

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet

William Shakespeare

GirlGang Manchester

Hope Mill Theatre

25–29 June 2018

GirlGang Manchester has exploded into the intimate surroundings of Hope Mill Theatre with an all-female cast of 16, full-on sword fights and liberal lashings of stage blood in a lively production of Shakespeare's most famous love story.

There is plenty of single-sex Shakespeare around nowadays, mostly all-male and often given some dubious historical justification. While it is true that Shakespeare's own theatre company was all-male, female characters were played generally by young boys with unbroken voices, not adult men, and this was a convention expected by the audience.

To a modern audience, men dressed as women suggests comedy—drag, panto dames, Mrs Brown—whereas women in men's parts, familiar to anyone who has had to cast Shakespeare for school or youth theatre productions, has no such associations to get past. This production doesn't change the sex or sexuality of any of the characters or even dress the men in a masculine way, but it is generally clear whether a character is intended to be male or female—or if it isn't, it probably doesn't matter.

While some of the group scenes in Kayleigh Hawkins's production, especially the comic scenes, fall into the trap over over-emphasising, as though the audience won't understand lines not accompanied by wild gesticulations and cackling from the company, there is some real power and clarity to some of the more intimate scenes. The fights, directed by Kaitlin Howard, are impressively realised and performed with real conviction.

The one who stood out particularly for me was Amy Leeson as Juliet, yet to graduate from LIPA but capturing perfectly the mood and physicality of the (almost) 14-year-old heroine and growing in stature throughout the play. After the bawdy knockabout, party and fight scenes, she manages to grab the attention with the famous balcony scene and make it seem fresh and meaningful.

Opposite her, Emily Dowson as Romeo captures the teenage moodiness of a character fond of parading his love and talking up the grand gesture but able to change the subject of his affection at the drop of a hat.

I'm not sure whether it is the way it has been cut or the way I viewed it, but Friar Lawrence seemed to be a more substantial part than usual, a role to which Joyce Branagh brought her great experience in Shakespeare with a particularly natural and compelling delivery—it was her face in the final tableau that nearly moved me to tears when nothing else had quite grabbed me emotionally.

Amongst the remainder of this large company, Evelyn Roberts's Tybalt is more sneering than fiery, but there is no shortage of fieriness in Hannah Ellis Ryan's very physical Mercutio. It's hard not to

feel sorry for Eve Shotton's likeable Paris, an innocent caught up in all of this, but she also plays Prince, giving his few speeches real passion and resonance. Elaine McNicol's Benvolio works well as the cautious, sensible one trying to keep the peace, and Maria Major's Nurse is a very modern character which actually fits quite well with Shakespeare's lines.

Perhaps some of the scene changes, particularly towards the end, are unnecessarily long and the modern pop music to cover them, while fine in principle, is a bit quiet and all coming from in the distance, stage right.

However as a whole, this is a production full of life and energy that tells its story clearly with some notable performances. It's not on for long and it's selling out quickly, but it's certainly worth seeing.

**Reviewer:** [David Chadderton](#)