

ROMEO AND JULIET
By William Shakespeare
Virginia Stage Company
Oct. 20 – Nov. 8
For tickets: (757) 627 1234

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large

The set is like some digital lab with huge movie screens. Actually the whole of the Wells Theatre is part of the set. We learn right off that old man Capulet who is a big business man has been killed in a plane crash. This enables us to click on the "send" icon and cut to the chase with alacrity. The time is now and the place is here, and away we go!

Patrick Mullins has directed his electronic conception of Shakespeare's tale of woe with a youthful vigor that held my attention throughout the "intermissionless" evening. What his vision does is to put the emphasis on the young people dealing with problems imposed on them by previous generations. We see them discovering and figuring out that issues like love are seemingly gentle, but as Benvolio says, tyrannous and rough in proof." The story line of youth is always in sharp focus.

It's no big deal that Mullins has everyone in modern grungy dress surrounded by all that gadgetry. In Shakespeare's time, as best we know, the plays were done in contemporary clothing probably owned by the actors. The digital contraptions, however, become neat devices for moving things along. The fight in which Mercutio is mortally wounded takes place in the lobby. We hear the struggle and see flashes of it in abstraction on the screens. It's far more exciting than the carefully choreographed stage fights we normally see.

In most of life's endeavors there seems to be give and take. We gain on the one hand and lose on the other. While the technology in this rendition creates a new and exciting world, (very well designed and illuminated by Samuel W. Flint and Traci Klainer respectively), it is at the same time a place without emotion. Too often the actors get too caught up in the breathless rush, and emotional values are lost. I found myself mentally glued to what was happening on the stage but only a time or two was I viscerally touched or moved. The result of all this is a lack of climax that produces an unchanging vocal level. The exceptions to these problems are Mahira Kakkar as Juliet and the extremely warm and likeable Christopher Livingston as a splendid Benvolio.

When one excises scenes or lines from a play, attention must be paid to the action that follows. For instance, Romeo drinks the potion he obtained from the apothecary, saying that thus with a kiss I die, and then does so beside the sleeping Juliet. Mullins has cut a short scene with Friar Laurence that immediately follows. As done, Romeo dies and simultaneously Juliet stirs. The result? Unwanted giggles

Mullins directs most of the principals in a contemporary style of acting. However, Mercutio and Tybalt and their street cohorts play their scenes in a very traditional clichéd manner that seems totally out of context with his concept. Shouldn't there be cell phones and texting going on? As I observe young people these days, cell phones are ubiquitous, Jeff Barry as Mercutio is not the first actor to be overwhelmed by the Queen Mab Speech. All the tedious horseplay going on around him doesn't help and his death is meaningless. Joe Delafield is a gentle, confused and most sympathetic teenager, as Romeo. His Juliet, the Miss Mahira Kakkar glows with life and passion. Nancy Lemenager, while hard to hear in early scenes, becomes a commanding presence as Lady Capulet. So is Andy Peterson as Friar Laurence. Natasha Bunnell does a by the book Nurse

Making radical changes to a play is like changing a recipe in cooking. If you alter one ingredient, you have to adjust the others as well. While not yet consistently well blended dish to set before a king, this Romeo and Juliet is well worth a visit.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.