

Reviews

Shakespeare in the Square's *Romeo and Juliet*

A youthful rendition of the classic romance gets a breakneck revival at the Gym at Judson.

Pete Hempstead | **Off-Broadway** | **January 18, 2015**



Elise Kibler as Juliet and Taylor Myers as Romeo in Shakespeare in the Square's production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Dan Hasse, at the Gym at Judson.
(© Erik Choquette)

That's a big loss, but Myers (in a corset) shines as Lady Capulet, and Kibler shows broad range as Benvolio, and even Friar John. De Sanz has excellent comic timing as the Nurse and Friar Lawrence, and Dooly gives us a convincingly angry Tybalt. The show's most impressive performance, though, belongs to Malahias, who delves deep into the play's language and pulls out subtle cues, gestures, and verbal nuances in his outstanding Mercutio and Lord Capulet. His delicate shadings of character are a sheer delight to watch.

In the end, the production misses its two-hour running-time goal by about a half hour or more. To be fair, it's hard to clock any Shakespeare play in at that time without significant cutting. Still, the folks of Shakespeare in the Square deserve some credit for trying, but it's important to remember that you can't hurry love.

BOTTOM LINE: The tale of Romeo and Juliet retold by actors who actually understand the text. Thank goodness!

The woeful tale of Juliet and her Romeo is one we have heard countless times. Since *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* was first produced and published there have been countless edits, updates, adaptations, corrections, and translations of this play. It's difficult to imagine the Bard's original intent. Although we will never know what those first performances were like (such is the ethereal nature of theatre), at least early texts can offer us a window to a time long gone. The up-and-coming company Shakespeare In The Square attempts to give a glimpse of Shakespeare-as-intended by using the First Folio as their principle text. (The First Folio was published in 1623, and is often considered the most reliable and accurate text for 20 of Shakespeare's plays.) In conjunction with the company's blend of Elizabethan theatre practices and a minimalist set, this production's bare-bones focus on Shakespeare's text is a relief. And what a relief it is to watch actors who both love and *understand* Shakespeare's language.

The basic story is the same as it has been for roughly 500 years. Two noble families in the city of Verona, the Capulets and the Montagues, are mortal enemies. Yet, as fate would have it, Juliet (Elise Kibler) and Romeo (Taylor Myers) meet at a party and fall hopelessly in love. In spite of the risks, the young lovers decide to marry, posthaste, in secret. The man who marries them, Friar Lawrence (Jack De Sanz), hopes this marriage may begin the end of the family discord. Though the Friar's hopes prove true by the end, he and the lovers fail to anticipate the grave sacrifices required to achieve such peace. All well intentioned plans for the couple go awry after Juliet's cousin, Tybalt (Chris Dooly), challenges Romeo to a duel and loses. In killing Tybalt, Romeo is banished from Verona.

While Friar Lawrence plans a way to reverse Romeo's sentence, Juliet's father is set on forcing her to marry another man in a few days. So, the Friar offers Juliet a potion which will put her in a deep enough slumber that feigns death. Meanwhile, the Friar attempts to send Romeo a letter that explains the plan to fake Juliet's death so that she may slip out of Verona and run away with Romeo. Like the marriage, all well intentioned plans go awry -- Romeo never received this letter and he commits suicide. Upon waking and finding her husband dead, Juliet takes her own life as well.

The entire cast does a wonderful job bringing these characters to life. Considering only five actors play the entire laundry-list of people in this play, it is impressive to watch well-executed commitment to each character. Constantine Malahias' character changes are especially remarkable. His portrayal of Mercutio is a captivating whirlwind to watch on its own. But each part he plays is so distinct I sometimes had to remind myself this was indeed the same actor. The minimalist set and lighting design also deserve praise. Phil Falino and Timothy Meola's choices are simple in principle but their precise execution adds beauty to an otherwise bare stage.

With all of the production's strengths in mind, I feel the cast's potential was cut short the show's quick pace. In the second half especially the actors pummeled through the language, giving neither themselves nor the audience opportunity to comprehend the text. Even some of Shakespeare's best sexual innuendo was passed over for the sake of speed. This is especially disappointing considering how clearly each actor has closely studied the script. I understand the desire to keep the play as true to "two hours traffic of our stage" as possible, especially in an era where few people are inclined to stay at the theatre for several hours. Frankly, I am far from an ardent fan of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Yet, I would have loved to watch these actors give themselves the time to explore and play with this text.

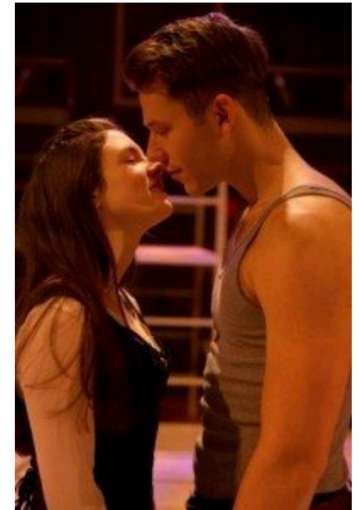
(*The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* plays at The Gym at Judson at 243 Thompson Street through February 8, 2015. Performances are Tuesdays and Thursdays at 8PM; Fridays at 7PM and 10PM; Saturdays at 8PM; and Sundays at 2PM and 8PM. Tickets are \$45 general admission, \$15 for students, and \$75 to sit on stage and have one drink. Tickets are available at shakespeareinthesquare.com or by calling 718.790.3081.)

Shakespeare in the Square eschews elaborate sets, props and costumes in favor of minimalist scenery, even indoors. (The company originated as a group at NYU that performed in Washington Square Park.) Just a plain stage and scaffold at the Gym at Judson suffice as familiar scenes: the costume ball, the garden, the friar's humble home. Small props differentiate between the five actors playing all 23 parts, a corset transforming Romeo into Lady Capulet, the lowering of a hood turning Friar Lawrence into Juliet's Nurse. It's mesmerizing to watch the actors morph between characters (sometimes within the same scene), and the delivery of the dialogue alone is enough to bring the story to life, often rapid-fire, so you need a sharp ear to keep pace. The show is also accompanied by live music - with additional music during intermission.

SITS's *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* is filled with talented actors who are no strangers to the works of Shakespeare. Elise Kibler (who will make her Broadway debut in *The Heidi Chronicles* next month) captures the petulance and wonder of the timeless teenager that is Juliet. Her infatuation and heartbreak are gut-wrenching to watch, making you wish you could somehow change the ending of the tale, even if you've seen the story a hundred times before. Taylor Myers' performance as Romeo is lighthearted and endearing without being cloying. Myers has wonderful chemistry between each of his scene partners, whether he's playing lovesick Romeo or strict Lady Capulet.

Jack De Sanz steals all the laughs as Juliet's nurse. His raw exuberance as the mother hen is delightful as is his somber portrayal of the Friar. Chris Dooly masterfully brings the dangerous element to the story as a commanding Paris, Tybalt and Prince. Finally, Constantine Malahias skillfully plays the lovable rascal Mercutio but is particularly spectacular as the sneering, recalcitrant Lord Capulet.

The interaction with the audience is exciting. Audience members are invited to sit on stools close to the action or join in the festivities of the costume ball onstage. This brings a feel of the old Globe Theater in London to a church auditorium on Thompson Street. The directing by Dan Hasse is so fresh and fun that both die-hard Shakespeare fans as well as newcomers will find something to love, whether it's the love story, stage combat or sharp humor.



The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare. Pictured: Elise Kibler, Taylor Myers. Photo Credit: 2015 Jon Hess

BWW Review: A Shakespearean Run with Food and Fun: A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

by Kristen Morale Aug. 14, 2018



There are certain truths in life that, whether we dream or be awake, still hold true; the subject of love, in all its splendor and glory, is no different. As Shakespeare wrote so well, "The course of true love never did run smooth." Now, this is the premise for both comedy and tragedy alike, telling the story of two people so enamored with the other that something dramatic is bound to happen. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to say that things do not smoothly is a bit of a comical understatement.

In a world of fairies and actors, lovers and the not-so-loved, with magic flowers that can bend the will of any who slumber on, love is both true and a playful farce all at once. The irony of magic in Shakespeare's masterpiece is that it is much less romantic than you would think; love is treated more as a game, disguised as a less-than-pleasant dream from which everyone awakens happy.

Shakespeare in the Square's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is, simply put, a theatrical dream come true - one that we don't need to wake up from to enjoy our happy ending. Oh...did I mention there was food?

Directed by **Dan Hasse** and in association with the Access Theater, which has given rise to youthful, unique productions for the last twenty-six years, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the most fun you will have at any Shakespearean production for an endless number of reasons. Not only does this unbelievable and versatile cast of six bring out the wackiness of this work, they are able to harbor the more emotional side of it through the unique means of food and song; they complement tradition with modern creativity, and it is truly as magical as I would imagine Shakespeare intended his play to be. I unfortunately can't call myself a fan of Shakespeare, but after seeing this production, I now have a model whose example all other future productions could follow. I always say that some of the best theater does not have to be on Broadway, and this is a true example of exactly what that means.

As the audience walks onto the stage to take their seats, they are welcomed into an intimate space with creaking floorboards - a place where creativity is about to take place. The cast soon takes its place on stage, and with guitar, broom or shaker in hand, starts to play songs that, in hindsight, reflect the different emotional aspects of this show; my favorite had to be their rendition of "Linger" by the Cranberries. Once the music stops and the lights dim, the magic of Shakespeare's plot happens.

To sum it all up, Hermia is in love with Lysander, whom her father does not particularly like; instead, he wishes her to marry Demetrius. Helena loves Demetrius, who wishes she would just go away. The fairy king Oberon wishes for his wife Titania's attention after a young Indian boy has diverted it from him. A group of actors must bring the tragic tale of Pyramus and Thisbe to life for



Theseus' planned wedding celebration. So much jealousy and manipulation, confusion and angst for a love that won't naturally occur; this is given such emotional height with the presence of food. From biting into an onion to angrily tearing the skin off an orange, to using whipped cream to write with and wafers to build a wall, the creativity of this show is amazing. There are also moments where you wonder if the actor standing right next to you is going to get that green stringy thing stuck in your hair.

This production is so well rounded as a whole, to say the very least. From the brilliant use of food (for both emotional efficiency and humor) to how each actor brings such versatility to the stage and such nuance to their characters, the hard work of this entire process is seen from beginning to end. There were so many memorable moments throughout the show, such as when Bottom turns into an ass. The transformation is so crazy and perfect; this is what it means to perfect the art of acting to the point where the crazy becomes comfortable - where it looks effortless and uninhibited. Other great moments can be seen in the unique way the direction and acting come together to create this special production. Actors transition from different characters to inanimate objects, from actors to musicians as quickly as the guitar is handed over, and throw food like children while reciting Shakespearean lines with as much conviction as I ever need to see. Such versatility and talent needs to be commended, and I really admire the effort put into this production from all those involved.



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THEATER

August 14, 2018

Theater Review New York Tribeca Off-Off-Broadway Plays Dan Hasse William Shakespeare

Why You'll Love This Delightfully Messy 'Dream' Review of Shakespeare in the Square's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'



Photo credit: EMILIO MADRID-KUSER