

## AT THIS STAGE, 'ROMEO' HAS ROOM TO IMPROVE

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**WATERTOWN** It's clear from the beginning why Rick Lombardo chose "Romeo and Juliet" to inaugurate the New Repertory Theatre's space at the Arsenal Center for the Arts. The forces loyal to the Montagues and Capulets, wielding swords and shovels, would have taken out half the audience at the Newton church where New Rep used to perform.

But if "Romeo and Juliet" is a terrific vehicle for showing what the theater can do formalistically, Shakespeare simply does not showcase Boston's acting community to great effect, particularly now that the Actors' Shakespeare Project has siphoned off so many of the region's best Bardists. Fewer than a handful of actors distinguish themselves here, and the two playing Romeo and Juliet, unfortunately, aren't among them. Lucas Hall and Jennifer Lafleur are perfectly adequate, as is most of the cast, but when taking on the classics, adequate usually translates to dull.

The production itself is not dull and the new Arsenal Center is a spectacular addition to the area scene. Not just for theater, either, as evidenced by the imaginative artworks everywhere you go in the big, bright lobby. It's a far more welcoming space than the Calderwood Pavilion at the Boston Center for the Arts.

The 300-seat theater is set up stadium-style with the audience looking down on the action, and there's plenty of that onstage. Lombardo and Kelli Edwards have choreographed the ball scene beautifully and **Ted Hewlett has helped produce some of the best fight scenes you'll see on a Boston-area stage.**

Not that this is "The Mark of Zorro." Shakespeare was writing about the tragedy of blood feuds, not urging them on, and Lombardo was drawn to that story for all it says about today's conflicts around the world. To illustrate that the director mixes Renaissance and contemporary moods, beginning with a soundtrack that uses remixed Gregorian chants and Gorecki's Holocaust-related Symphony No. 3.

The set is divided into two tiers, which wouldn't have been possible in the snug Newton space. The top tier suggests both a classical Verona balcony and a city at war, symbolized by a cross in stained glass that has been half-destroyed. Below, the remains of a broken-down car depict life during

wartime, while trellises bloom, as if hoping for quieter times. Frances Nelson McSherry mixes and matches Elizabethan and current fashion imaginatively, Franklin Meissner Jr.'s lighting design is both bolder and subtler than the old space allowed for.

John Howell Hood's overall set design, though, is too basic to sustain three hours of Shakespeare, particularly when the spoken Shakespeare is equally basic. The first step in producing good Shakespeare is providing clarity, and this "Romeo and Juliet" passes that test. The actors know how to deliver their lines without resorting to sing-song intonations and Lombardo keeps the plot moving and the thematic concerns center stage.

The second step in producing memorable Shakespeare is much harder. It entails finding actors who not only can read the lines convincingly, but can do something with them that make them into characters who are full of life. Going hand in hand with that, often, is a more relaxed, robust body language.

There are really only three actors who summon up such sweet thunder. Two are Publick Theatre mainstays: Diego Arciniegas makes Friar Laurence's ode to harmony in the natural world and in human nature a joy; Steven Barkhimer brings muscle to Lord Capulet in every scene he's in.

And Joe Plummer as Mercutio, the top man in Romeo's entourage, lights up the stage every moment he's on it, whether he's teasing Romeo, doing a swashbuckling number on Tybalt, or carrying off Juliet's nurse (an on-again, off-again Bobbie Steinbach) on his shoulders.

This isn't the first production in which Mercutio steals the show from Romeo, but it shouldn't be this easy. Shakespeare refers to Romeo as angelic and the character worries about becoming effeminate from his love to Juliet. Still, Romeo has real spine and strength of character that Hall only finds when he kills Tybalt and Paris. An affected languorousness almost makes mockery of his passion for Juliet.

There's no sizzle in Lafleur's Juliet, either. She's expressive enough, but the poetry of Shakespeare's language doesn't come across. When Juliet yearns for Romeo through the broken bars of the balcony, neither actor captures the transcendence of the language.

Perhaps Lombardo was overly ambitious in making "Romeo and Juliet" the inaugural event, though he and the New Rep haven't gotten this far without

stretching. For all the problems here, it's still a pleasure to see the company reaching higher.

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