

# Romeo and Juliet

**AUTHOR**

William Shakespeare

**DIRECTOR**

Alexis M. Hadsall

**PRODUCING COMPANY**

TheatreRats

**nytheatre.com review**

Kat Chamberlain · April 26, 2008

Pulsating with an original rap/hip-hop score, Theatre Rats' production of *Romeo and Juliet* is on a cheerily playful mission to burrow around inside the Bard's story, and give it a twist worthy of its Manhattan vibe. If its tragic moments are not entirely tear-inducing, the comical treatment in other parts is reason enough to see this glorious young cast.

Before the show starts, the music fills the theatre and establishes the tempo. Perfectly danceable beats and proudly blunt lyrics—you know your rap vocabulary—makes one wonder whether the language in the play will be modernized as well. An offstage voice gives the "Two households" prologue straightforwardly, then in rushes a group of young people dancing uninhibitedly in a street. Thus is revealed a show characterized by an admirable yet somewhat uneven mixture of the old and the new, original text and fresh physicality, high comedy and dull drama.

In the program, director Alexis M. Hadsall notes that she has set the play in her neighborhood of Inwood, and mines the theme of racial and class tension. Our Juliet is a white, upper-middle class girl, and Romeo, according to the press material, Dominican. The two rival groups are cast as white on one side, and "mixed" on the other. However, other than the visual clue, very little is displayed to further address their divide. Tybalt, Juliet's cousin who is slain by Romeo in retaliation for Benvolio's death, is cast as a policeman. This inadvertently confuses the class issue, as most policemen do not spring from the well-off Upper East Side. Politics aside, interesting role-twists abound, including the gender-bending of Juliet's nurse, the Prince of Verona, and Romeo's buddy, Mercutio, all of which generate unexpected humor and interest.

Where the production excels is its physical energy, which fuels the classical language. The integration is not always seamless, but it's consistently refreshing. There are a few laughs that come out of places I had never thought funny before, and in a good way. In the second half of the play, however, the innovation ceases and the cast mostly plays the story straight, severing it from the preceding tone and feel. The vivacity ebbs, and the loss of love and life is rendered more perfunctory than profound. It is almost as if the director is less inclined to play with the tragedy the way she freely and triumphantly does with the comedy.

The cast is uniformly confident and competent, with a zest that is thoroughly enjoyable. Caitlin Davies is a sassy and cute Juliet who suits the play's particular flavor. Francis Mateo plays Romeo rather quietly, but with an earnest appeal. Michael Kevin Darnall's Benvolio is outrageously entertaining—at times even show-stealing—with his effortless charm and command of language. Brandi Rhome's Mercutio is ebullient and bold.

Outstanding is the original music by 2Tru Dynasty, Greyhound, Racial tension, and Duwende. It largely disappears in the second part of the show, and its absence illustrates how much it has advanced the overall performance. Lighting and scenic designer Duane Pagano and costume designer Melissa Kraus have the challenging task of marrying the modern setting with the text. Although there are many imaginative touches throughout, I wish they had gone further to match the verve that the music has created.

The minor reservations I had over its execution in no way diminished my enjoyment of the show. Unwaveringly cool and fun, this application of a modern take to a text that stands up to endless reinvention, appeals to both eye and ear. Catch it during its short run.

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