

# R & J Review by Lance Bassett

Banbury Cross Players

ROMEO AND JULIET BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

The Mill Arts Centre, Banbury

15th – 18th March 2023

Banbury Cross Players' production of *Romeo & Juliet* was a ground breaker for me. I'd read the play was a modern take on the story, so was looking forward to BCP's interpretation of this infamous tale. Fair enough, the set was certainly modern with just a balcony running the width of the stage and a bed.

So off we go. The players began to appear all dressed in modern apparel, jeans trainers, hoodies, you know the sort of thing. Then the dialogue. I was expecting 'yoof' speak, but no this was as Shakespeare had written it. This threw me for several minutes, until brain connected with ear to accept what was going on. By this time I had not fully taken in the entrance of BCP favourites John McCormick and Jem Turner as ruffians Sampson & Gregory gesticulating and generally upsetting the toffs in this opening scene.

This play, the second in BCP's 2022/2023 season, opens with Romeo & Juliet's death scene. It's no spoiler to remark on the incredible performances from protagonists Alex King as Romeo and Sophie Jasmin Bird as Juliet. The pair throughout the production delivered strong performances interpreting their huge parts as good as ever I have seen on the professional stage. They delivered their words, which included some massive monologues, as far as I could make out prompt free, this also being the case for the other cast members.

This was the first night of the run so one could forgive the odd pieces of dialogue that went astray. Whether through lack of projection or speaking a little too quickly, but never enough to affect the enjoyment of the play.

This production of *Romeo & Juliet* marked the directorial debut of Katy Roberts who states in her programme notes that she hopes this play surprises the audience in ways they weren't expecting. Well, it certainly did that for me.

There was action a-plenty too. More knife fights than a Saturday night in Kabul plus creative stage management with the one prop, the bed, travelling more around the stage than Michael Palin on holiday.

The plot, of course, is renowned but in a nutshell the Capulet and Montague families don't see eye to eye. Romeo is a Montague who falls for Juliet a Capulet. As an aside it was a real joy to witness the interplay between these two in the famous 'Wherefore art thou, Romeo...' balcony scene. So, having agreed to wed, Romeo goes off to see the Friar (Bruce Walton) to arrange the union.

Romeo's mates Mercutio and Benvolio turn up as does Tybalt (an outstanding performance from Justin Clinch) with his henchmen and takes offence at the sight of his families (the Capulets) enemies and gets in a fight with Mercutio and stabs him to death. Romeo now takes the hump and kills Tybalt. Mercutio was played with great gusto by Lizzie Forward and Zac Lacey-Rousou was Benvolio. Sadly, Benvolio's voice was lost on several occasions simply because he didn't speak loud enough but it was the first night. Several characters' diction improved during the performance, I guess down to gaining confidence.

Helen Williams was Juliet's Nurse, who gave a confident, spirited rendition in this vital role especially providing support to Juliet when she hears Romeo has been banished from Verona for killing Tybalt.

Lady Capulet (Kate Groves), Juliet's mother, insists her daughter marries Paris (Chris Brant) a young nobleman of her acquaintance this coming Thursday. It's safe to say things don't work out well. Juliet fakes her death to get her out of her forthcoming nuptials with Paris, Romeo discovers her and thinks she's dead and kills himself. Juliet wakes up, sees Romeo's corpse and so poisons herself. A touching finale, very well acted by all concerned but medals to Alex and Sophie as Romeo & Juliet especially.

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