

Theater review: Early 1930s a fine fit for STC's 'Romeo and Juliet'

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Shakespeare in general and "[Romeo and Juliet](#)" in particular has stood up to numerous "interpretations" as inspired or ill-conceived as they may be. The young "star cross'd lovers" are easily believable and usually compelling in any time or place. Sacramento Theatre Company's current production puts an early-1930s, mobbed-up New Jersey spin on the story, offering not only two warring clans but different faiths as well. The strongly performed production fares well for the most part, sprinting through a cohesive, entertaining first act before sputtering with a muted, anti-climatic ending in the episodic second act.

Dramaturg Brian Harrower has turned Romeo's Montague clan into an observant Jewish family, with Juliet's Capulets as Italians who we assume are Catholic. Consequently, the Franciscan friar (the lively Matt K. Miller) who is the lovers' confidant and secretly marries them becomes a rabbi here, and still comes up with a disastrous plan to save them.

The opening prologue is delivered by a tabloid reporter in a rough mix of Jersey-accented Shakespearean verse. Quickly and happily, though, the adaptation's conceits settle solely into fashion statements – double-breasted suits and fedoras on the men and flowing dresses on the women. McKayla Butym came up with the costumes and Anna Katharine Mantz designed the blocky set consisting of staircases and landings coupled with two free-standing columns sporting period signage for businesses.

There are text cuts in this version that eliminate early comic byplay from supporting characters. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's play opens with the two-family feud in full swing, so we never really understand the source of enmity between them. We just know they don't like each other.

The production benefits enormously from the energy and chemistry of its leads, Andrew Joseph Perez (Capital Stage's "The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity") and Denver Skye Vaughn (veteran of several B Street Fantasy Theatre school tours). The effectiveness of any Shakespeare production lies not just in the actors' facility with the language, but also with their ability to communicate meaning. What happens between Romeo and Juliet is easily understood through the physicality of Perez and Vaughn, and the play's evocative poetry lushly flows through their fine performances.

Director Ed Claudio's reputation as an acting mentor will only be enhanced by the performances he showcases here. STC newcomer Jeb Burris adds an edgy electricity with his smart, smirking Mercutio, one of the play's essential characters. Amy Kelly crushes the intentional comedy of Juliet's bawdy loyal nurse while showing an impressive range in the later tragic scenes.

The play's first half is full of ribald sexual innuendo, with Mercutio and the nurse each showing the lustful side of the romantic and sexual love Romeo and Juliet demonstrate.

Kirk Blackinton and Kristine David make an imposing couple as Juliet's inflexible parents. Blackinton especially makes Capulet's fury at Juliet's resistance to his marriage match with Eason Donner's decent Paris fierce and harrowing.

For all the energy and excitement the first act summons, the second act doesn't sustain the same momentum, in part due to the shorter scenes and the repetitive blackouts. The final tomb scene comes as an anticlimax, with Sean Morneau's sensitive mayor almost apologizing in his repudiation of the warring families, rather than angrily indicting them for the senseless violence they have engendered.

As always, the play's the thing, not its setting or its costumes, and this production effectively delivers the story essentials.

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