

Do think twice, it's more than alright

Although I enjoyed much of last year's festival, I did feel that the absence of director David Salter was noticeable. His return, in such fine form as he is here, makes me sure that this was indeed the case. This production, seemingly simple because it works smoothly, must have been very carefully crafted. Without stepping away from the Festival's traditional approach it is nonetheless fresh, invigorating and insightful.

For those who have read my book, you will know that any play with Tessa Hatts in it has a head start in my book. She is, as one would assume, a splendid Lady Capulet. However, as I am forever extolling the virtues of Tessa, let me spread some praise around and pay homage to the lead characters. I always feel these parts must be very difficult to play; so embedded are they in our culture, so often have people seen them portrayed, and everyone already has their own vision of what they should be like. Yet, Max Sterne followed up his brilliant 2014 performances with another outstanding rendition, this time of the love-struck Romeo while Holly Ashman was simply the best Juliet I have seen for quite some time. Her part has almost unbelievable challenges; she's so young and so naive and yet still so much wiser than Romeo; and she paradoxically has to possess an inner maturity and wisdom at times way in advance of her years while appearing childish and downright silly at other junctures. Somehow Holly Ashman balanced all this, along with the complex emotions of falling in love at first sight and convincing us that one so young has indeed found her eternal love.

Naturally, Mercutio is always a star in any version of *Romeo and Juliet*, his part is simply sumptuous and even when performed merely adequately is still irresistible. On this occasion, though, he positively sparkled, like a whirling firework throwing sparks into the evening air. Were I to describe why that is so, and how he was portrayed by Jannick Archer, you would doubtless shake your head and think, 'that's ridiculous, that would never work'. Consequently, I will not do so, instead I will urge you to go and see him, because work it most certainly does.

With the three major parts so well handled, with David Salter's hands on the steering wheel and with Tessa Hatts as Lady Capulet, I was always going to be happy. If you add to that an all round strong cast with that Festival stalwart, Rob Goll excelling as Lord Capulet, then you can imagine that I was very happy indeed. Yet, I did not expect to be so.

I confess, very guiltily, that I went along thinking to myself: 'oh no, not another *Romeo and Juliet*'. In the last three years, I have seen it half a dozen or more times, I have taught it twice and I thought 'enough is probably enough, you won't like it'. Not for the first, and, I am certain, not for the last time, I am very happy to report that a production of Shakespeare at CSF proved me wrong.

One of the biggest triumphs of this production was the all-round camaraderie of the young men (Joseph Emms's fine Benvolio along with the aforementioned Romeo and Mercutio) at the beginning of the play, was very well brought out. This, as we all know, makes the later tragedy all the more moving.

The friar is an interesting character in the play; he can be played in such a variety of ways that interpretations seem endless. Salter's intriguing take on this role (played by Judy Tcherniak) was a new interpretation to me - but you can see that when you go along and see it yourself. As I really think you should.

If, like me, you thought you had seen enough of this play, then this production will make you think again.

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