

'Romeo and Juliet' features strong cast

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Brandi Rhome plays Juliet in the American Shakespeare Center's production of "Romeo and Juliet." / Photo by Mike Bailey

Written by
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British writer and humorist Jerome K. Jerome once reduced the entirety of "Romeo and Juliet" to two lines: "Lass and lad, loved like mad; Silly muddle, very sad." All the rest, he said, was "mere picturesque amplification."

Thank goodness, however, for the picturesque amplification.

Shakespeare's timeless and oft-performed tale of two ill-fated lovers is a joy to behold, at least as presented by the American Shakespeare Center. The ASC reminds us once again that elaborate sets, complex lighting and scores of actors are unnecessary to produce a play that is fast-paced, engrossing and — although ultimately tragic — culturally uplifting.

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what: "Romeo and Juliet"

when: Playing now through June 19

where: Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton

tickets: \$10-\$40

more info: 851-1733 or

Josh Carpenter as Romeo is appropriately eager and smitten, as all young lovers should be. While it's easy to overdo the role of a young lover — and I know since I've committed that sin in a dozen plays —

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Carpenter never once succumbs to the temptation. He strikes just the right balance between amorous ardor and heartfelt sincerity, and comes across as a mature, manly and genuinely in-love Romeo. It's a nice balancing act, one only a talented and seasoned actor can accomplish.

Brandi Rhome tackles the role of Juliet with what has become, for me, at least, her trademarks — energy, beauty and an uncanny skill for getting inside a character, top to bottom. With the ability to play anything and play it well, Rhome gives full rein to the character of Juliet and is so endearing that you can easily understand why a lover would bang back a bottle of poison over her.

Terrific as these leading characters are, millions of people (including me) find the bawdy, swashbuckling Mercutio to be the most compelling and entertaining character in the play. And I'm ticked, really ticked, that Shakespeare kills him off. But in doing so, the Bard gives him some of the greatest exit lines in Western literature, including the almost humorous, "No, 'tis not so deep as a well nor so wide as a church door," he says of his sword wound, "but 'tis enough, 'twill serve."

Breathing full, swaggering life into Mercutio is Curt Foy. From his entrance to his death, Foy handily commands the stage every time he is upon it. He also doubles as Montague, Romeo's father.

Rick Blunt as Capulet, Juliet's father, Ginna Hoben as Juliet's nurse, Aidan O'Reilly as Paris, a suitor to Juliet, and Dennis Henry as the friar who provides Romeo with the plan that will prove to be fatal, help to picturesquely amplify "Romeo and Juliet" into far, far more than Jerome's catty two-line synopsis.

The exceptionally strong cast also includes James Patrick Nelson, Kelly McKinnon, David Zimmerman and Joseph Rende.

E-mail Go! columnist Charles Culbertson at mail@stauntonhistory.com.

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