

## **Romeo and Juliet (Theater Review)**

### **Terri Bourus**

Presented by the Chicago Shakespeare Theater on Navy Pier, Chicago, Illinois. April 2-June 19, 2005. Directed by Mark Lamos. Scenic design by Michael Yeargin. Costumes by Candice Donnelly. Lighting design by Rui Rita. Sound design by Scott Stauffer. Choreography by Rachel Rockwell. Fight Choreography by Robin H. McFarquhar. Wig and make-up design by Melissa Veal With Carman Lacivita (Romeo), Julia Coffey (Juliet), Rondi Reed (Nurse), Mike Nussbaum (Friar Lawrence), Robert Petkoff (Mercutio), Susan Hart (Lady Capulet), Steve Hendrikson (Lord Capulet), Michael Polak (Tybalt), Nick Sandys (Prince and Apothecary), Brian Hamman (Benvolio), John Hoogenakker (Paris), David Lively (Montague and Friar John), Susan Wands (Lady Montague), and others.

Veteran Shakespeare director and Chicago native Mark Lamos made his Chicago Shakespeare Theater debut with a rich Italian Renaissance feast for the senses. This retro-production revealed its intentions immediately with a set designed by Michael Yeargin--stark but easily identifiable as a quattrocento Verona where Lamos "lay his scene." Lamos did not depart from this vision at any time during this high-energy and fast-moving production. This staging was no modern or postmodern interpretation or anything close to a West Side Story approach; rather, it was a play that combined the look of an idealized and elaborately illustrated nineteenth-century picture book with the language and the action of Elizabethan theater. Lamos contracted the noted costumer Candice Donnelly, another artist making her debut at CST, to create the opulent garments that filled the stage and delighted the eyes of the spectators. And because these costumes placed the action firmly within fourteenth-century Italy, they served to further emphasize the setting and the accompanying language, and thus the action, of the sonnet-like story, which is certainly what Lamos had in mind. It was authentic and aesthetically pleasing, and it worked.

Juliet, played convincingly and movingly by Julia Coffey, easily dominated every scene that she shared with a somewhat insipid Romeo, played by Carmen Lacivita, an experienced CST actor. His dark good looks would have added significantly to this interpretation if he had been better able to carry off the language. He seemed uninvolved with Juliet and this was partly because his lines were delivered without the requisite feeling; he did not exploit the potential power of the verse and failed to recognize the importance of delivering his lines with the rich cadences that the rhymes and verse demand.

In spite of his problems with delivery, this Romeo expertly demonstrated his passion as a young fighter among his friends and against the Capulets. The athletic prowess of the young men, particularly Robert Petkoff's Mercutio, was beautifully demonstrated with vigorous fight scenes expertly choreographed by Robin H. McFarquhar. There were vibrant and energetic swordfights, accompanied by realistic punching, pushing, yelling, grunting, and thumb-biting. There was

spitting anger, noise, confusion, chaos, hurled insults, and the heated quickness so natural to adolescents. When Tybalt stabbed Mercutio, Romeo's surprise, and then his disbelief quickly turned murderous rage, were palpable. It was Lacivita's finest moment.

Coffey acted her role as the almost fourteen-year-old Juliet convincingly, giving her character exuberant youthful energy, innocence, frank sexuality, and honesty. Coffey had several key scenes in tandem with a brilliant performance by Rondi Reed as the Nurse. The actors played off of each other with exquisite timing, strengthening in the drama the relationship, so powerfully evident in the text but not always played that way on stage, between the two women. It was not difficult for the audience to recognize the depth of the bond between them, from the instant the Nurse was seen in conversation with the steely Lady Capulet concerning the possibility of Juliet being contracted in marriage, to the "woeful day" of the Nurse's achingly realistic grief upon discovering the seemingly dead Juliet. What was most memorable about Reed's performance in this production was her indefatigable vigor in portraying the tiring Nurse: breathless, hurried, running out of energy and, like Juliet, running out of time. Reed's wimpled Nurse was hilariously bawdy and could more than hold her own against the taunting of Mercutio and the gang of Montagues who accosted her in the square. She lent a powerful presence to the entire production, always maintaining her perfect sense of timing and humor.

But it was her interaction with Juliet that not only complimented the younger woman's performance beautifully, but conveyed the sense of closeness and devotion the two women shared. Lamos accentuated the warmly feminine nature of the relationship between Juliet and her Nurse early on in 1.3 when the Nurse lovingly brushed Juliet's hair; this occurred just as the Nurse realized that she would soon be expected to surrender the young girl to marriage. This small gesture brought attention to Juliet's hair, which became increasingly significant throughout the rest of the play. Coffey's long hair, whether it was tied back or flowing freely, reflected Juliet's mood and was complimented by whatever costume she was wearing, emphasizing her youth, and innocent yet passionate nature. It was a prop in itself which never let the audience forget that this is, after all, Juliet's story. At the Capulet ball, it was carefully parted in the middle, held back with an embroidered and elaborately decorated cap. The copper and rose material of her gown accentuated the auburn highlights of her dark brown hair, giving her a particularly vulnerable, and at the same time, fiery appearance. She covered her hair during the wedding ceremony, but on the balcony after the night spent with Romeo, it flowed freely over one shoulder leaving the other bare in her simple cotton nightdress. Later, after drinking the contents of Friar Lawrence's vial, in the "borrowed likeness of shrunk death," her dark hair hung, as did the white and billowing curtain behind her, still full of life, upstage, over the edge of the bed towards an audience that could no longer see Juliet but only the thick, wavy cascade. This was a brilliant touch, further brought out by Rui Rita's subtle play of lights. The treatment of Juliet's hair underscored the poignancy of the final scene as well: when the young lovers' bodies were carried onstage and the biers were laid side-by-side, Juliet's hair was tied back, almost completely hidden.