



CurtainUp

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A CurtainUp Review

Romeo and Juliet

By [Deirdre Donovan](#)

My only love sprung from my only hate. — Juliet

Theatergoers who want to see a Shakespeare play this summer without burning a hole in their wallet might try Theater 2020's *Romeo and Juliet*. Combining puppetry with traditional theatrical techniques, their reimagining of Shakespeare's star crossed lovers story is being presented at Saint Charles Borromeo Church in Brooklyn Heights and Pier 1 at Brooklyn Bridge Park. The production is highly original in its cross-cultural setting and retooling of its protagonists as a Muslim and a Hindu.

Whether you go to the park or the church (as I did), you will likely be struck by how well Shakespeare's text can be appropriated as a Mideastern conceit. In a program note, director David Fuller reveals that his search for a modern setting for *Romeo and Juliet* was resolved when he discovered a news event last February that involved a double-suicide of teenagers. In the real event a young woman was killed by her parents for loving a young man of a different religion. Depressed, the young man on the case then killed himself. Fuller doesn't overplay his cross-cultural premise, but the tension between the Muslim and Hindu religions is subtly felt during the entire evening.

This compact production has real power and verve. It opens with the traditional Prologue during which the troupe of 8 actors stride down the center aisle. The audience watches from the front pews as they pass by, and dance into the altar area. There's bell ringing, chanting, and a large boom box which anchors the play in the present-day. A young actor, swirling a red rectangular scarf through the air, breaks away from the cadre, and goes up into the pulpit. Without speaking a word, he secures one end of the scarf to the pulpit, and dramatically lets the other end fall to the altar's floor. A cascade of redness, it seems symbolic of the passion and violence to follow.

Some performers wear traditional Muslim or Hindu clothing (costume design by Lynn Marie Macy); and others contemporary clothing with simple veils, close-fitting caps, or turbans. But there's no doubt that the time and place are here and now.

You might think that watching *Romeo and Juliet* within the hallowed walls of a Roman Catholic church might give it a too gossypily mood and atmosphere. Not at all. The setting mysteriously amplifies the tragedy as a homily of love. Nearly all of the church's interior is utilized during the presentation: the center and side aisles function as exits and entrances; the altar area serves as the main performing space; and the pews serve as impromptu platforms to heighten the dramatic action.

The total result is that the play's inherent religious theme is effortlessly expressed in this ecclesiastical venue.

Admittedly, there are a few minor rubs in this production. Although the puppeteering is charming, it seems too sugary cute during the darker scenes. The 4 giant puppets will appeal to families viewing the production outdoors at the Brooklyn Bridge Park setting, but surrounded by the elegant architecture of Saint Charles Borromeo Church, they tend to be more of a distraction than a clarification.

The puppetry aside, Fuller takes a commanding hold of the play. He cleverly has Juliet (Poonam Basu) speak her famous "O Romeo, Romeo" monologue from the pulpit's lofty height, adding a new gravitas to her romantic words. And when Romeo (Vandit Bhatt), concealed in the shadows, suddenly reveals to Juliet that he's been eavesdropping on her passionate outpouring, Juliet's reaction is that of a teenager experiencing the thrills of first romance. And it's utterly convincing here.

This show is not for the faint-hearted. The fighting scenes (fight direction also by David Fuller) are executed both in the altar area and in the center aisle, a hair's breadth from the audience. The Act 5 sword duel between Romeo and Paris (Kareem M. Lucas), in particular, is quite breath-taking. So if you flinch at the sight or sound of metallic swords' clashing, you would be wise to slide down the pew during the sword fights and not get too close to the action in the center aisle.

Of course, the success of any *Romeo and Juliet* depends on the 2 actors playing the titular roles. Fortunately, Vandit Bhatt and Poonam Basu rightly show their vulnerability and callowness throughout the evening. And though their passion could sizzle more in the bedroom scene following their secret marriage, their emotional awareness is sublime in the Act 5 tomb scene. Other fine performances are turned in by Lynn Marie Macy, as the loyal Nurse, and Nicholas Pollifrone, as the cynical Mercutio.

This is the inaugural production of Theater 2020, which touts itself as the first professional theater company in Brooklyn Heights. Artistic Directors Judith Jarosz and David Fuller, veteran members of the New York theater community, are committed to producing classic and contemporary plays and musicals for a 21st Century audience. And based on their first theatrical effort, the company is worth watching.

Romeo and Juliet

Written by William Shakespeare

Directed by David Fuller

Cast: Vandit Bhatt (Romeo), Poonam Basu (Juliet), Justin Bennett (Laurence/Puppeteer), Marc Andrew Hem Lee (Benvolio/Puppeteer), Kareem M. Lucas (Tybalt/Paris), Lynn Marie Macy (Nurse/Puppeteer), Brandie Moore (Lady Capulet), Nicholas Pollifrone (Mercutio/Puppeteer).

Sets and Lighting Consultant: Giles Hogya

Costumes: Lynn Marie Macy

Fight Director: David Fuller

Production Stage Manager: Cynthia Hennon Marino

Assistant Stage Manager: Mackenzie Beth Ginsburg

Running time: 1 hour; 45 minutes with no intermission.

Reviewed by Deirdre Donovan based at press performance of 7/22/11