

# R & J Review by Alex Wood

Romeo and Juliet  
Banbury Cross Players  
15th – 18th March 2023  
Show seen on Wednesday 15th March 2023  
The Mill Theatre, Banbury  
Bland Romeo and Juliet Disappoints  
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A slimmed-down cast perform this modern-dress production of Shakespeare's classic play at the Mill Theatre, Banbury.

I enjoyed the acting of the two young lovers – Alex King as Romeo and Sophie Jasmin Bird as Juliet. Clearly totally absorbed in their respective parts, skilful and dynamic in voice and movement, though on a few occasions the power of the drama overtakes the need for clear diction. The death scene is extremely well done, leaving the audience stunned into silence at the climax of the play.

Benvolio, Romeo's friend and confidant, is represented in Zac Lacey-Rousou's matey, confident and competent performance and Lizzie Forward as Mercutio, 'a gentleman that loves to hear himself talk', carries off the part with some nice comic timing, though again, some words are lost in a slightly breathless rush. And Justin Clinch makes a strong impact as Tybalt.

The fights on stage are admirably executed – especially the one between Mercutio and Tybalt. BCP are to be commended for their ambition in engaging professional help with this. It works well.

Bruce Walton plays Friar Lawrence with skill, showing a priest's concern in a situation he realises is becoming increasingly impossible and Helen Williams is a pleasingly motherly Nurse, mirrored by the coldness shown by Kate Groves as Lady Capulet.

Jem Turner and John McCormick play Gregory and Sampson with enthusiasm but, as senior cast members, I was not convinced by their casting which sees them involved in the skirmish at the start of the play. Of minor roles Simon Hook impresses as Apothecary (cleverly portrayed here as a drug dealer – one of the too few real nods to the play's contemporary setting), Chris Brant is suitably dopey as the undesirable Paris, Christian Markham is a majestic Escalus and Zoey Warnock a likeably puzzled Peter.

The set could not be simpler – a scaffold-constructed balcony a few metres above the stage and a bed which doubles as Juliet's tomb. In some respects this works well, giving the actors a large, uncluttered space in which to perform. But the bed makes a large number of appearances, each time having to be rolled on and off, slowing the action and being stationed uncomfortably upstage left. (For what it's worth I would leave it at upstage centre and not move it at all until it is needed for Juliet's tomb.)

Music is used sparingly but very effectively throughout the show and a simple lighting plan is also totally suitable.

I felt uneasy about this production which I saw on its first night. It was clear that a lot of work has been done by this very good company and the director Katy Roberts is obviously a huge fan of Shakespeare but overall I found this production disappointing. I think a modern production needs more tension than this which is why so many supplement the script with a contemporary setting. (Most commonly, but not exclusively, gangs) I'm still trying to make my mind up about this but I suspect that the stripped -down set, very few props and simple costumes minimise the opportunity to emphasise the Capulet/Montague conflict, giving the production a bland feel.

For Sardines

Alex Wood

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