



From left, Josh Drebit, Daryl King, Jason Emanuel and Omari Newton star in Shakespeare's R&J.

## R&J: No frills, all the thrills

**LESS-IS-MORE ACTING:** Performances all so beautifully transparent

### Theatre

#### Shakespeare's R&J

**Where:** Beaumont Studios, 316 W. 5th Ave., Vancouver

**When:** Tomorrow-Sat. night at 8

**Tickets:** \$20/\$18 at 604-341-9706

**Grade:** A-



**Jerry Wasserman**

THEATRE

*Romeo and Juliet* is probably Shakespeare's most familiar play. Even if you've never seen or read it, you likely know the story and the famous speeches. But I bet you've never imagined it like this.

In Joe Calarco's adaptation, four Catholic school boys perform the play for themselves in their dorm. Jack Paterson stages his Equity Co-op production in Beaumont Studios' tiny black-box theatre, a space so intimate it makes the Culch feel like GM Place. We're right in there with the boys, and it's like knowing the play for the first time.

All the hype about this adaptation emphasizes the same-sex experience, the revelation of seeing Shakespeare queered. I didn't get that at all. For me it was about the power of theatre.

We meet the boys, clean-cut in white shirts, ties and sweaters with the school

logo, as they practise their rote Latin, conjugating the verb "to love" (*amo, amas, amat*) and reciting lessons about how men rule the world and women help keep them from temptation.

But they can't resist the temptation of letting go of their repressions through acting. At first they're tentative and mannered when it comes to reading a woman's part. But when Daryl King assumes the role of Juliet, there's a slight pause, a hush, and he plays it without a hint of effeminacy. From then on the boys commit to their roles with adolescent energy and enthusiasm that drives the play forward at a terrific pace.

They nervously hesitate and momen-

tarily revert to their regimented school roles the first time Juliet and Romeo (Jason Emanuel) kiss. But then they dive back into the play. And so do we.

What's amazing is how quickly and easily the audience accepts the conventions of the production. Four people play all the roles, boys play girls and women, no one changes out of his school uniform. There are no shifts of scenery to tell us where we are. In fact there's no scenery at all, just three wooden boxes on which the actors sometimes stand or bang their hands to provide percussive accompaniment.

The only prop is a red sheet, stretched between actors to represent a balcony or a sword, grasped to his gut by Mercutio (Omari Newton) as his bloody wound, wrapped about her head as a scarf by the Nurse (Josh Drebit). This is the magic of theatre, conspiring with our imaginations to conjure a complex world by the simplest means.

It helps that the performances are all so beautifully transparent: less-is-more acting at its most effective. Director Paterson could cut back on the shouting in that small space. Otherwise, he and his cast give us Shakespeare with no frills but all the thrills.

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