

Theater: Getting ‘Romeo and Juliet’ into good shape

By Marcus Crowder
mcrowder@sacbee.com

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Actor and exercise enthusiast Andrew Perez does not believe in excess body fat or sitting around being idle. Besides acting, Perez counts himself a musician (he gives guitar and ukulele lessons), a Web designer, an open water diver and a personal trainer (NASM-certified). Recent shirtless photos of Perez on Facebook give no reason to disbelieve his claim he has reached 8.5 percent body fat.

Perez will take the lead as Romeo in the new [Sacramento Theatre Company](#) production of “[Romeo and Juliet](#),” which opens Saturday. Since Perez is also a certified actor/combatant in the Society of American Fight Directors, he choreographed the production’s fight scenes as well.

If nothing else, the production will be in good shape. During a rehearsal break, Denver Skye Vaughn, who plays Juliet, did pushups and worked on her downward dog pose.

Meanwhile, Perez talked about taking on one of the most well-known characters ever.

“It’s a blast. It’s one of the most well-known plays in the English-speaking world,” the 26-year-old Perez said. “So for me it’s just coming at it as genuinely and honestly as possible and then making the words my own, to speak them in a way that hopefully is fresh.”

Perez went to Jesuit High School and then studied drama and creative writing at [Seattle University](#). He’s been acting and working relentlessly in theater since then – in ensembles at the Music Circus (“Fiddler on the Roof”) and Capital Stage (“Enron”) and as lead at Sacramento Theatre Company (“Little Shop of Horrors”). Last year he played the Mace in Capital Stage’s stellar production of “The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity.”

As the thoughtful Mace, Perez not only narrated the play and was the main protagonist, he also participated in vigorous wrestling scenes that simulated actual moves seen on televised pro wrestling events. The production was so successful that it went on to the San Jose Stage Company for a second run. Perez now takes on a timeless classic, and as soon as he closes the show here, he’ll fly to Memphis to start on “The Taming of the Shrew” as Lucentio at the Tennessee Shakespeare Company.

“I’ve just tried to take in as much information as I can about this play’s history and the text itself. The words themselves and the meaning. The poetry,” Perez said.

The action has been transferred from Verona to a 1930s “Boardwalk Empire” full of New Jersey mob grievances and gangster violence. The concept comes from Big Idea Theatre artistic director Brian Harrower, who adapted the script. Director Ed Claudio said the adaptation was handed to him by STC producing director Michael Laun, and Claudio thinks the ideas will work.

“It definitely crosses into modern culture,” Claudio said of the play.

“You look to make it relevant, but more than anything, you look for the truth. The truth of the story, the truth of the characters,” Claudio said. “If you find the truth, the audience is going to relate to it, but that’s easier said than done.”

The text has been cut, which often happens with “Romeo and Juliet,” but Claudio said Harrower hasn’t added any text.

“My belief is when you do cut a play, you diminish the play,” Claudio said. “I’ve done that with Chekhov, and every time I do it, I shed a tear or two. It’s not what I really want to do, but the necessities of the modern stage require that kind of thing, it just does.”

Perez has adapted sword fights – a major component of the “Romeo and Juliet” plot – to fit the mobster concept. At the same time, he’s tried to remain consistent with the Bard’s language, which can be specific in terms of the fights and their outcomes.

While wearing his two hats, Perez has built a strong relationship with the veteran Claudio, a renowned acting teacher.

“We trust each other to push and pull each other into whatever direction we need to get the story where we all feel it needs to be,” Perez said.

“It’s a very open and honest relationship. We both know we’re working together to hone this particular production of ‘Romeo and Juliet’ to be the best possible story that it can be and tell the story most effectively as we can,” Perez said.

Call The Bee’s Marcus Crowder, (916) 321-1120.

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