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THEATER ARTS

Review: ‘Romeo & Juliet’ at New York Classical Theatre

By Deb Miller - June 14, 2018

For nineteen seasons, New York Classical Theatre has delivered free performances of more than 40 revered masterworks to sites throughout the city, enjoyed to date by nearly a quarter-million people. This summer’s captivating offering is the company premiere of *Romeo & Juliet*, a smartly streamlined adaptation of Shakespeare’s beloved tragedy of feuding families and star-crossed lovers, featuring a dynamic cast of six playing over a dozen of the Bard’s well-known roles.



Connie Castanzo and Ian Antal. Photo courtesy Miranda Arden.

Presented in New York Classical’s signature style of “Panoramic Theatre,” the audience follows the characters’ emotional journey through an immersive site-specific participatory production (which opened in Central Park, and will travel to four other NYC parks in June and July), moving from place to place and scene to scene with the actors. In so doing, we are fully encompassed by the sublime landscape setting and the show’s intimate blocking, and thrust into the midst of the story and the world of old-time Verona, with the aid of historicizing costumes and a few integral props (Production Design by Summer Lee Jack and Sarita Fellows).

Under the skillful direction and keen imagination of company Artistic Director Stephen Burdman, the entire cast fluently delivers first the wit, then the drama, of Shakespeare’s tale, capturing his full range of emotions, the meaning and beauty of his language (voice and speech coaching by Joan Melton), the admonitory significance of his message, and the momentous import of time, while maintaining a rapid-fire pace that keeps the audience enthralled and engaged. Beginning with an emphasis on rollicking song and sword play (fight direction by Sean Michael Chin), piquant taunting and bawdy humor, the mood abruptly shifts to the

overwhelming gravity of hatred, anger, and vengeance, their deadly consequences of loss, grief, and regret, and the poignancy of a lesson learned too late, successfully increasing the tension and impact of the didactic narrative, just as the playwright intended.

Ian Antal and Connie Castanzo star as the ill-fated young couple, bringing a youthful spirit of giddy flirtation, magnetic attraction, ardent devotion, and reckless passion to their juvenile characters, and evincing the all-consuming intensity of adolescence (the production's recurrent sequences of the pair's lengthy kisses are spot-on hilarious). Their iconic scenes are heartfelt and empathetic, embodying the life and depth of Shakespeare's familiar words, effortlessly incorporating Burdman's edits to fit the outdoor locale (in a clever re-envisioning of the famous balcony scene, Romeo questions here "What light through yonder *meadow* breaks?" and later looks up with confusion at the still-bright sky, while speaking of "yonder moon"), all the while making us feel what the doomed lovers are feeling.

Performing multiple roles and giving fine support to the leads are the expressive Vivia Font as Juliet's mother Lady Capulet and Romeo's good-natured male cousin Benvolio; Nick Salamone as the loquacious Mercutio and the controlling Lord Capulet (the rage he directs at his daughter Juliet is palpable); Clay Storseth as Lord Montague, Paris, and the Apothecary, a morbid figure who uses his poverty as an excuse to sell Romeo the fateful vial of poison; and the outstanding Ian Gould as Tybalt, Friar Laurence, and Juliet's ribald Nurse, who makes scene-stealing appearances with his uproariously camp cross-gender characterization (in keeping with Shakespeare's time, when male actors also portrayed the female roles). All clearly distinguish between the characters they play, and effect split-second transitions, with the efficient help of the stage crew's costumers.

New York Classical Theatre's production of *Romeo & Juliet* isn't just free, it's priceless – a thoroughly accessible, comprehensible, and inclusive opportunity to experience the genius and universality of Shakespeare in an excitingly transportive and personal way. Be sure to catch it at a park near you.