Written by Jill Walsh
Tuesday, 25 June 2002 18:00

Ninja-style nuns, two sets of twins separated at birth, woeful lovers, men vaguely resembling Elvis, and a society divided by religious differences. These and more are part of the annual Shakespeare festival at Riverside outdoor theatre in Iowa City, with *The Comedy of Errors* and *Romeo & Juliet* on stage in repertory through July 7.

One of the most rewarding elements of repertory-theatre productions is having the opportunity to see the same actors playing parts in one show that are polar opposites of those in the other production. For example, I underestimated young Dan Kuhlman, who was poorly cast as the bumbling, well-intentioned Officer in *Comedy of Errors* but who played Romeo with beautiful dedication and passion. (In *Comedy*, he was on stage mainly to partake in some of the slapstick routines, and had little to do with the plot.)

The acting is nothing less than phenomenal, thanks to an ensemble of talent gathered from prestigious backgrounds that include starring opposite Patrick Stewart in *Othello* and performing with Richard Burton in *Equus* on Broadway. Of course, the majority of the actors are members of the Actors' Equity Association (the Union of Professional Actors & Stage Managers in the U.S.), which means they're paid very well for these outdoor productions. But this group of 24 actors handles the load of memorizing lines for two shows, which are frequently performed on alternating nights.

Romeo & Juliet is one of Shakespeare's most well-known and, in my opinion, most beautifully written plays. Having seen the popular 1996 film version starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes about five times and reading the play multiple times during high school, the Iowa City festival was an exciting opportunity to finally see the tragedy performed on stage.

Director Mark Hunter chose wisely when he decided to set the play in modern Jerusalem. In the festival's production notes, he says, "I had thought long and hard about the wisdom of proceeding with this production as originally conceived [to be set in the Middle East]. I was daunted by the possibility that it might be perceived as either exploiting or trivializing a deadly conflict whose victims enjoy no poetry, no carefully wrought dramatic structure, no intermission, and no escape into metaphor. But I chose to go forward because of some deep and heartfelt convictions. No subject is off limits for art." The setting is incredibly relevant, especially after the September 11 terrorist attacks and the violence that occurs every day between Israelis and Palestinians. One of the many morals of the story: Peace and understanding solve more than violence and ignorance.

Two powerful families are divided by religion; the Capulets practice Islam and Montagues are Jewish. Visually, costuming makes it easier to distinguish Capulet from Montague before audiences familiarize themselves with the characters. The Capulet women, with the exception of young Juliet, keep their faces shrouded, while the men wear tunics and headpieces. Montagues don modern dress: jeans, Hawaiian shirts, and suede suits.

Acting talent abounds in the lead characters of Romeo, Juliet, the Nurse, Capulet, and

Benvolio. Fourteen-year-old Juliet is played by the pert, tiny Nicole Raphael, whose innocent plunge into love is engaging and sweet. Kuhlman as Romeo also captures audiences in his genuine and pure performance. Love at first sight is truly believable in this production.

Noteworthy moments in the show are the dance scene at the Capulets' house, which includes traditional Islamic seduction dances and a flurry of beautiful costumes; the fight scenes between Montagues and Capulets, which are so realistically choreographed, I was actually frightened I would see blood; and of course, the sweet balcony scenes between Romeo and Juliet.

Comedy of Errors is the less engaging of the two plays, though it lives up to the standards of director Ron Clark, who describes his interpretation as "teetering on the brink of becoming a Merry Melody cartoon." Filled with an uncountable number of sexual references (whether Shakespeare intended all of them or not) and outlandish costume and set design, this production is pleasant and funny, though at times it might be offensive to more conservative audience members.

Comedy of Errors is Shakespeare's shortest and most complicated comedy, with two sets of identical twins, both separated at birth, who are reunited (though they don't figure this out until the play's end). It is set in the city of Ephesus, after the family was separated in a shipwreck when both sets of twins were very young. The situation eventually lands the father in jail with a death sentence and the four twins all in the same city in search of each other. And here's where the play begins.

Both sets of twins keep encountering each other at various times, which throws the plot line into turmoil. These innocent confusions create the bulk of this show's visual, slapstick humor because it is so absurd that the four people cannot meet until the end of the play. Handsome Tony Bingham, who also plays a good-natured Benvolio in *Romeo & Juliet*, is the actor who carries this show. His portrayal of the hair-greasing, confident Antipholus of Syracuse is priceless: His facial expressions don't get too exaggerated, his voice is powerful, and his innocence during certain situations (which I won't spoil by revealing) are balanced with precision.

If director Ron Clark describes this play as a cartoon, I'd add that it's a very strange cartoon. Movements are over-exaggerated, costumes are eccentric, the set is a bright pastel color, and the Dromios' large ears and the Antipholus' Elvis/Fonz-style hairdos are outrageous. The atmosphere is a light-hearted, zany one, and audiences feel drawn to the characters because of their ability to spur laughter. With chase scenes, slapstick swordfights, and mistaken identities, this show is one wild ride.

Comedy of Errors is something of a humorous treat, but people who decide to see only one of the two shows should pick the tragedy. *Romeo & Juliet* is filled with so much emotion, passion, and poetic beauty that *Comedy of Errors* simply can't compete.

The Riverside Shakespeare Festival runs through July 7. Shows begin nightly at 8 p.m., and

tickets are $25. Reservations can be made by calling (319)338-7672. For more information, visit (http://www.riversidetheatre.org).