

Shakespeare's new sexual crisis

By CHRIS PAGE

Get Out

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"Love goes toward love, as schoolboys from their books"— Act 2, Scene II, "Romeo and Juliet"

The idea of an all-male cast performing Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" is nothing new — in the author's time, that was de rigueur. Yet playwright Joe Calarco has attempted to one-up the Bard with "Shakespeare's R&J," playing through December, in a tour de force production by Phoenix's Nearly Naked Theatre.

Calarco frames his "R&J" in an empty attic above a Catholic boarding school, where a quartet of buddies retreat from the boring repetition of their lives to, one night, stage their own production of Shakespeare's most-beloved tragic romance.

For them, bringing the play to light — after it has been banned at their school — carries the same youthful thrill of finding naked pictures in the encyclopedia or dirty words in the dictionary. For boys segregated in the desexualized world of Catholic school, "Romeo and Juliet" is as taboo as a smuggled Playboy.

Armed with only a red silk sheet, they begin acting out the play.

As their uncertainties with the Bard's words melt away the deeper into the text they go, so do the boys' qualms about playing women; mincing mockeries of high-pitched voices become sincere attempts at becoming their characters. And, in a strange turn of events, the boy playing Juliet (the students are never named, but she's played by Thomas Bigley) becomes enamored of his part — just as Romeo (Michael Sherwin) begins to work his wooing magic on her. They share a fleeting, awkward peck and then . . . things get much more complicated.

It's not a gay play, director Damon Dering says in his director's note, and that's apparent. Though there is male kissing, and a long moment of full nudity, this "R&J" serves as merely a tribute to the strength of Shakespeare's masterpiece, and the ability for readers to be sucked in to the story. That a Romeo can fall for his male Juliet only speaks to the power of lines like these: "O blessed, blessed night! I am afeard./Being in night, all this is but a dream,/Too flattering-sweet to be substantial."

By the second act, it's realized that "R&J" is no mere adaptation. Instead, it's as if Calarco were a DJ sampling a Motown record, only to find that the original is too good to tinker with. The second act finds our student players too deep into Shakespeare's tale to do anything more than tell it without

interruption. That's been called a fault of Calarco's play, but the ultimate tragedy of "R&J" is that the framing device of the Catholic school attic (what, no one goes up there to just read "The Neverending Story" anymore?) only draws away from the full force of Shakespeare's work.

Yet the four actors — including Sherwin's masterful work as Romeo and the alpha male of the four friends — breathe new life into the original tale. As the boys who pick up the assorted supporting characters in "Romeo and Juliet," Barry Finnegan and Patrick McGinley (the latter a near Jason Biggs look-alike, only hunky) work wonders; yet it seems they weren't given as much direction in how to react as students seeing their two dear friends suddenly falling in love.

And then there's the matter of the red silk sheet. It serves as the only prop on stage save for two footlockers. It almost deserves its own billing in the play's program, it does so much work: Stretched wide, it becomes Juliet's balcony; bunched, it becomes the vial of poison that kills Romeo, then the spirit escaping from his lips. I imagine it the deftly brilliant stagebound extension of Dering's direction.

That the four actors deliver such a fine, emotionally moving version of Shakespeare's play actually works against the design of Calarco's "R&J," which allows its cast to forgive acting deficits with the excuse that, hey, it's four high schoolers acting. In the end, it's their "Romeo and Juliet," not their gimmicky "R&J," that we want to see.

Do we care that it's boys falling in love before our eyes, or that our hearts are going out to the tragedy of their star-crossed love? Not at all. Shakespeare has given us a story that blinds its gender. It's no shock to see boys as girls.

See, Ol' Shakey — some things never change.

'Shakespeare's R&J'

Who: Nearly Naked Theatre

Where: The Space, 4700 N. Central Ave., Phoenix

When: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, some 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday matinees, through Dec. 27. Closed Christmas

How much: \$15, \$12 for students and seniors

Info: (602) 274-2432

Note: contains adult content and male nudity

Grade: A-