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Between poetic and potboiler

Romeo and Juliet

By [Jeff Hudson](#)

Here's the paradox of *Romeo and Juliet*: Most people feel familiar with this iconic play. Everyone recognizes the balcony scene (“Wherefore art thou Romeo?”) and goes into seeing a production realizing the star-crossed lovers will die. But it is not that oft produced—in fact, a surprising number of folks have never seen it live. As verification, the decades-old Sacramento Theatre Company (historically fond of classics), is currently staging *Romeo and Juliet* for the first time.

Director Ed Claudio updates the setting to Prohibition-era New Jersey, where two patriarchal syndicate clans (one Jewish, one Italian) contend. Hip flasks abound, cocky young men are quick to draw concealed weapons. Instead of Friar Laurence (uttering “Holy St. Francis”) we get Rabbi Laurence (“Jumping Jehoshaphat,” spoken by cagey veteran Matt K. Miller). Newcomer Jeb Burris (a pro who’s played Mercutio on the summer circuit) lights up the audacious Queen Mab speech. And comic actress Amy Kelly (as Juliet’s motormouth nurse) channels the brassy spirit of Ethel Merman. Romeo (buff, giddy, eager Andrew Perez) does athletic pull-ups to smooch Juliet (modest, pint-sized but feisty Denver Skye Vaughn) on her balcony, bringing freshness and good chemistry to the scene. Its pure bawdy comedy until halftime, as Shakespeare intended.

Then, the young bucks start slaughtering each other



Mysterious masked smooches and melodrama.
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SACRAMENTO THEATRE COMPANY

Romeo and Juliet, 12:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. Thursday; 8 p.m. Friday; 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday; 6:30 p.m. Wednesday; \$12-\$31. Sacramento Theatre Company, 1419 H Street; (916) 443-6722; www.sactheatre.org. Through March 23.

in the streets, and Romeo's penchant for impulsive action derails his half-formed plans. Everything darkens: The glad-handing Lord Capulet (Kirk Blackinton) is revealed as an abusive woman-beater; the suicidal Romeo visits a street pusher to buy a fatal dose; the desperate Juliet threatens to slit her throat in the distraught rabbi's study. The production's tone wavers between poetic and potboiler—but as a piece of storytelling, it connects (albeit less consistently as the frolicking first half). The cast's dedication and the time-honored qualities of this classic script carry the day.