

R & J Review by Jo Genesisus

For her directorial debut with BCP, Katy Roberts chose Shakespeare's time-honoured tragic tale of the star-cross'd lovers Romeo and Juliet, but with a pared down adaptation by Katy herself. As she says in the programme notes, this production was intended to be "funny, exciting, haunting and incredibly emotional", and indeed it was all those things. Shakespeare can be daunting to modern audiences, especially due to the language which sounds archaic to our ears. However, the cast were very successful at understanding what their own characters were saying so that the sense impinged upon our ears as much as the actual words. This meant that the plot was fairly clear and the language relatively easy to follow. There were a few points where I lost the words, but these were either due to a slight imbalance of music or sound effects and the text (such as in the recorded prologue at the start), or to over-emotional expression on the part of the cast.

The production was certainly incredibly emotional, as intended, and on the whole the cast managed to make even strong emotions believable. Explosive outbursts from Romeo (BCP newcomer Alex King) and Tybalt (Justin Clinch) were startling, Juliet's (Sophie Bird, another BCP newcomer) distraught crying in both her scenes with the Nurse (Helen Williams) was certainly not restrained, and Romeo's and Benvolio's (Zac Lacey-Rousou) emotional outpourings at the deaths of both Tybalt and Mercutio were very powerful. The cast were clearly comfortable with each other physically, and Romeo's relationships with both Juliet and Benvolio were very believable. The fight scenes were well done and shocking, as intended, and the level of energy onstage was impressive at times, particularly from Alex King.

I had not realised how funny parts of Romeo and Juliet are. Comedy was brought out to good effect in some of the earlier scenes, and Simon Hook as a shady drug dealer (for which read 'Apothecary') lent a black comedy frisson to what is otherwise a tragic scene – Romeo buying poison in order to commit suicide.

The production was updated and devoid of frills, with timeless yet contemporary dress (other than in the ball scene, complete with courtly dancing). There were a few modern touches – Lady Capulet (Kate Groves) busy texting on a mobile when Juliet is trying to get

her attention, and the Apothecary's wallet – but in general the production was light on props and set, and relied on sound, lighting and the actors to bring it to life.

The set itself consisted of the balcony across the back of the stage and a bed-cum-bier on wheels. This was the one thing which let the play down for me at least. Every time the bed needed wheeling downstage from its 'home' under the balcony, its brakes had to be foot-operated, and I found this very distracting. It was a shame that the bed could not remain upstage centre and just be ignored and worked round when not needed, or alternatively that a more audience-friendly brake mechanism could be used. That said, it was extremely effective when Mercutio and Tybalt, both by that time deceased, wheeled on a drugged Juliet and then stood sentry. A nice touch, that.

With a stage devoid of any set to speak of, locations, situations and overriding moods were denoted by effective use of both lighting and atmospheric background music. My only issue here was that the music was a little too loud to hear the prologue clearly.

Adapted and pared back, yes, but to my mind it was a bit too heavily cut. Several key characters were completely removed, e.g. Romeo's parents and Juliet's father, and the final few pages were removed in their entirety. This meant that the play ended abruptly with Juliet's death, and Friar Lawrence's (BCP stalwart Bruce Walton) exposition of the story of the star-cross'd lovers, the Montagues and Capulets agreeing a truce, and the Prince's final elegy were all missing. I felt this was a shame as without it, there was no sense of closure as Shakespeare has seemingly intended. Also, it was not made clear that Friar Lawrence's note to Romeo explaining that Juliet was drugged, not dead, never reached him.

Overall it was a brave endeavour, not just a directorial debut but of a major adaptation of a well-known play by the director. I think it was mostly successful, and there were some very powerful performances (particularly from Alex King, Sophie Bird, Helen Williams, Zac Lacey-Rousou, Justin Clinch and Bruce Walton) but it was cut a little much in the end for my liking. And so to bed (brakes on!)...

Jo Genesisus

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