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Theater review: Theater at Monmouth's 'Romeo and Juliet' a touching, relevant



production

In a whirlwind performance, cast captures classic story of 'star-crossed lovers.'

BY **STEVE FEENEY**



Leighton Samuels and Lindsay Tornquist star as Romeo and Juliet in the

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Theater at Monmouth production that runs through Aug. 24. Rene Minnis photo

They never quite get it right, do they? But those “star-crossed lovers” still fascinate audiences, centuries after Shakespeare set them on their fateful path.

The venerable Theater at Monmouth has opened a production of “Romeo and Juliet” which belies Romeo’s assertion that “sad hours seem long.” At about two hours, the play moves along almost too quickly.

The tale of feuding clans and the damage that ensues from their intransigence remains as touching and relevant today as do the images of youthful love for which the play is so widely known. This worthy production captures all that is special about this play in something approaching a whirlwind of dialogue and action.

Director Dawn McAndrews has staged the play in period dress and also given weight to several spirited sword fights (with help from choreographer Paul

Dennhardt). A dance sequence, to the contrary, seemed subdued, perhaps to suggest the constraints of stultifying traditions from which the lovers hope to escape.

Though there was much to commend on opening night, there was a sense that some of the players were still settling into their roles. There's little doubt, though, that this production will get even better.

Among the principals, Lindsay Tornquist made her Juliet a sweetheart who, nonetheless, knows what she wants. She's giggly and girlish in repartee with her beloved Romeo but is also capable of fending off the restrictive admonitions of her elders. Tornquist brought to her character's peaks and valleys, her joys and woes, real force and feeling. Juliet's ultimate fate gained poignancy as the actress embodied the passion that gives this play its lasting power.

Leighton Samuels' Romeo voiced his lines at times with a hint of recitation, like a young man knowing the words

but not the feeling behind them. As the performance went along, he gave more and more glimpses of the almost delirious adolescent emerging from behind the language.

Both Tornquist and Samuels worked hard to define their chemistry, though it was, as always, clothed in Elizabethan effusiveness. Particularly in the afterglow of their characters' wedding night, a temporarily controlled passion showed even greater depth as the pair playfully debated whether nightingales or larks were calling.

Janis Stevens was an emotional Nurse to Juliet, while Will Harrell thundered as the young girl's uncompromising father. Both ably provided needed contours for the story, as did Bill Van Horn as the perhaps too helpful Friar. Turner Frankosky, Michael Dix Thomas, Ryan Simpson, Erica Murphy, Lisa Woods and Max Waszak each took advantage of their supporting moments as well.

Finally, Ardarius Blakely, as the Prince, gave resonance to his announcement that a peace had been won but, as is too often the case, a horrible price had been paid.

Steve Feeney is a freelance writer who lives in Portland.

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