

Review: A feisty 'Romeo and Juliet' at Hillsboro's Tom Hughes Civic Center

Posted by [jcarlin](#) July 20, 2009 01:26AM

The story of "Romeo and Juliet" goes back to ancient times, according to Scott Palmer, artistic director of Bag & Baggage Productions. Shakespeare helped himself to the plot and characters that came before him, taking from such earlier writers as Arthur Brooke, Pierre Boaistuau and Matteo Bandello, and coming up with his own lyrical, inspired hit of a play. Palmer, who has mounted an adapted version of the famed tragedy outdoors in Hillsboro's spacious Tom Hughes Civic Center Plaza, likewise dips into the works of Brooke, Boaistuau and Bandello, throws in a little John Keats and a bit of his own language as well.

The result is refreshing. Palmer's modern-dress interpretation actually clarifies the tale, shortens it a bit and adds more depth to the characters. In a pre-Shakespeare version of the story, the Capulet and Montague mothers of each household are dominant, and Palmer honors that here. Mercutio's comrade Benvolio was in earlier versions his female lover Benvolia, here played at high intensity by Lesli Okorn, who also choreographs the show.

It is Benvolia, not Friar Lawrence, who fails to give Romeo the letter from Juliet explaining to him that she may appear dead, but that the drug is only temporary. Benvolia and Mercutio (a fine, frenetic performance by Dallas Myers in "Clockwork Orange" garb) have a baser, highly physical love relationship in contrast to the star-crossed lovers' more romantic, lyrical union. Sometimes, they come across as *comedia dell'arte* clowns, crude and grotesque, yet acrobatic and graceful.

Palmer uses only eight actors, cuts the roles of the nurse, Paris, Lords Capulet and Montague and other minor parts, and he has Jacob Morehead play narrator, the friar and other small parts in abbreviated form. As narrator, Morehead poses a direct question to the audience at one point: Should we step in to warn Romeo and Juliet of their impending doom or let them continue? At the end, he chastises us for not doing so.

Tybalt is a petite, feisty swordswoman as portrayed by Amanda Washko, and Christine Shields as Lady Capulet and Leslie Grasa as Lady Montague represent each warring household succinctly. The theme of battling families is enhanced with the phrase "a plague on both your houses," which echoes as a refrain uttered by the ghosts of Tybalt and Mercutio in the final scene.

A strong, urgent performance springs from William Goblirsch, Jr. as Romeo, decked out in a Frank Sinatra hat, Doc Marten boots and incongruously wearing angel wings to the costume ball where he first meets Juliet. Amanda Jane Long keeps Juliet slightly frivolous, yet highly focused. She's particularly effective in the final moments. Both actors, like most of the cast, have worked hard to project above the outdoor noise of airplanes, flapping flags and passing pedestrians, and they do it quite naturally, shaping powerful, believable characters along the way.

Actors enter from various parts of the plaza, and utilize a vast playing surface, which keeps them on the run entering and exiting. This kind of staging could lend itself to sloppiness, but the action is tightly blocked, and every movement is cleanly executed.

Lauren Elledge on electric violin provides haunting musical accompaniment. Costume and set designer Gregory Pulver keeps the visual elements simple yet evocative. Billowing white and black giant swatches of fabric give definition to the stage area, and contemporary costumes in black and crimson reflected this darker version of the story, which is not recommended for children. This may be an old tale, but Palmer has brought a freshness to it by delving into the past beyond Shakespeare without disrespecting him.

"Romeo and Juliet"

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays through Aug. 2

Where: Tom Hughes Civic Center Plaza, 150 E. Main St., Hillsboro

Tickets: \$15-\$18, www.bagnbaggage.org

Categories: [Performance Top Stories](#), [Theater Reviews](#)

Comments

Footer