

In 'R&J,' boys shed their repression (and clothes)

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Most of us have no fear of words. They are so much a part of our lives that we take them for granted. Yet, of all the things we encounter, words can be the most dangerous.

It takes something like Joe Calarco's play *Shakespeare's R&J* to jolt us out of our complacency. In this subtle, provocative adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, the playwright reminds us of the power of language to transform lives, to subvert convictions, even to supersede reality as we conceive it.

Calarco presents us with four Catholic boarding-school boys, young men whose bodies are as carefully groomed as their minds are carefully regimented and their sexuality carefully repressed. Their school has banned Shakespeare's tale of star-crossed lovers. The quartet discovers a copy and sneaks away to an attic where they begin to read the text with the enthusiasm of adolescents having their first taste of forbidden fruit.

They don't count on Shakespeare's words having a will and magic of their own. Almost without their knowing it, the boys assume the emotions of the characters they're portraying. So much so that the pair playing Romeo and Juliet find themselves nude and in bed, to the shock of the other two, who aren't sure they can go that far.

Calarco doesn't bring things to this point simply to titillate his audience. As their reading progresses, the boys shed their repressions along with their clothing. They discover that life is not something that can be regimented, at least not without a price. It is messy and complicated and frequently painful - but it is exhilarating.

There are those who will stay away from *Shakespeare's R&J* believing that it is a gay play. It is not. There are scenes that are homoerotic, and there is that longish nude scene, but the essence of *R&J* is the discovery that life has no value unless it is lived. Conformity and repression breed self-destruction.

The real reason the school banned *Romeo and Juliet* wasn't because of its sexual



Nearly Naked Theatre

Thomas Bigley, Michael Sherwin, Barry Finnegan and Patrick McGinley play four Catholic school boys who meet secretly to perform Shakespeare's "R & J."

'Shakespeare's R&J'

Reviewed Sunday at the Space Theatre, 4700 N. Central Ave., Phoenix. Continues through Dec. 27. \$12-\$15. (602) 274-2432.

content, but because of its images of rebellion against authority. So it is that the most controversial element of *Shakespeare's R&J* is Calarco's contention that, to be truly alive, it is necessary to break the bonds imposed by religion and society.

Nearly Naked Theatre Company has given Calarco's play a first-rate production, and fielded a superb cast. First among equals is Thomas Bigley's Student No. 2, who plays Juliet.

Equally good are Michael Sherwin (Romeo), Barry Finnegan (Friar Laurence, Mercutio, Lady Capulet) and Patrick McGinley (Tybalt, Balthasar and the Nurse).

The true star, though, is director Damon Dering. He simply is the best and most daring of the Valley's young theater talents. *Shakespeare's R&J* reveals him at the peak of his form.