

British Theatre Guide

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Romeo and Juliet

William Shakespeare

Bard in the Botanics

Glasgow Botanical Gardens

30 July–2 August 2025

Bard in the Botanics' second Shakespeare of the season manages to fill the stage at the side of one of the hothouses in the Botanic Gardens with its delightful verbiage and an environment where people can sit comfortably out in the open air whilst quaffing on their Prosecco and quinoa in branded Tupperware boxes.

It is a fascinating backdrop to a love story that at times just does not light itself up.

Managing to make the necessary cuts that brings it down to a manageable 2 hours and 20 minutes, there are choices made in terms of which narrative stream needs to be removed.

That includes the cutting of extraneous characters, including Father John and Balthasar, which are understandable, but also Paris, meaning that we lose one of the deaths at the end. The five actors begin the performance playing the perfunctory opening brawl before having to quickly assume the roles of outraged seniors. It is confusing.

Romeo and Juliet is filled with excellent set pieces, from the Queen Mab speech through to the balcony scene, which here manages to save much of the structure. The set becomes a character that seems out of place. It suggests a community that is distraught from various deaths, being a construction site with nods to youth culture, including Adidas tops, baseball caps and the various "available at your local garage" bouquets strapped against herring fence that suggest that somebody has been lost in some form of "accident". The number of floral tributes suggests that this is more than just an occasional event.

But once we have the context established, the set doesn't lend itself to being anything other than functional for interactions. Even that is doubtful, as having the balcony scene atop a scaffolding tower is far from new. It is hard to escape the fact that a love story in the midst of natural beauty needs little by way of anything to enhance it. Add the lyricism of the Bard and staging it down the building site does seem odd.

Of course, Shakespeare is ripe for exploitation and pushing the boundaries, and here, Bard in the Botanics should be applauded in the attempt, however, in the execution, I felt a little let down.

In terms of the approach to the text, there is a tone and a pace which seems to be furious in both senses. The difference between anger at somebody turning up to your party is equated with the loss of a daughter, and there is a very small difference between the approach taken directorially for each. That leads the actors to be consistently placed in a process of extreme emotion rather than finding cadence within the language that can convey the emotions far more effectively.

There is also a clear age difference between Romeo and Juliet, but hats off to both Lola Aluko as Juliet and Sam Stopford as Romeo. Aluko, last season doing an exceptional job up at Pitlochry, has done equally impressively this summer. Stopford continues to show why he is increasingly in demand theatrically. He crafts a performance that matches naïveté with ego-filled anger.

As for the rest, Benjamin Keachie (Tybalt and Friar Laurence), Star Penders (Nurse and Benvolio) and Bailey Newsome (Mercutio, Capulet and the Apothecary) show an adeptness with the text. The issue they had was constantly switching between characters where at one point you're dead, the next lamenting the man who killed you: a struggle, and one with which they cope admirably. The pace and the tone requested of them hinders that, and the set often feels like an unwanted wedding guest who has turned up at a wake.

I was not totally on board with the soundscape, especially during the Queen Mab speech, and it felt awkward.

And yet, at the end, people rose to applaud. There is little to doubt the earnest nature of the enterprise, however, no matter the effort, the reward was not quite onstage the equal to it.

Reviewer: [Donald C Stewart](#)