**NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD**

**Full-Length Play Festival**

**PRIORY PLAYERS**

**at the Headgate Theatre**

***Romeo and Juliet***

**31st January 2019**

**Introduction**

I have to admit to having approached this show with a degree of scepticism. I have no problem at all with adaptations of Shakespeare’s works, nor with changes of gender, location or era, but I know that a change which switches the basic situation of a play, while interesting and even innovative, can sometimes fail through some details not fitting with the concept, or through a concept not being thought totally through nor carried out. The idea of reversing the generations of Romeo & Juliet and having them under the care of their children was not new to me. In Wivenhoe’s own Pop-Up Shakespeare a couple of years ago the idea had been explored for one scene. And of course Bristol Old Vic staged just such a scenario with Sian Phillips and Michael Byrne in the title parts in 2010 in an adaptation called “Juliet and her Romeo”. Making a whole play fit an alternative scenario is a challenging proposition. Will the concept hang together? Will everything make sense?

However, I was very pleasantly surprised. Some peripheral detail had either been cut or skilfully adapted, and the success of the whole depended on the credibility of the central relationship between Romeo and Juliet. Here, we had a moving and believable relationship, the verse thoughtfully and intelligently delivered, with strong trust and attachment replacing youthful passion in the central love between them. I was won over.

**Front of House**

The FOH staff were the usual helpful and friendly team always to be found at the Headgate. The programme was of a striking design, and had the necessary cast and crew information, and an interesting introduction by the director. It might have been useful to have included the information which I found on the Headgate website that the Houses of Montague and Capulet were in this instance two different wings of the Verona Residential Home, and for those unfamiliar with the play, to have shown which characters were from which wing.

**Set and Staging**

The set was wisely simple - and placing furniture in front of blacks worked well. Having Juliet’s bedroom, as well as the Capulet monument, on the raised area of the apse worked very well, and although getting on and off this area sometimes meant breaching notional walls to other areas, this was usually well handled by lighting changes and the attention of actors to not seeing what they were not meant to be seeing! This was a little awkward in the balcony scene, as Juliet had to exit to see the nurse via the space which Romeo had been occupying seconds before. His move across and downstage to speak to us made this work. And on the whole this epic tale was ably and satisfyingly made to fit into this challenging space.

The opening scene in the shared lounge space in the home was well done - having the occupants in situ when the house opened, and with credible activities to carry out gave the sense of place very well. Quite a small cast can fill the Headgate stage very easily, and there were moments when the number of people to get on and off stage did slow the action down a bit - especially as the characters were necessarily not fast movers! The dance was well staged, with the necessary meeting of eyes across a crowded room giving us the spark which signalled the start of this fated relationship.

**Lighting & Sound**

In this show lighting was used for space-staging as well as mood, and the cueing for this was managed sensitively. While the residents’ lounge was rightly well lit with stark white light, Juliet’s room seemed to glow in a different, warmer tone - though whether this was achieved by the furnishings, by the light (or both), or by our expectations I will never know. But it was!

Romeo’s gloomy digs in Mantua were perfectly suggested by one dingily lit chair, and the tomb was suitably forbidding and ethereal at the same time.

**Props**

At first I though that giving all the characters walking sticks was a bit of a stereotyping of the elderly, then I realised that these were their weapons! All the panoply of a residential home was there - pills, walking frames, upright armchairs, phones where used. Accurate and effective.

**Costumes and Make-up**

The costumes were spot-on, from the nursing uniforms of the staff of the home through to the individual clothing of the residents, and the luminous glow of Juliet’s gown and hair, which certainly made her stand out “like a jewel in an Ethiope’s ear” indeed. Tybalt’s rocker gear, Romeo’s ageing Lothario neat suit (and the initial hair combing gesture, just enough to flag up his youthful outlook) contrasted with the cardigan of Absolom, and the variety of modes of dress which marked out the individuality of the other residents.

**Music**

Izzy Liddamore accompanied the action throughout sensitively and beautifully with well chosen and appropriate music which moved the action along and accented the emotions felt. Costumed as one of the residential home staff, her presence was never obtrusive and always supportive. A beautiful and sustained performance.

**Acting Performances**

**Romeo - Tony Winn**

Tony’s depiction of Romeo had all the romance, passion and personal investment which Romeo calls for. The necessary switch from being in love with love, in his interest in the unseen Rosaline, turned to the real commitment to Juliet which Romeo needs. Added to this was a wry acknowledgement that he might not be as nimble as once, but this Romeo caught the essence of being “young at heart” that most of us still feel as we get older. A little vain, as evidenced by the hair combing move at the start, he does not in general doubt that he can be loved, but still has the self-doubt and anxiety of anyone out to form a new relationship. We felt with him at every turn, and his commitment made the whole credible.

**Juliet - Sara Green**

Sara truly shone as soon as she appeared, and we could immediately see why Romeo was smitten. Sara remade the beautiful passionate verse into a contemplative, poignant and longing narrative. Certain of her feelings, and just as certain of her impossible situation, she stilled any questions we might have about why she did not act differently by the grounded integrity of her gentle soul. She was aware of her commitments to those around her and her thoughts about these were woven into her delight in Romeo’s love. A wonderful performance.

**Benvolia - Helen Bridge**

Helen began with a low-key performance which fitted with the setting, but excluded the upper half of the audience, but her performance quickly grew, and she became a likeable, reliable friend to the audience, taking on an everyman-style role as a link to the action.

**Mercutio - Rod Green**

Rod had all of the affection for his friends, plus amused scepticism about their feuds which younger Mercutios exhibit. This was truly Mercutio in essence, with age not having dimmed anything of his personality. Rod also makes the verse his own, and gave us a fine, sensitive and wry performance.

**Tybalt - Mike Carrington**

Mike’s Tybalt made a good hot-headed contrast to the other residents. I felt this was a little over-the-top, but my companion disagreed, and Mike’s performance certainly added the spice of life to the proceedings. Tybalt was certainly raging against the dying of the light, to mis-quote Dylan Thomas, and his rocker-style leather jacket combined with the walking frame showed a character at odds with himself and his fate, and so at war with the world. Juliet’s daughter was clearly fond of “Uncle Tybalt” and his death a great shock to all the residents. Mike managed the fight with Romeo and Mercutio well, and where this might have been comical, it was truly shocking.

**Paris - Nigel Walford**

Nigel made a splendidly dapper Paris, suitably self-confident and obsequious, and rightly oblivious of the fact that Juliet really was not interested. The flamboyant rose and handkerchief highlighted his panache, and Nigel made us sympathise with this well-intentioned character who had clearly mis-read the situation and complex motives involved. The final fight with Romeo was urgent and believable.

**Romeo’s son - Aaron Bowater**

Aaron made Romeo’s son a pleasant, affectionate man, particularly moving at the end when he discovers his father dead, and making a good foil to the manipulative son-in-law of Juliet. We believed that he was fighting the corner of his combative parent, with loyalty and affection.

**Juliet’s daughter - Ivy Dillon**

It is always a pleasure to watch this actor at work. Having seen Ivy’s portrayal of Juliet for the Mercury Youth Theatre, it was impressive to see how she brought all that she had learned about Juliet’s relationship with her parents then, to the reversed role of daughter to the older Juliet. Concerned for her mother’s welfare, she still exhibited the cavalier lack of empathy for what her mother really wants, which can be shown by young people not able to put themselves in the place of the old. She began as an attractive character - bringing colour and energy to the home and clearly influenced by her husband’s ideas for marrying her mother to a rich suitor. As the action wore on, the appearance of bruises and by Act 3 Sc 5 her cowed appearance, and the anguished delivery of “Talk not to me, for I’ll not speak a word” told us everything we needed to know about her relationship with her husband. Beautifully played.

**Juliet’s son-in-law - James Potter**

James started strongly, highlighting the rivalry between the wings which we later began to suspect this son-in-law might have engineered! I liked the antagonism between him and Romeo’s son, which though it could not be explained textually, helped to make the rivalry between the wards heightened and convincing. As the action progressed, it became clear that his iron will was steering the decision to marry Juliet to Paris. The scene where he threatens Juliet from behind her chair was masterly, and made her fear and despair completely credible. A well thought through characterisation, working beautifully with Juliet, Paris, and most of all Juliet’s daughter. Well done.

**Nurse - Paul T Davies**

Making Juliet’s nurse a male nurse in the residential home worked superbly. The tender relationship of trust between them was lovely, and made the nurse’s ultimate betrayal - when he tries to persuade her that she should marry Paris bigamously, all the more shocking. Paul made the most of the comic moments which the part affords, without ever straying from the essence character he had built up - his working of the “Oh honey nurse” scene was just right - believable distraction, not working Juliet up deliberately. So as elsewhere, the comedy of the situation was played, but never over-played - the calling of Juliet from the balcony in order to give her her pills, for instance, and the initial joviality when the young Capulets suggest the union with Paris, all built this sensitive and detailed portrayal.

**Chaplain Lawrence - Donna Potter**

The chaplain was a wonderful well-intentioned local vicar doing her best to help. A strong character, unwittingly instrumental in Romeo and Juliet’s tragedy, not by the failure of a friend to get to Mantua this time, but by mobile phone signal failure. All too believable to all of us! Calling her the conflated “rev’rend” instead of “friar” worked well, although someone’s script had not been changed near the start!

Donna’s Chaplain had credible reason to be round and about the home, and her misreading of the situations as they unfold alongside her concern for the inmates and later remorse at the results of her interventions were all played with conviction.

**Mrs Prince - and the Apothecary - Sara Carr**

The solution to the problem of who rules Verona, when it is a care home, must be the manager. Converting the Prince to Mrs Prince worked well as a device, and Sara exuded authority and leadership - although I’m not sure whether, if I’d been a relative, I would have had confidence in her peace-making skills! Sara played the hand dealt to her well, with the right amount of distance from both staff and inmates. I think when pronouncing death or banishment she could have done with backup from the local police, however!

Sara’s other role as the apothecary (read drug-dealer) was in complete contrast, and beautifully played. The “my poverty, but not my will, consents” line rang true and the undercover nature of the transaction was telling.

**Gregory - Zac Miller**

Zac invested the care attendant Gregory with a mischievous spirit for stirring up the inmates in their quarrels! His interventions, just as Romeo’s son on the other side, reinforced the combative situation the residents had become used to.

**Miss Sampson - Anne Tomkinson**

Anne’s portrayal of the gleeful thumb-biting Sampson was lovely. Her egging on of Gregory to fight, while checking with him whether she was within her rights was funny, and drew us into the unlikely “fight in the residential home” scenario with both humour and trepidation. Her further appearances in the group scenes were sensitive and well thought-through (see the comments on Montagues and Capulets, below).

**Abraham - Brian Butcher**

Brian managed with his usual aplomb to combine both humour and sensitivity in the role of Abraham, giving us a good start to the play by kicking off the fight between the residents. His teaming up with Benvolia added a further dimension to the relationships between the Montagues.

**Carer - Rosemary Sturgiss**

Rosemary’s performance leant authenticity to the care home scene, and she made a sympathetic carer, giving support to the characters under her care and keeping the audience’s focus on the action.

**Montagues - Gilli Robson, Ann Powell & Capulets - Jenny Lithgow, Sheila Lloyd**

The adherents to both “houses” gave excellent support to the action and to the principals. The fight at the start, the dance, the touching wedding scene, and the final reckoning were all greatly enhanced by sensitive reactions and focus. Each person had a different character evidenced by costume, daily activity and reaction, and I felt that everyone had worked on their back-story and were therefore able to convey to us the life of the home.

**Production and direction**

As I have said in the introduction, I had doubts about whether this reversed-ages production would work, which were overcome by the credibility of the central relationship, by the inspired casting of the nurse, and by intelligent playing all round.

Shakespeare’s text was thoughtfully and sensitively adapted to the context chosen for the production by the director, Lorraine Haworth, who certainly had her cast’s total commitment to the vision.

There were, however, still some aspects of the adaptation which were rather glossed over. The feud between the houses of Montague and Capulet was replaced by rival wings of the Residential Home - a rather thin device, not flagged onstage (maybe signs to “Montague Wing“ and “Capulet Wing” would have made this clear for us? Why would there be such rivalry? Why would it lead to killing? Of course, without adding concocted iambic pentameter, you could not add a back-story to this, so it had to stand. However, other aspects of the rationale behind the scenario were splendidly conveyed by some thoughtful acting. One question which hovered in the air was why should Juliet be so horribly under the control of her daughter and son-in law. This all became clear when the son-in-law showed himself in his true bullying colours - and the previously upbeat daughter appeared cowed and bruised.

Inevitably there was humour arising from the change of generations at the start, and the audience had to adjust to this, but as soon as you had proved to us that this was not just going to be played as a comedy, we were able to go with the flow. The walking-stick fights were initially comical, but you played to that when it was fine to do so in the fight between Abraham, Miss Sampson and the Capulets with Benvolia and the Montagues at the start. Mercutio’s heart-attack rang true, but then, how could it be directly blamed upon Tybalt? And making Romeo smother Tybalt with a cushion made this death deliberate rather than an accident of self defence, and changed our view of Romeo rather.

However, the whole worked believably and emotionally. Hats off to Lorraine and the whole company.

**Summary**

This thoroughly enjoyable and moving adaptation and performance of Shakespeare’s classic play left us discussing the many highlights, adaptations and enjoyable moments for a long time afterwards. Thank you for inviting us.

Sheila Foster, Adjudicator

with Helen Chambers

NETG

7th February 2019