

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Romeo and Juliet*, A Lyric Theatre Production at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast,  
February to March 2023 (Sunday 26 February)**

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Directed by Philip Crawford. With Aaron Ferguson (Samson/Count Paris' Assistant), Steven Cooke (Gregory/Prince Escalus' Guard), David Craig (Tybalt/Friar John), Rosie McClelland (Lady Capulet), Patrick Buchanan (Lord Capulet), Laura Hughes (Nurse), Emma Dougan (Juliet), Lucy McCluskey (Petra/Balthasar), Tiarnan McCarron (Abraham/Prince Escalus' Guard), Finnian Garbutt (Benvolio), Mary Moulds (Lady Montague), Adam Gillian (Romeo), Lata Sharma (Escalus, Prince of Verona), Eugene Evans (Count Paris), Thomas Finnegan (Mercutio/Apothecary), Ray Sesay (Friar Laurence).

If we can be certain about one thing regarding Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, it is that the play takes an audience on a journey of all-consuming passion that directs the actions of our protagonists against the backdrop of violence and spilled 'civil blood'. Disappointingly, the play's contrast between romance and conflict in this production did not come to the fore. This homegrown theatrical staging was by The Lyric Theatre Production Company and is the only theatre of its kind in Northern Ireland, producing plays from page to stage. Considering this, the expectation for their shows is high. Head of Creative Learning at The Lyric, and the director of this show, Philip Crawford, has extensive experience working with young Drama School applicants but I fear his history of youth theatre has prevented this version of *Romeo and Juliet* from feeling as polished and professional as it should have been. A clunky parade of actors onto the stage for the Prologue felt busy and unwarranted, and the sharing of lines between everyone in this scene was reminiscent of a high school cliché, allowing all a moment of stage glory. Sadly, this set the precedent of an amateur performance rather than one to rival the RSC.

The largely young and vibrant cast had the potential to deliver a gut-punching portrayal of the two star-crossed lovers, and a dynamic opening fight scene provided a thrill for the audience, showcasing energy and skill, yet this was not sustained throughout the performance. Admittedly, skirmishes and biting thumbs were delivered with aplomb, with the young cast well versed in stage combat, but the ‘fire sparkling in lovers’ eyes’ fell flat, except perhaps for a school audience. The burning question of ‘Did my heart love till now?’ remained largely unanswered as the incendiary desire could be likened to a wet match. Performances from Emma Dougan (Juliet) and Adam Gillian (Romeo) held moments of sparkle but may have benefited from more forceful direction to showcase their full potential and embed the fiery passion and poetry of Shakespeare’s words into their delivery.

The idea to modernize the tale in twenty-first-century Italy, with two competing fashion houses, was a triumph, excellently supported by the outstanding costumes designed by Gillian Lennox. Being seated in the front row allowed for close examination of every hemline, cinched waist, and silky open shirt, none of which disappointed. Attention to detail and quality of design were evident as well as necessary. What was not so essential was the protracted party scene, incorporating several minutes of singing and dancing in Italian. Neither Romeo nor Juliet made eye contact with each other during this time, therefore rendering Romeo’s subsequent sonnet on Juliet’s beauty somewhat fruitless. No obvious connection ignited between the actors in what surely should be considered the most pivotal moment of the play.

Suitably Mediterranean, the stone-washed set design transported the audience to Verona, the balcony backlit with a red hue, presumably to reflect the growing love of our protagonists. Noticeable props such as the trattoria table at stage left added convincing touches, however, whilst the retractable bed was necessary for plot development, it failed to be nothing more than laughable, gaudy, and ridiculous, reinforced by the comic delivery of the nurse’s facial expressions when she spied the bedsheets after the lovers’ wedding night.

There were, of course, stellar performances by some. Ray Sesay as Friar Laurence was delightful, although not given enough stage time, and the bustling Laura Hughes as the nurse was a standout actor. Her portrayal of the fussy yet caring confidante to Juliet was spirited, with Hughes clearly relishing the verse that rolled off her tongue with considerable ease. Rosie McClelland’s Lady Capulet was suitably sharp yet choosing her character to deliver what was originally Lord Capulet’s speech I found to be an odd choice of direction. Patrick Buchanan’s Lord Capulet stood aghast and slightly confused as Juliet’s mother made the case for her to marry Paris, a task usually reserved for the man

of the house. Much cannot be said for Lady Montague either or her missing husband. An attempt to modernize by portraying Lady Montague as a single mother failed to make an impact and her reaction to the news of her son's death showed little evidence of experiencing a bereavement. Thomas Finnegan's Mercutio provided the much-needed moments of light relief and as such, his death felt as prominent and devastating as it should have. Romeo's tepid anger at his friend's demise, however, failed to pay justice to what had unfolded before, although his exile and downfall into homelessness were compelling and contemporary. The apothecary, presented as nothing more than a trampish drug user, also added some poignancy to the decline into tragedy.

If this performance achieves one thing, it shows that Shakespeare can be for the young. The shortened script allows accessibility to the story, the fashion appeals to those absorbed in Instagram culture, and it lends itself as a platform to open and discuss the mental health challenges facing many young people today. Philip Crawford's experience of working with schools is evident in his interpretation of this play, and his direction of the youthful ensemble should be applauded to an extent, but disappointingly this production fails to move beyond reasonably accomplished.