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Romeo & Juliet

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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Elizabeth Olsen & Julian Cihl as 'Romeo & Juliet' (Source:Joan Marcus)

Out of the wealth of the Bard's classic tale of tragic star-crossed lovers currently gracing New York City stages, among the best is The Classic Stage Company's uniting of Julian Cihl and Elizabeth Olsen in a spare, if memorable, production of "Romeo & Juliet."

Director Tea Alagić presents a modernized rendition of the well-known tragedy. The Capulets and their ilk are well-heeled thugs, menacing in Versace silk shirts, or Adidas track suits with leather dress shoes, as if they stepped out of Miami, with a side trip to Belarus to pick up their tattooed bodyguard friend.

The Montagues, by comparison, are an unwashed bunch of street thugs clad in sweat pants and jeans jackets, looking only to defend their honor against their sworn enemy -- that is, when they are not busy crashing the Capulets' costume parties.

In a family of sleek Capulets, including pater Capulet (David Garrison), Lady Capulet (Kathryn Meisle), and cousin Tybalt (Dion Mucciatico), young Juliet (Olsen) is as different as day from night. She is fair of hair and disposition, and clad throughout the play in variations of a white dress. It is a head-scratcher why such a fair bride would reject the attentions of the noble Count Paris (Stan Demidoff), who wishes to woo and wed her.

Yet from the moment she meets her Romeo (Cihl), who is wearing an oversized Winnie the Pooh head, Cupid has cast his arrow. The two woo and wed, and as Romeo tries to squelch the bad blood between the Capulets, his kinsmen Benvolio (McKinley Belcher III) and his mercurial friend Mercutio (T.R. Knight), he is unfortunate enough to kill his new wife's kin Tybalt in an unnecessarily blood-soaked display (with the victim in white pants, no less).

Daphne Rubin-Vega is a delight as the Nurse. Clad in mod black heels, high-waisted pants and a rhinestone-studded cross, Vega attacks the role, using pidgin English and frequent interjections of Spanish into her advice to Juliet. She is the source of both the play's humor and of its roots to this modernist telling. She makes it easy to imagine the Capulet clan as a Miami-beach crime syndicate.

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As the Franciscan Friar Laurence who marries the young lovers, "The Nanny" star Daniel Davis really shows his chops. He is no meek man of the Lord; this friar chides Romeo's tears over being banished as "womanish," and encourages him to go to Mantua until he can be reunited with Juliet.

He is the one who gives Juliet the poison that allows her to trick her parents into thinking she

is dead; unfortunately, he does not arrive to the tomb in time to assure Romeo that his love is merely sleeping, before the boy takes his own life, and Juliet takes hers again (and again, with the stage blood on the white dress. The dry cleaning bills, and in this economy!).

But such is the stuff of true love. And you know how quickly 14-year-olds flit between passion and pain. For a young actor, Cihl did a fine job bringing the words of the Bard to life through his character. Olsen is not quite as skilled with the material, but she certainly runs circles around anything that her two older sisters ever did, including their commercially successful series of straight-to-video mysteries.

And while I understand Alagić's choice to leave the stage bare, save for a low table used as a stage or seat, and a collection of chairs like those found at a health clinic, it leached some of the grandeur out of the proceedings.

Previous productions at CSC have included the sublime version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream,"

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F#*K'N Classy Thursdays at Score was hosted by Chyna Girl and Danny Ferro, with DJ Daisy

during which Taylor Mac popped out of hidden panels in the curved ceiling like a character from "Laff-In." And in the theatre's staging of "The Cherry Orchard," Dianne Wiest and her ilk pointed to the titular orchard from under a raised patio that doubled as a sitting room.

Seeing the theater so bare left the audience with nothing to ponder but the quality of the acting. For such relative neophytes as Cihl and Olsen, that is far too big a burden to bear alone.

"Romeo & Juliet" runs through Nov. 10 at Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. in New York. For information or tickets, call 212-352-3101 or visit www.classicstage.org

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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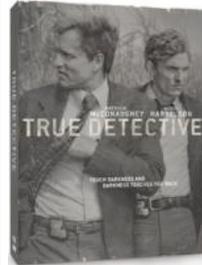
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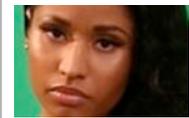
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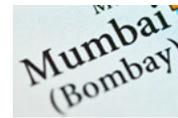
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