

Romeo and Juliet

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The Oregon Shakespeare Festival's 2012 production of *Romeo and Juliet* is set in the often romanticized world of late 1840s Alta California. Director Laird Williamson takes some liberties with the familiar play, sprinkling the text with Spanish words, phrases, and Californio/Mexican accents. In this world the Capulets and Montagues are hidalgos, recipients of land grants from the Spanish government; the Friars are Franciscans; and the play's rulers are aptly cast as United States military officers, including General Prince (Rex Young), himself married to Mercutio's sister, an invented Californio female character. These well-executed choices help Williamson create a nuanced version of the classic tale and at the same time present socio-political and aesthetic themes from a turbulent moment in California's history.

The strength of the concept lies in the tension between the old lifestyles enjoyed by the two aristocratic Californio families and the uncertainty of their new social positions within Verona after recent US occupation. Imagined and historical markers of this place and time set several of the play's details into textured relief. The political uncertainty provides powerful motivation for Don Capulet (Elijah Alexander) to hasten the marriage between his daughter and an ambitious young American Captain Paris (Miles Fletcher) in order to secure the family's continued prominence in the changing political and social landscape of California on the cusp of statehood. Lady Capulet's normally puzzling ambivalence toward Juliet's (Alejandra Escalante) marriage is artfully explored through the intense "Latin" passion displayed between Don and Doña Capulet (Vilma Silva) as well as the machismo that clearly dominates their relationship and characterizes representations of Spanish colonial gender roles. One example that artfully illustrates the era's complexities is the recasting of the Apothecary as an Ohlone medicine woman, played by Cherokee actress DeLanna Studi. The scene in Mantua begins as Studi sings vocables,



Romeo (Daniel José Molina) and Juliet (Alejandra Escalante) prepare to take their wedding vows.
Photo: Jenny Graham.

dressed in carefully rendered traditional Ohlone clothing, including a large deer hide, a shell and feather prayer necklace, and a brown cloak containing various medicines. Romeo's (Daniel José Molina) lines "... famine is in thy cheeks, / Need and oppression starveth in thine eyes, / Contempt and beggary hangs upon thy back; / The world is not thy friend nor the world's law" resonate meaningfully considering the horrors of colonization experienced by California's Native peoples (V.i.73-76).

Although the director's notes explain the concept as "a memory dream of the fabled world of the Spanish Californios"—and indeed, the romance to which he refers certainly strengthens aspects of the character relationships and action—I was personally impressed with the restraint used by scenic designer Michael Ganio, whose simple, clean set gestured at a California pueblo town without recreating the romantic flowering balconies and plazas so often associated with imagined 'Old Spanish Days.' The set includes two levels of arched backdrops. The most upstage of these is painted deep orange-red and serves as Juliet's balcony. The downstage structure is painted in the muddy grays and browns of pueblo architecture; mobile platforms of dark wooden slats add texture to this sloping pueblo wall, providing the backdrop for the majority of the play's action as well as providing foot holes for Romeo's anticipated balcony ascent. Projections on a large screen located beyond the two arching walls set the tone, time of day, and scene location. Costume designer Susan Tsu's carefully researched designs help create the world of the play as romantic and historical, without referencing 'Spanishified' clichés. While the lighting worked nicely with the costumes and set, there were frustrating key moments when the actors' faces fell out of light; it is difficult to know whether this is the fault of lighting designer Don Darnutzer, Williamson's staging, or the actors themselves.

Overall, Williamson's *Romeo and Juliet* was a success in no small part due to the smartly conceived and applied concept and to a truly moving and sincere portrayal of Romeo by Molina, whose connection with his text was palpable. These were perhaps the most refreshingly youthful actors I have ever seen play the star-crossed lovers in a professional production. Despite Escalante's ideal look and obvious training, her performance felt over-rehearsed and particularly so in comparison with Molina's immediate and honest portrayal. Unfortunately, this unevenness could also be seen elsewhere in the production. While Jason Rojas' Mercutio, Isabell Monk O'Conner's Nurse, Vilma Silva's Doña Capulet, and Elijah Alexander's Don Capulet were fresh and rang true to both the script and concept, Fajer Al-Kaisi's Tybalt,

Kevin Fugaro's Benvolio, and Tony DeBruno's Friar Laurence seemed to be lacking energy and presence. Still, the standout performances, direction, and production elements made the nearly three-hour performance fly.

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