

Spartan production a celebration of the power of language

# Male cast sweetens up Romeo and Juliet

## Shakespeare's R & J

At Beaumont Studios until Nov. 18

Tickets: 604-341-9706

Reviewed by Jo Ledingham

THIS MAY BE THE SWEETEST JULIET I have ever seen and I have seen some sweet ones. Jennifer Mawhinney was innocence itself back in 2001 at The Firehall and Meg Roe was blushing girlish on the Playhouse stage in 2003. But this one is played by a young man, Daryl King. Perhaps what King describes as "horrified excitement" finding himself in the role, has heightened his performance. Whatever the reason, he makes a fantastic Juliet: translucent, shy, eager, fearful, young, girlish and boyish.

Adapted from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* by Joe Calarco, *Shakespeare's R & J* is a bit of a rare bird. It's not uncommon to have a play within a play; and many plays and musicals use Shakespeare as a springboard for something new. But *Shakespeare's R & J* is actually the real *Romeo and Juliet* (with the addition of a few context-setting scenes plus a couple of Shakespeare's sonnets) as secretly performed by four boys in a Catholic boarding school. Never have the sonnets ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" and "Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediments") resonated so beautifully.

The play is reminiscent of Tom Schulman's *Dead Poets Society* in which

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a teacher fires the imagination of some of his students through literature. In *R & J*, however, the boys themselves discover *Romeo and Juliet* and one night, away from the watchful, disapproving eyes of priests and teachers, perform the play together. Their days are filled with math, Latin, religious and ethical behaviour studies, but one night is rebellious and alive with imagined sword fights, poisonings and most of all, love. Stirred by Shakespeare's language, they find their own emotions stirring restlessly; forbidden feelings begin to surface. The play's homoeroticism is, however, subtly and sweetly – there's that word again – played out. Curiosity, not carnality, informs this Romeo and this Juliet's behaviour. And, of course, joy.

That four young male actors play all the roles—and play them so well—is remarkable; King is not only Juliet but also Benvolio, Friar John and several others. Dark-eyed, dark-haired Jason

Emanuel is love-struck Romeo. Omari Newton and Josh Drebit metamorphose constantly; Drebit is often Juliet's talkative nurse and Newton, Juliet's unsympathetic mother. At the same time, of course, they are all still students in grey flannels, navy V-neck sweaters and school ties.

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And that is one of this adaptation's and this production's most emphatic points. Like these boarding school boys, Romeo and Juliet were teenagers. She was 13; he was not much older. Had Juliet's parents not so hastily arranged her marriage to Paris, Juliet might well have fallen out of love with Romeo just as quickly as he had fallen out of love for Rosalind—the woman whose presence drew him to the Capulet's party that fateful night.

The staging is spartan (a section of chainlink fencing suggests both the schoolyard and the emotional prison these boys find themselves in) and under Darren Boquist's lighting, the single prop—a bolt of crimson cloth—almost comes alive as it transforms: a dagger, a ring, a vial of poison, a coverlet, a shroud.

Paterson's directing is sharp and tight making this production as moving as any *Romeo and Juliet* I've seen. On top of everything, it's a celebration of the power of language to move us, to teach us, to give us pleasure.

Sweet.