

British Theatre Guide

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Shakespeare's R&J

Joe Calcarco

Chapel Lane Theatre Company

Tabard Theatre

30 June–8 August 2015

Chapel Lane Theatre Company's latest production starts with four unnamed boarding school students sneaking into an abandoned room while the rest of the school sleeps. Bent on mischief, they decide to entertain themselves by reading out loud the bawdiest parts of the first book they lay their hands on, which turns out to be the titular Shakespearian classic.

The four actors make the most of the Tabard's tiny stage, which hardly seems big enough to fit in the only furniture, a small table and four chairs. Set designer Thom Harvey-Ball overcomes the space restrictions to recreate the claustrophobic setting of the "strict boarding school" that director Christopher Harvey describes, with the cluttered litter of schoolbooks piled high on the shelves, a blackboard crammed with conjugated Latin verbs the students have to memorise and scuffed tables and chairs.

The effect is so realistic, the audience can almost smell the blackboard chalk and unwashed gym wear of a huge building crammed with teenage boys forced to live, study and sleep in close quarters with each other.

The heat is another factor with which the actors struggle gamely, as they first appear in school winter blazers and long trousers. On the hottest day of the summer so far, this must have been a trial, especially during the energetic opening scene.

But shining with a endearing mixture of thespian enthusiasm and sweat, the small cast play at least 12 characters in all, counting Shakespeare's characters as well as the unnamed students. They play so many roles that for clarity the programme simply lists the main characters and then adds "etc".

Director Christopher Harvey explains how reading the play helps the students discover their "innermost feelings" with art imitating life. Students 1 and 2 find the Shakespearian textbook takes over their everyday lives and makes it easier to express their emotions towards each other, as they start reading the parts of the two leads.

With the four actors playing Lady Capulet, the Nurse and of course the female titular role, the audience sees exactly what the Bard would have seen until female actors were allowed onstage after the English Restoration in 1660.

Richard Hall makes the most of the comedic possibilities as Lady Capulet and Friar Laurence (among others) and Jeremy Franklin adds a touch of menace to his performance of Tybalt. Without these two, the remaining lines are played fairly straight, although the play could have used more humour, as when Juliet snappily orders her servants around.

Meanwhile, James Burman as Student 1/Romeo and Alexander Morris as Student 2/Juliet successfully carry a great deal of the play on their blazer-clad shoulders. They have to convince as both Latin-reciting scrubby schoolboys, as well as the world's most famous doomed couple; and Burman and Morris adroitly morph from classmates to lovers and back to dorm-mates again as the play ends.

Playwright Joe Calarco states in the programme that his new ending, playing for the first time at the Tabard, is intended to be less "desolate". His original ending had Student 1/Romeo standing alone on the stage as the curtain falls, sadly reciting a line from early on in the original and then starting to falter (act 1, scene 4): "I dreamt a dream tonight. I dreamt...I dreamt...I dreamt..."

Calarco also mentions how he now feels that, nearly two decades after writing the play, (and with marriage equality a current topic) the role of two male actors kissing would be less "shocking/dangerous".

However, good writing is good writing, the play has thrived, and will continue to do so as long as dreams are dreamt.

Reviewer: [Nina Romain](#)