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Romeo and Juliet (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Romeo and Juliet Presented by Georgia Shakespeare at the Conant Performing Arts Center, Atlanta, Georgia. October 13–November 6, 2005. Directed by Richard Garner. Set by Rochelle Barker. Costume design by Sydney Roberts. Lighting by Liz Lee. Music by Klimchak. Fight Choreography by Jacki Blakeney.

Dramaturgy by Andrew Hartley and Alaina Jobe. With Eugene Russell IV (Romeo), Lakeisha Woodard (Juliet), Neal Ghant (Mercutio and Apothecary), Crystal Dickinson (Nurse and Lady Montague), Chris Kayser (Friar Lawrence), Enoch King (Benvolio), Theroun Patterson (Tybalt and Friar John), Henry Bazemore (Paris and Lord Montague), Bruce Evers (Prince Escalus), Joan Pringle (Lady Capulet), Tony Vaughn (Lord Capulet), and others.

The fall production at Georgia Shakespeare occurs after a break of more than a month and a half following the end of the summer repertory season. Since it is the only time during their season when schools are in session, it is usually drawn from the typical high school Shakespeare curriculum. In spite of a predictable slate from which to choose, Georgia Shakespeare consistently breathes new life into these oft-performed plays, such as in the gender role-reversal production of *The Tempest* in 2003. While this production of *Romeo and Juliet* stayed true to most of the classic conventions, its atypical casting and its focus on time gave it a fresh energy.

Although a recent college graduate of DePaul University, Woodard was immediately believable as a girl in her early to mid teens. Rather than falling prey to the trap of "acting" like a teenager, Woodard performed Juliet vivaciously, with an unselfconscious grace, always living in and for the moment. The chemistry between Benvolio, Romeo, and Mercutio was immediately believable as that of three high school buddies—in part because the three actors worked during their teens as part of Freddie Hendrick's Youth Ensemble of Atlanta. Their antics, including stealing liquor from the party at the Capulets', rang true. Like Woodard's Juliet, their behavior was believably teenaged, without resorting to stereotypical tropes. There were, however, points when Romeo's petulant sulking and awkward courting seemed forced and stagey, never quite shaking off the melodramatic lovesick daze in which he begins the play. His performance seemed at times more like an adult pretending to be a teenager, a sharp contrast with the portrayals of the other young characters.

Foremost in both the direction and the design of this production was a heightened awareness of time. The set suggested the pieces of broken

clock works, with gears serving as seats and tables variously throughout the production. (This was less apparent to the seats in the front half of the house, where an edge-on perspective did not fully show the shape of many elements of the set.) One unique element of the design, however, was the presence of a pool of water in the middle of the stage. Although this cut down considerably on the playing area available to the actors, it gave a literal representation to the symbolic gulf between the two families, crossed only in the play's final scene when Juliet's bier was placed in the center of the pool. Around the edge of this pool were scattered a number of short pillars of varying heights, which served as stepping stones for Romeo as he approached Juliet's balcony, and seats for characters throughout the play. This too echoed the theme of time being unpredictable and out of balance—a theme also explored in Garner's production of *The Winter's [End Page 111] Tale* in 2001, which likewise featured a rounded playing area surrounded by twelve irregular pillars.

Death came quickly to characters in this production. Audiences have come to expect outstanding fight choreography from Georgia Shakespeare, following recent productions of *Macbeth* and *Cyrano de Bergerac* in which the fighting styles of the characters so effectively evoked their individual personalities. In a play with fighting so central to the story, it was surprising that nearly every fight was over in a few seconds, with even the climactic fight between Mercutio and Tybalt taking little more. However, knowing the company's previous work, it was clear that this was not the result of sloppy or...

infectious relish that Temple brought to the role, this Benedick's voice made him a vigorously stylish, accomplished, and even puckish version of the polished soldier.

Accordingly, when Benedick and Beatrice tangled briefly in their first scene together, the raillery came alive as an elegant version of trash-talking that served as both spectator-sport and flirtation: "What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?"—with mock surprise and a comic take to the audience. As the show went on, the actors, especially Peter Temple, engaged the audience more and more, to the point of achieving a kind of call-and-response dynamic. During Benedick's soliloquy after being gulled into love, for example, several audience members audibly voiced their affirmation, as though in sympathetic and forgiving response to a public confession:

I did never think to marry. I must not seem proud; happy are they that hear their detractions, and can put them to mending. They say the lady is fair; 'tis a truth, I can bear them witness; and virtuous, 'tis so, I cannot reprove it; and wise, but for loving me; by my troth, it is no addition to her wit, nor no great argument of her folly, for I will be horribly in love with her.

Responding himself to the audience's reactions, Temple played the revelations and jumps in thought with disarming spontaneity and carried the audience along on an increasingly giddy ride to the comic finale: "No, the world must be peopled."



Romeo and Juliet

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