

Theatre review: Citadel's Romeo and Juliet irresistible

BY LIZ NICHOLLS, EDMONTON JOURNAL APRIL 11, 2014

REVIEW

Romeo and Juliet

Theatre: Citadel Maclab

Directed by: Tom Wood

Starring: Brendan McMurtry-Howlett, Shaina Silver-Baird, Morgan David Jones, Rose Napoli, Jamie Cavanagh, Nick Abraham

Running: through April 27

Tickets: citadeltheatre.com

EDMONTON - If you ever secretly wondered why Romeo and Juliet didn't, you know, go out together, or maybe shack up, before they rush, fatally, into marriage, Tom Wood's sumptuous and dangerous production now brawling its way across the Citadel's Maclab stage will skewer that thought in the first scene.

Welcome to fair Verona, a place of public mayhem, explosive carnage, noise, smoke and confusion, the clash of steel, whirling bodies — as violent as it is beautiful.

The terrific opening scene, one of the best I've seen, is a veritable ballet of violence. The eerie tones of a boy soprano singing a requiem (score by Michael Becker) pierce through the noise of civic chaos. On the mean streets of Verona, the Prince, the sole authority figure, can't even make himself heard to lay down the law.

In the ensuing tragedy, fighting — dangerously, scarily, excitingly choreographed by Jonathan Purvis — is to the death. I've rarely seen that world set forth with such convincing ferocity. Nick Abraham's Tybalt, a lithe and lethal career feuder, is a formidable foe. And Jamie Cavanagh's superb Mercutio has a mad and manic charisma to him as he rushes pell-mell toward death-as-performance, flinging dirty jokes and double entendres, savouring to the hilt his own glittering, sardonic, sour poetry.

Everything about this production happens quickly; nobody saunters in Verona and everybody is out of breath: violence is endemic here. And if the finale scene in Capulet's family tomb seems to arrive a little abruptly, the escalation in pace is powerful.

At the Capulets, competitive nouveau-riche climbers, hospitality is the thinnest of veneers. Juliet's dad, played by the excellent Paul Essiembre, has a short fuse attached to a vicious temper. His idea of home entertainment is no holds-barred bare-chested wrestling, and he joins in. His tantrums when crossed happen in a terrifying way, as Juliet, and even the fighter Tybalt, have reason to know. Wood's production sets forth this domestic dysfunction — including a cold-eyed socialite wife who's having it

off with Tybalt — with unusual detail. And Louise Lambert's earthy chatterbox of a Nurse is a dimensional participant; you can see why she's Juliet's only friend.

With such a vivid evocation, the fatal finale isn't — as the old Romeo and Juliet joke goes — a matter of bad postal service between Verona and Mantua, or damn bad luck on timing. Love is up against it here. "The yoke of inauspicious stars" has a bona fide tragic inevitability.

And speaking of stars, Cavanagh's doomed Mercutio is an auspicious one: a toxic imp of a guy who shines most brightly. As for the star-cross'd, this production alternates pairs of lovers, which puts considerable demands on the rest of the ensemble. I had the chance to see both this week, Morgan David Jones and Rose Napoli, and Brendan McMurtry-Howlett and Shaina Silver-Baird. Both pairs are likable if not heartbreaking; the differences are intriguing. The alternating Romeos differ in age by six years (a mere piffle in Shakespeare years) and tone, which affects the dynamic between the lovestruck outsider and his exasperated pals, especially Mercutio and an unusually grave Benvolio (Jesse Nerenberg).

Jones's Romeo has a certain withdrawn, aloof reserve to him. When he meets Juliet, he seems to wake up. He has to learn impulsiveness, it seems; it doesn't come naturally to him. McMurtry-Howlett's performance is impulsiveness itself; he's exuberant in both despair and joy. He catapults up staircases and over orchard walls.

Neither Juliet falls into the wispy, poetically romantic innocent lineage in the role. They're sturdy gals, naturally jolly. And in the case of Napoli, who's particularly fierce and determined in her playfulness, you feel she'd have been a bit of a handful as a wife if things had worked out. The way she cries No! to marrying Paris gives you a tiny glint that she's her father's daughter. The Capulets are a loud, vigorous household on her nights — Mabelle Carvajal's Lady Capulet is a short-tempered shouter, like her husband, in contrast to Iam Coulter's icy socialite Lady C, with whom she alternates.

Silver-Baird's Juliet seems very young indeed. She doesn't seem particularly surprised by falling in love at first sight, only pleased.

Meanwhile, it's for Jamie Williams to broker developments as a sort of good-hearted, progressive organic herbalist-type Friar Lawrence. He's not the formal type; his first appearance is on the john.

The production is fast-moving and intelligible. And it's beautiful to look at, thanks to Corey Sincennes's design — a classically symmetrical Shakespearean tiered stage with, yes, a lovely balcony — his gorgeous costumes, and Kevin Humphrey's extravagantly burnished, marbled, painterly lighting.

The route to the tomb has never been more irresistible.