

## Theatre Rats

April 24 - May 3, 2008

Acting           ★★★★☆  
Costumes       ★★★★☆  
Sets             ★★★★☆  
**Overall**       ★★★★☆

Admittedly, I was a bit apprehensive about attending this “re-invention” of *Romeo and Juliet* since I am not a fan of rap or hip-hop, two musical motifs which figure prominently in the production. But I walked away from the performance very pleasantly surprised. **Director Alexis M. Hadsall does a terrific job of merging Shakespeare’s timeless love story with an original contemporary urban score that leaves us with no doubt as to when or where we are from the time the lights go up until the final curtain.**

This *Romeo and Juliet* is set in New York City 2008, where our Romeo is a Dominican hottie from Inwood/Washington Heights (a still predominantly Hispanic neighborhood at the very top of Manhattan), and our Juliet is a rich, pretty, somewhat bratty white girl from the Upper East Side. Shakespeare’s original text is substantially abbreviated for this production, but -- with the major exception of Paris’s scenes, and especially his death -- this is a good thing. **The story moves forward in a pulse and rhythm that reflects its musical backdrop and maintains the upbeat, celebratory spirit that Hadsall intends,** without bogging too far down in the tragedy, or worse, the ad nauseam monologues that would be inappropriate for a show of this nature. **Nothing is lost in the plot; in fact, it may, in its way, even be a bit improved with the emphasis on action.**

The Medicine Show Theater, where this production plays, is a relatively small black box space with technical limitations. Despite that, lighting and set designer Duane Pagano has built a nifty little two-tiered upstage platform that really could be used more imaginatively in the staging than it is. The dress is standard NYC street casual, but **costume designers Melissa Kraus and Emily Taradash show a delightful flare with the “toga” outfits for the party at the Capulets. Fight choreographer Ryan Bartruff’s knife duel scenes are beautifully staged and truly unnerving, especially since it appears that the actors are using real switchblades.** The original music score comes from recording artists 2Tru Dynasty, Greyhound, Racial Tension and Duwende. Most of the music is used in the background or during set changes, but some also gets featured as part of the action. Dance scenes are choreographed by Elia Monte-Brown.

Here, Romeo's cohort, Mercutio, is a tough young black woman referred to as "she," and Juliet's doting Nurse is a very "out," flamboyantly gay man referred to as "he." Both of these casting choices work marvelously well. Mercutio is played by the talented, very buff Brandi Rhomes; scene-stealer Peter Schuyler plays the Nurse, with a special nod to his parasol. Walter Brandes is splendid as the hate-obsessed Tybalt, as is Michael Kevin Darnall playing the loyal but conflicted Benvolio. Other fine performances come from Cedric Jones as the resourceful Friar Lawrence and Rachel McPhee as a miserable, alcoholic Lady Capulet.

For the most part, Francis Mateo makes a wonderful, believable Romeo, but, alas, he's hampered by playing to a Juliet with whom he has very little chemistry or connection. Caitlin Davies, who plays Juliet, is lovely, and she's amusing in the scene when Juliet throws an adolescent tantrum. But somehow Davies is not in touch with this show's rhythm and just doesn't seem to be in the same production as everyone else; nor does she seem comfortable with the text. Fortunately, the balcony scene, which could have been a train wreck, is wisely pared to a bare minimum.

On the other hand, most of Paris's scenes have been radically cut and some are missing altogether. Presumably this is in the interest of time, but it's also at the expense of a good actor, as I would have liked to have seen more of Joe Kurtz. To a further degree, it's an expense to the show, because with all the cuts – unless somehow I missed something -- there is now no reasonable explanation as to why Paris suddenly wants to be at Juliet's grave or why Romeo is so compelled to kill him.

According to its literature, the aim of the TheatreRats troupe is to "reinvigorate a sense of community among artists in New York," and produce contemporary re-inventions of plays written before 1900. Despite the aforementioned comments about an out of sync leading lady and some overly ruthless text cuts, *this Romeo and Juliet is an ambitious, very enjoyable show that's accessible to a youthful, 21st century audience, and a production of which this five-year-old company can be proud.*