

Review of *Romeo & Juliet*

Produced and performed by Lanes Coven

August 4-20, 2023

Windhover Performance Center, Rockport, MA

In so many ways, the current Lanes Coven theater production of *Romeo & Juliet* is a revelation. What is revealed are profound and often unseen truths about the play, about Shakespeare himself, and about our human condition.

First of all, this production reveals that *Romeo & Juliet* is not only a tragedy, but rather a tragicomedy in which the elements of tragedy and comedy are both equally and perfectly balanced, creating a deep and compassionate experience of our human condition--where love, laughter, sex, and death are inextricably woven together. Watching this extraordinary performance, we are vividly reminded that all love ends in loss, and that death can be the door through which love appears in a renewed form. Shakespeare's tragedies end in death and his comedies end in marriage, but *Romeo & Juliet* is a hybrid of both. The lovers are married in their death.

From the very first scene, the meeting of servants from the feuding families of Capulet and Montague, there is a comic quality to the exaggerated insults and threats they throw at each other--as if they are relishing their mutual hatred. Then Juliet, when she first appears, is sucking on a lollipop, making clear that she is a somewhat ditzy teenager (she is just 14!), an overprotected and only child. (She is convincingly and winningly played by Lily Narbonne, co-founder of Lanes Coven.) And Juliet's nurse, masterfully played by Phoebe Potts, is hilarious in her fussing and bustling about. Romeo, played by Wes Guimarães, is an endearing, vulnerable teenager love-smitten by Juliet at first sight. We cannot help but love him as we smile at his over-the-top love-protestations and promises. Mercutio, who is Romeo's best buddy and a party-lover (it is she who suggests that they crash the enemy Capulet's ball) is here played by Eryn O'Sullivan as a delightfully cocky, swashbuckling young woman in red short shorts, and sporting a dueling foil.

Much of the humor in *Romeo & Juliet*, as in most Shakespeare plays, is bawdy. Shakespeare, who was likely bi-sexual, is at his best in *Romeo & Juliet* and Lanes Coven plays this to the hilt. All the men and women in this production (except the patriarchs Capulet and Montague and the friars) are showing off their sexuality in diverse delightful ways.

In a recent New York Times essay Drew Lichtenberg, a Shakespeare dramaturge, wrote, "Shakespeare seems almost purposefully designed to confound those who want to segregate the smutty from the sublime. His work is proof that profundity can live next to, and even be found in, the pornographic, the viscerally violent and the existentially horrifying.... There's always been a... path to a more salacious and subversive Shakespeare, one well known and beloved by artists and theater people." <[Lichtenberg](#)> Lanes Coven has gleefully revealed this path for us.

Alongside all these comic elements there is the painful feud of the Capulet and Montague families. Richard McElvain and Mark Efinger authentically play the two patriarchs, Capulet and Montague, aged, rigidified, and weakened by their mutual hatred. And, of course, there is the tragic ending in which Juliet, who has taken a time-limited potion that makes her appear dead, is discovered by Romeo, who doesn't know that she will awaken shortly. He takes his own life with poison, whereupon Juliet wakes up and seeing him dead, takes his dagger and kills herself.

This tragic dénouement, which is extremely difficult to enact because it can so easily seem melodramatic, is all held with the profound compassionate presence of the Franciscan Friar Lawrence, here played by Lisa Anne Porter—a veteran actor and teacher of actors (including Lily, Justin & Wes) from San Francisco. Having this role played by a woman is a stroke of genius by director Justin Genna. For me, she is the key character, the heart of this production, who balances the comic and tragic poles of the play. She deeply embodies the Franciscan virtues of wisdom, humility, compassion, and peacemaking. These qualities are the mature and ripened fruit of having traveled the whole human condition—from hate to comedy to love and to death.

Although her plan to reconcile the feuding families of Capulet and Montague by secretly arranging the marriage of Romeo and Juliet goes horribly awry, it turns out in the end, that through the deaths of both Romeo and Juliet, the two feuding patriarchs are reconciled and embrace each other as brothers. The final scene is a minute-long tableau, lit from above, of the dead bodies of Romeo and Juliet intertwined, held emotionally by the weeping Friar Lawrence. Like the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Christ in Michaelangelo's Pieta <[Pieta](#)> and like the Archangel Michael holding a dead soldier in Lanesville sculptor Walker Hancock's war memorial <[Hancock](#)>, she is the very embodiment of compassion. She is the divine mother holding all our loves and losses, our broken hearts in an all-encompassing embrace. Never have I wept so openly at a Shakespeare play as I did at this final scene.

The music for this production was created and arranged by master musician and composer, Scott Moore—a next door neighbor to Lily and Justin in Lanes Cove. He has composed music for the Louisville (KY) Ballet, and several of their Shakespeare productions, and in Lanes Cove's production he has created music that perfectly amplifies both the comic and tragic aspects of the play. Justin has sound-designed a fun cut from "Kiss Them For Me" by Siouxsie and the Banshees, a 1970's British rock band, for the Capulets ball at which Romeo meets Juliet for the first time. Scott has composed a rollicking polka that Romeo, Benvolio, and the Nurse dance to; and many brief musical fragments highlighting the mood of the moment. Most compelling for me is Scott's heart-wrenching violin dissonant drone in the final scene that would make you weep, even if you were not watching the play.

The director, Justin Genna, who was trained as a ballet dancer before taking up acting, has created an entire production that really dances. The actors are constantly in motion, whether together or apart. The scenes with just Romeo and Juliet are lovely *pas de deux*, which along with their delicious speeches to each other, create an irresistible evocation of young love. The most extraordinary dance choreography is in the fight scenes. Justin Genna, is Juliet's cousin, Tybalt, a fiery and fierce street fighter straight out of *West Side Story*, dressed in tight black

leather pants and jacket with a leopard print undershirt. His two duels are exquisite slow-motion swirls of thrust and parry—an elegant yet deadly ballet.

This performance of *Romeo & Juliet* takes place outdoors under a tent with open sides at the historic Windhover Performance Center in Rockport. Throughout the play, the wind blows the colorful cloth backdrops on stage and you can hear crickets chirping. The best seats up front are collapsible camp seats and the others are folding chairs or benches, all on a dirt floor. This humble, rustic setting is perfect for this play. Shakespeare would, I imagine, love it as he loved his outdoor Globe Theater.

Lanes Coven's mission, as written on their website, is to make Shakespeare and contemporary plays accessible to everyone and "to honor what is larger than us." In this production of *Romeo & Juliet* they have brilliantly succeeded in accomplishing this.

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