

Virginia Stage's 'bold' Romeo/Juliet is that, and it works

By Mal Vincent
The Virginian-Pilot

NORFOLK

The Virginia Stage Company promised "a bold, new staging" of William Shakespeare's tragedy "Romeo and Juliet." It has delivered — brilliantly.

The production uses Internet technology and audio and video devices to dress and illustrate the drama of two teenagers caught in the quarrels of an adult society divided by hatred and greed. More than just a high-tech showcase, the treatment adds high inspiration in creating a hard-edged, modern tone that is softened by the sweet innocence of its two lovers. It works.

The most obvious ploy would have been to use the vagaries of the Internet to explain the final tragedy in which Romeo fails to get the message sent by the bumbling Friar Lawrence, leading to the deaths of both lovers. That aspect is used and, in fact, it is more believable than the 1595 version. Why is it that the computer I'm staring at seems less competent than the horse-messenger the silly friar sent from Verona over five centuries ago? When "Fatal Error — Your Information has been lost" flashes across the screen, it is something that is totally believable. (In fact, we'd best rush into writing this review because the system could crash at any moment).

Director Patrick Mullins has recruited a young cast that turns this into a battle of family empires who fight it out in the capitalist market of economic greed. Mullins, who is too often stuck with the workhouse task of mounting "A Christmas Carol" each season, never allows the huge screens and handheld cameras to become a distraction. Even PilotOnline, the news Web site associated with The Virginian-Pilot, gets a credit (thank you) in reporting the proposed marriage merger of the Capulet and Montague family fortunes.

theater review

//romeo&juliet/

What The Virginia Stage Company production of the tragedy by William Shakespeare

Where Wells Theatre, Monticello Avenue and Tazewell Street, Norfolk

When 4 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, 7 p.m. Tuesdays and 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays; through Nov. 8

Tickets \$28 to \$45 — (800) 745-3000, www.vastage.com

Online facebook.com/romeovsc, facebook.com/julietvsc

A huge screen to the rear of Samuel W. Flint's sparse, metal-scaffolding set is augmented by screens on each side. (Get seats to the rear of the theater because, in this case, they are better). The actors often photograph each other with handheld cameras. The rumble between the Montague and Capulet boys even spills out to Tazewell Street. Using a "Blair Witch" kind of photography, Romeo's descent into the family tomb makes the Wells Theatre really look like "the womb of death."

The contributions of multimedia designer Michael Miceli are considerable. A particularly clever touch is that Romeo is banished to an area in which the cell phones can't get a connection.

Joe Delafield is a likably boyish and vulnerable Romeo. Mahira Kakkar, a na-

tive of India and a graduate of the Juilliard School, is a sweetly innocent but vibrant Juliet. With the help of a bizarre close-up camera angle, she brings a touch of insane-mad Juliet to one scene — something new.

Delafield manages all the physical dashes of the assignment with never muffing a line, or getting out of breath. Has any other Romeo had to climb to the balcony carrying a camera? In this case, the lovers get a real balcony — the ornate front balcony of the classic Wells Theatre.

Running without an intermission, it clocks in at a brisk one hour and 40 minutes. The most obvious cut is the nurse's scene in carrying messages. The most obvious character cut is Lord Capulet. We don't miss either.

Particularly effective is Nancy Lemenager's high-heeled, steely modern depiction of Lady Capulet as an affluent, conniving socialite, usually with a cocktail in hand.

Mullins has the actors climbing down ladders and entering the stage down aisles — even carrying their fights to the lobby and out onto the street.

Of the gang leaders, Jeff Barry, a Yale Drama School alumnus, is particularly swaggering and showy as Mercutio — a real punk in tight jeans. Natasha Bunnell, in her early scenes, tends to overdo the comic aspects of the nurse, but she settles down.

It's something of a stretch to see the friar as an office worker, but Andy Paterson does manage to make him more forcefully spoken than the usual elderly casting.

The yuppie setting, making the youths the product of ultra-rich, power-broker families, doesn't quite fit with the gang look of the costuming. (Although rich kids today often look the same as gang kids, don't they?)

This is an exciting new look at the play, a surprising adventure that, we suspect, doesn't play exactly the same at any two performances.

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