

Review: Young lovers ignite on stage in Lab Theater's "Romeo & Juliet"

BY: CHRIS SILK

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FORT MYERS - What: Shakespeare's tragedy about two young lovers from rival families

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday through Feb. 25; one 2 p.m. matinee on Feb. 29

Where: Kiwanis Hall, 1634 Woodford Avenue, downtown Fort Myers

Cost: \$20 adult; \$12 for students

Information: 239-218-0481 or [laboratorytheaterflorida.com](http://www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com)

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The Laboratory Theater of Florida dove into fair Verona Friday night. Star-crossed lovers, nurses, friars, Capulets, Montagues - it must be Shakespeare's "Romeo & Juliet." Here, Annette Trossbach trims the tale to a whiplash-paced 90 minutes. Kiss. Fight. Die. Home by ten. Boring, it is not.

Shakespeare's tragedy about two young lovers from rival families has been endlessly adapted. You've seen it as Baz Luhrmann's "Romeo + Juliet," musical "West Side Story" and even "High School Musical." The story has everything - great characters, fighting, love scenes, death scenes, fight scenes, kissing, weeping and a godly amount of hysterical dramatics. And don't forget that "O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo" line on the balcony.

Trossbach takes a chainsaw to the play, hacking away everything but the essentials of the love story. Think of this as the "Wikipedia-lite" version of "Romeo & Juliet." Purists (one of which I am not) might look askance at the reductions, but what's left remains compulsively watchable and vastly more entertaining than three hours of "thous," "thees" and "wherefores."

Modernization means tossing the accents and the particular speech patterns of Shakespeare. For better or for worse, this can demystify the rhyming couplets at the ends of sonnets. Every now and again, I miss the lilt at the end of a speech, but on the whole, I prefer modern speech. Listen for the crude/clever snip during Act III, Scene II - "Come, cords; come, nurse. I'll to my wedding bed; / And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!"

Fight scenes, choreographed by Trossbach, resound with bone-crunching authenticity. Romeo's duel with Tybalt (an angry, ferocious Vladimyr Bellefleur) feels like something out of a wrestling match.

Trossbach accomplishes near miracles with her amateur cast - many of them teens. High school students Kyle Tague (Romeo) and Gabriela Pickett (Juliet) make a pleasant, pretty, if somewhat bland, pair of young lovers. Tague broods moodily in skinny jeans and a leather jacket beneath a sweep of Justin Bieber-esque hair. Whippet-thin Pickett prances through the party scene in a purple tutu, massaging the long nose of her Romeo's mask ever so unsubtly. Fair warning - the play is far raunchier than you remembered.

While the two bring a vibrant teenage vigor to their roles, it's up to the adults in the cast to deliver more nuanced performances that shape the show. The one youthful exception comes from standout Christian Cooper - who makes for an electric shaggy-haired Mercutio. Dipped in ripped, skin-tight faded red denim and a baggy tee, he seems a one-man sex machine delivering the puns Shakespeare wove into the play.

The pruning leaves barely enough material for the second rank characters to become more than placeholders - but clever staging and some delicious acting carries the day. Sometimes, the cuts highlight the very best parts of the characters - freeing them from the weight of a storm of sonnets.

Denyea Clarkson's Nurse hiccups through the Capulet ball with a beer in her hand. Upon returning from Friar Laurence's, the actress delivers a marvelous performance as she forces Juliet to wait for the news that, yes, she is to be wed to her Romeo. Whether waving a floppy hat or lugging a shopping bag, she's the epitome of aged wisdom. Her streetside scene with a young Romeo is another highlight.

Look for Jack Weld's towering, fiery Father Capulet. Trossbach asks for a bruising, blustery take on the character that sees him slap Juliet across the stage. It becomes a frightening scene - and a powerful one that demonstrates how little recourse women had in those times. Or seek guidance from Dale Hoover's morose confidant of a friar.

The production dispense with medieval dress - except for the party scene, which is a nice touch. Would-be cradle-robber Paris arrives in an elegant suit. Beth L. Yazvac's saucy "Real Housewife" portrayal of Mrs. Capulet slips into three-inch heels and a form-fitting red dress. Gang members don skull tees or muscle shirts.

Trossbach sets all the action on the bare stage, with a simple balcony built at the back. A series of steps leads up to the stage; Friar Laurence's cell and some of the street scenes actually take place amidst the first two rows of the audience. It's a masterful exercise in "less is more." Roger Tanksley's soft lighting caresses the moonlight scenes with care.

Despite "Romeo & Juliet" being adapted endless times, here's yet another spin that's worth a look. Annette Trossbach offers up snack-sized bites of the best scenes, brimming adolescent fire and exploding off the stage. Enjoy the star-crossed lovers, but look for the supporting players - Clarkson's earthy take on Nurse, Weld's angry father and Cooper's thrilling Mercutio.

"I charge thee in the Prince's name obey." Email me, csilk@naplesnews.com (<mailto:csilk@naplesnews.com>), find me on Twitter at **@napleschris** (<http://www.twitter.com/napleschris>) or read my Stage Door theater blog (<http://www.naplesnews.com/stage>). You can also sign up to receive the Stage Door blog via email (<http://eepurl.com/cScpM>).