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Cal Shakes' "Romeo and Juliet"

A classic tale of love, and hate

By Lou Fancher



Dan Clegg (Romeo) and Rebekah Brockman (Juliet) in Shana Cooper's production of "Romeo and Juliet." Photos Kevin Berne

If you think you've seen William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" one too many times to see it once more, think again. Director Shana Cooper takes seven top-notch Cal Shakes actors on a terrific romp through the classic hate story at Orinda's Bruns Amphitheater in a production running through July 28. Yes, that's right. It's roiling hate, love's antithesis, smoldering beneath a universe of young passion and old feuding.

Cooper paints the vicious scaffold with a bold physicality, but never allows her quasi-contemporary portrayal to outshine The Bard's original wit, wisdom and wonderful way with words. Remarkably, the laughs outweigh the horrified gasps, despite the play's inevitable, bloody, poisoned end.

On a stripped stage, scattered with classroom-style chairs, a stack of bricks, an upright piano, a table bearing electronic equipment and little else, the action begins with a mock fist fight. Daniel Ostling's minimalist set design keeps the focus in the right place: on the Capulets and the Montagues, two families who've fought for so long the elders' animosity has become an heirloom passed to the younger generations.

Romeo (Dan Clegg) breaks up the opening fight, hyperbolically confessing to his cousin Mercutio (Joseph Parks) his love for the never-seen Rosaline before lifting the

fleeting devotion of young love like a petticoat and chasing pell-mell after Lord Capulet's 13-year-old daughter, Juliet (Rebekah Brockman). But Juliet has been promised to Paris (Nick Gabriel), a close-to-royal figure whose kinsman, the Prince (Domenique Lozano), has decreed that any Capulet or Montague who continues the insufferable feud will be "banished." And Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, is incensed when Romeo appears at his uncle's masquerade ball.

"Is love a tender thing?" Romeo asks, early in the play. The rest of the production is as close to answering "no" as one can imagine. The only exception is Shakespeare's sumptuous writing, which offers bittersweet gems, like a reference to dreams ("they are children of an idle brain") and pathos, in Juliet's plaintive cry upon discovering Romeo is a Montague ("My only love sprung from my only hate!"). Throughout, the actors play multiple roles and never drop a word or a line's intention - even the mildly modernized script retains the linguistic characteristics and breath of Shakespeare's original text.

Following the Capulet's ball, a spirited balcony scene - the two young lovers separated by 15 feet; their words swirling as intimately as cream in coffee - signals the play's pinnacle of love. From that moment on, it's a swooping slide into lies and betrayal when a misguided Friar (Dan Hiatt) agrees to marry Romeo and Juliet in secret.

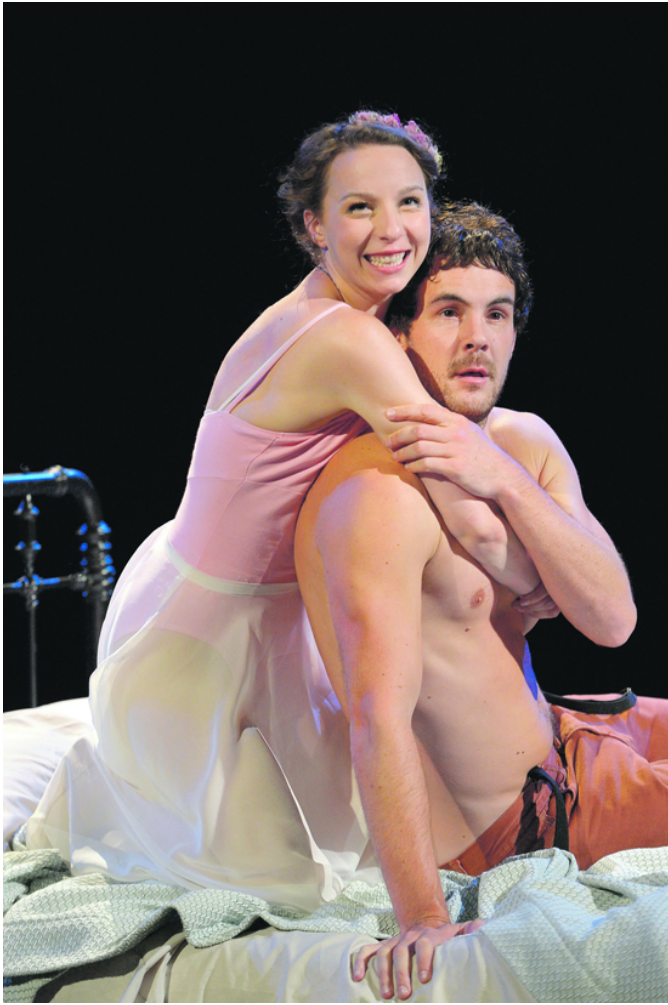
Their marriage consummated, it's time for another fight, but this time Tybalt holds a knife in his fist and stabs Mercutio, killing him. Romeo kills Tybalt and when found out, is banished.

Act II is an extended tantrum that can best be described as youthful impulse partnered by horrendous opportunity and set to a fickle timepiece. Juliet secures a mild poison from the Friar and fakes her own death to escape marriage to Paris. Romeo hears of her death, but lacks the Friar's message explaining the deception. Entering the crypt, clutching his own poisonous flask and intending to join his love in the hereafter, Romeo drinks, and dies. Juliet "awakens" 30 seconds too late, discovers Romeo's limp body, and ends her life (this time, for real) with the thrust of a knife. Lord and Lady Capulet rush to the deathbed of their only daughter: too late, it's "bitt' rest gall."

Cooper does a marvelous job with pacing in the first act and is particularly adept when teasing out the bawdy humor or wicked sarcasm of the dialogue. If the characters' precipitous descent into grief, revenge and death in the closing scenes is two shades shy of convincing, perhaps it's the result of our having been titillated or transported along the lofty language of early love scenes for too long.

The choreography and staging are meticulous: not in an uptight, persnickety way, but in a satisfying sum total way. From the cast's boisterous, wide strides to a lovely entwined multi-coupled pas de deux (dance for two) to a surreal scene in which Juliet is "passed" along a grapevine of characters who tip, swirl or bow her body, Cooper (sharing credit with Erika, Chong Such and Dave Maier for movement and fight director credits, respectively) has created the perfect physical storm. Add to that a flawless cast and truly, Cooper's "Romeo and Juliet" is a not-to-miss, fabulous take on the ruin and redemption of love and hate.

"Romeo and Juliet," presented by California Shakespeare Theater, runs through July 28 at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (off Highway 24), Orinda. For information, call (510) 548-9666 or visit www.calshakes.org.



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[back](#)

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