

# 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, she laughs out-weight 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 breadth 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 time-piece. 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](http://www.calshakes.org).



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

# Award-Winning Songwriter Returns to Hometown for Guitar Workshop

By Jennifer Wake



Ali Handal

Photo provided

Ali Handal has come a long way since singing in the choir and in musicals at Acalanes High School. Now a multi-award winning songwriter with three albums under her belt, her songs featured in numerous TV shows and movies, and author of a guitar instructional book/CD "Guitar For Girls," published worldwide by Hal Leonard, this gutsy guitarist will be returning to Lafayette July 27 for a special workshop at Lamorinda Music.

"I'm especially excited to start out the tour in my hometown!" says Handal, who is a member of the Les Paul Experience Artist Advisory Board along with Steve Miller and Alan Parsons. "My main goal is to share my story and encourage all aspiring guitarists."

Handal's first instrument was piano, which she started when she was 4, but her world changed forever when she discovered Led Zeppelin. From that moment on "it was all about the guitar," she notes on her website. "I wanted to be Jimmy Page." She started on a little acoustic, and went electric as soon as she could, ultimately swapping her acoustic for an airbrushed-dragon Fernandez Explorer purchased at a Berkeley music shop.

She attended college, first at Occidental and then UCLA, and earned a psychology degree with honors, but a career outside of music made her miserable. She decided to pursue her passion, and soon found herself living with a house full of musicians in North Hollywood, supporting herself with odd jobs while she worked on her craft. "I had to be willing to suck at first," she points out in her bio. "Something I'd never done. But that's what it takes."

Handal says she particularly loves encouraging young women to strive beyond what they think they're capable of. "I was so timid when I first approached the guitar, and I enjoy helping girls get over their own insecurities and fears," she says. "I like to

share what held me back and how I overcame the obstacles to becoming the player and singer I am today."

On her website, she says "people love it when I bleed, when I scream and hurt my voice, and when I play really fast, even on acoustic guitar. They liked when I'd do something more masculine, energy-wise, something loud and fast."

The catalyst for her book was Hal Leonard calling her up and asking if she'd be interested in writing a guitar method book specifically for girls. "As an ardent feminist, I actually had mixed feelings about writing a music book targeted only to girls – after all, the mechanics of playing guitar are the same for everyone, and I had grown up worshipping exclusively male guitar heroes," she says. "But the more I thought about the project, the more I realized that there were differences between how girls approach guitar and how boys do (of course, there will always be exceptions to this generalization). Generally speaking, girls tend to be shyer about putting themselves 'out there' and playing before they're really good, and while that may seem to be a good quality it's actually not helpful as an aspiring musician."

One of the most important activities Handal says you can do as a student of music is to jam with other students, perform as much as possible, and just put yourself out there. "My experience, and what I've observed, is that many girls deny themselves these experiences because they're overly concerned with embarrassing themselves, whereas boys tend to just go for it."

The free workshop will be held from noon to 1:30 p.m. Saturday, July 27 at Lamorinda Music in Lafayette. Aspiring guitarists can also visit the Lessons page on Handal's website ([alihandal.com](http://alihandal.com)), where she's posted free video lessons and a list of her favorite books on guitar playing, songwriting, and creativity in general.

# Young Orinda Film Director Works on New Movie Short



A group of Miramonte High School students, with Christopher Tennant in the middle, work on their new production, "Before A Fall." Photo Sophie Braccini

Christopher Tennant and a group of friends from Miramonte High School were seen at Barbacoa in Orinda's Theatre Square shooting scenes for the young director's new production, "Before A Fall." Tennant says that the film he wrote, a silly, goofy story of a street gang that thinks of themselves as pirates. The young man, who

has already made other short movies, plans to release his new production at the Orinda Theatre in late August or the beginning of September and will subsequently compete in junior film festivals. The story of the film making can be followed on the facebook page: [www.facebook.com/BeforeAFall](http://www.facebook.com/BeforeAFall). S. Braccini

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