

Love Is a Battlefield: "Romeo & Juliet," at Lincoln Park through July 27

Written by Mike Schulz
Wednesday, 23 July 2008 02:25



I didn't think there was much wrong with Sunday night's presentation of Genesius Guild's *Romeo & Juliet*, aside from the fact that I didn't *feel* much of anything at it. But in terms of this particular Shakespeare play, isn't that a pretty sizable issue?

It's not that there wasn't plenty of fine work on display. The production featured many topnotch performances, Aaron Sullivan (who also played Benvolio) choreographed continually impressive swordplay, and Mike King (who also played Mercutio) designed a rather extraordinary set for director Barbara Carroll's endeavor; a two-story structure with a pair of staircases that extended beyond the traditional playing area, it made the Lincoln Park stage imposingly, appropriately majestic. (Ellen Dixon's costumes, too, were exquisite, but the designer's work is so consistently outstanding that I'm reasonably sure she could turn gunnysacks into *haute couture* .)

All throughout the evening, though, I kept thinking that while the stage was filled with talents, few of them appeared to be acting in the same show. There's so little connection between the disparate performance styles here that the production oftentimes exudes a lurching, stop-and-start quality, and never develops the rhythm or momentum needed to make the Bard's tragic romance truly resonate for those of us (which I'm assuming is *most* of us) who know its story by heart. I found myself admiring the show on a scene-by-scene basis, yet when the production ended after two and three-quarter hours, the experience was all too easy to shake off.

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This was all the more surprising considering just how marvelous so many of its portrayals were. Before attending Genesius Guild's latest, I'd never thought of the character of Lord Capulet as one of the greats in the Shakespeare canon, but *man*, did Pat Flaherty turn me around on that one. The actor's vitriol towards Juliet (Aisha Ragheb), demanding her obedience in marrying Paris (Neil Friberg), was filled with such bottomless rage that, for a moment, the Bard's play seemed to be Capulet's tragedy more than anyone's. The actor's stirring work was worthy of *Lear*

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Flaherty's passion was nearly matched by that of Jonathan Gregoire, whose incensed Tybalt was particularly fine during his duels with Mercutio and Romeo (Andy Koski); taunting and goading his adversaries with heedless abandon, Gregoire delivered an intensely physical performance. (He and Flaherty are perfectly believable as relatives; when their anger hits a boiling point, both of their voices crack and shoot off into the ether.) And King, to the shock of no one who attends Genesius Guild with any regularity, brought considerable vigor and cleverness to his Mercutio. Despite sporting a jet-black wig, he isn't exactly age-appropriate for the role, but King did a terrific job of disguising that fact, and his comic spirit was as welcome as ever. (At one point, he exits by leaping on Sullivan and allowing the much-taller actor to piggyback him off the stage.)



The tangible energy of these performers, though, was a marked contrast to the close-to-the-vest underplaying of Koski and Sullivan, who were also quite good, yet who seemed to be acting in a different *Romeo & Juliet* altogether. Whereas Flaherty, Gregoire, and King gave robustly externalized portrayals, Koski and Sullivan gave thoughtful and internal ones, and appeared as relaxed as their co-stars were excitable. In truth, they may have been a bit *too* relaxed, as understanding many of their low-key deliveries - particularly in the first act - required a great deal of concentrated listening. But their stage confidence was always inspiring, and Koski played Romeo's later romantic anguish with earnestness and honesty.

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Thankfully, these were also two qualities shared by Ragheb's Juliet. A controlled and effervescent presence who took to Shakespearean verse with ease - the actress' balcony soliloquy was delivered with lovely, unforced sincerity - she also had a lower, richer voice than her youthful prettiness would suggest; Ragheb's Juliet, even in her misery, always sounded *sensible*.

I wish I could say that *Romeo & Juliet's* central love affair was as credible as Romeo and Juliet themselves. But unfortunately, the performers generated little in the way of romantic chemistry, which seemed less due to their age difference (Ragheb is more than 10 years Koski's junior) than their different styles - during the duo's romantic encounters, Koski appeared intent, and Ragheb appeared enraptured, and sadly, the actors never quite meshed.

Romeo & Juliet's other portrayals were similarly, distractingly diversified: Friberg's Paris was shrewd and subtle; Bob Hanske's Friar Laurence and Faith Hardacre's Lady Capulet were engagingly emotional; and Patti Flaherty's Nurse was so wildly over-the-top - shrieking and popping her eyes and toddling on and off stage - that she could pass as the leading character in a braying Shakespeare sitcom for Fox. There are more than enough individual reasons to catch this latest Genesis Guild offering, but with so little performance continuity on display, they *remain*

individual reasons; it's the rare case of a theatrical whole being less than the sum of its parts.

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