

Romeo and Juliet

By William Shakespeare

Produced by Worcester Foothills Theatre, Worcester, MA

2003-2004 Season

Directed by Edward Isser

A Failed Comedy

Romeo and Juliet is the most frequently performed Shakespearean tragedy and probably second only to *A Midsummer's Night Dream* in popularity among all the plays in the canon. It has inspired over two dozen operas and ballets, a half-dozen movies and even a Broadway musical (*West Side Story*). The appeal of the play is found in the universality of its subject matter and in the effectiveness of its structure.

Romeo and Juliet strikes deep chords in its portrayal of youthful exuberance. The burning love of the two teenagers is moving because either we fondly remember similar feelings, yearn to experience such emotions, or feel a deep emptiness, fearing we never will. The emotional quality of the play, however, extends beyond the romantic and encapsulates other passions as well. The young characters lack the maturity and constraint to edit or censor any of their feelings. Mercutio is an archetypal rebel who speaks his mind and acts impulsively. Tybalt is equally voluble, lashing out in word and deed against any perceived wrongs. Accordingly, many critics (invariably middle-aged or older) view the play as a warning about the dangers of adolescent impetuosity: If only these kids had had some self-control, the heartbreak and bloodshed could have been avoided. This reductive interpretive viewpoint, however, misses the point of the play and the reason it continues

to attract audiences. Despite the horror that ensues, these young people live life in a fuller and perhaps more profound manner than their elders who are constrained by societal imperatives.

Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* in 1595 during the early phase of his career. The play, one of his first forays into the tragic form, has a jejune quality and fails to adhere to the tenets of classical tragedy. Ironically, however, these “failings” make the play more compelling and moving than some of his later, more polished tragic works. In fact, except for the rarely performed *Timon of Athens*, it is the only Shakespearean tragedy that is not about the fall of a great man or woman. The two young heroes are neither kings nor queens; they are merely the offspring of well-to-do parents. In death they fail to gain either self-awareness or transcendence—learning nothing and feeling no regret. But it is the familiarity of these characters that immediately connects them with an audience. While none of us can ever imagine being a Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra or Caesar, we all understand the pangs of overwhelming love. Even more horrifying, we all can imagine and empathize with the pain of losing a child. For this is the crux of the drama—the death of adolescent children cut off before their lives have barely begun.

The final great “failing” of the play is in its structural impurity. *Romeo and Juliet* is a comedy that has gone terribly off the rails. Consider any of Shakespeare’s great comedies—*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*—and you will note that they share identical plot and structural elements. Two young lovers are prevented from uniting by an intruding society and a fundamental misunderstanding. During the course of these other plays, there is always a comic reversal in

which the impediments to true love are removed. The comedies invariably end with the lovers married and society reintegrated. *Romeo and Juliet* follows this model precisely and if Romeo merely arrived a few minutes later or Juliet awoke a bit earlier, the terrible tragedy would be averted. The play also has a series of stock comic characters such as the Nurse and Mercutio and even Capulet, who fills the role of the blustering, domineering father. But these characters, like the play itself, violate the norms of comedy: Mercutio dies a meaningless death; the Nurse betrays Juliet's trust; and no higher authority offsets Capulet's imperiousness. The structure of the play encourages the audience to fall victim to its comic devices: no matter how many times we read or see it, we always find ourselves wishing, somehow, all would work out in the end. And it is this hope that drives the play forward and makes the ending so emotionally devastating.

The Foothills Theatre production celebrates and embraces the visceral qualities of the play. This is not a postmodern deconstruction striving to impose a deeper or political meaning upon the work, to modernize it, or to pass judgment. Rather, we seek to let the play speak for itself. *Romeo and Juliet* contains some of the most beautiful poetic language ever written. We hope you will listen, and allow the verse to permeate your being, as it works upon your hearts and souls. Don't search for a simplistic moral or an easy answer: Passionate love and impulsive violence defy logic and rationality. The genius of Shakespeare was his ability to put into words what the rest of us merely feel.