

Dissing the Bard?

Romeo and Juliet is chopped and changed for a young audience

By Chris Rohmann

Romeo and Juliet

By William Shakespeare, directed by James Vesce. UMass Amherst, 545-2511 or (800) 999-UMAS. Through April 10.

When the lights go up on the production of *Romeo and Juliet* now playing at UMass, you might be forgiven for wondering if you've wandered into the wrong show. *The Tempest*, maybe, if you're still thinking Shakespeare, as diaphanous spirits rise out of the smoky earth.

Or, considering the look of the place, *The Lord of the Flies*. The swaggering boys and girls who soon fill the stage with taunts and brawls are not the sleek youth of old Verona but barefoot castaways dressed in patched and tattered sackcloth, wild survivors of some catastrophe. They loiter and squabble in a post-urban wasteland littered with slabs of broken stone.

This is no blood feud between proud families of the merchant class, fought with glittering swords. Here the rivalry of the Montague and Capulet clans, which forms the backdrop to this most famous of love stories, is a dissing match between teenage urchins who duke it out with fists and feet, sticks and stones.

This vision, half primeval, half apocalyptic, belongs to director James Vesce. "I wanted to create a world in which no one knows where the moral center is," he explained during a break in last week's dress rehearsal. "These two lovers find themselves in a world that's sort of loveless. This is a world of young people, where moral authority, especially adult authority, has broken down."

To highlight that point, Vesce and dramaturg Yael Prizant have taken the radical step of ousting all the play's authority figures from the script. The necessary lines of exposition spoken by Juliet's parents have been given to two minor characters in the Capulet household. The prince-magistrate's decrees outlawing the street brawls and banishing Romeo from Verona are spoken by the Chorus (Lauren Bergamo) — here envisioned as an earth-spirit attended by a troupe of dancing sprites. (These specters represent, for Vesce, the primal passions that drive the characters.)

With legal and parental authority offstage if not entirely absent, the hostility to the love between Romeo and Juliet (Matthew Ferraro and Melissa Fendell) becomes a matter of peer pressure. Their supposed accomplices, and the only grown-ups to survive the cuts, are Juliet's nurse (Tary Chevalier) and Friar Lawrence (Van Farrier). These two are the lovers' go-betweens, but in Vesce's view they are dubious allies; the nurse's advice is contradictory and the friar's is disastrous.

The production's creators haven't only altered the cast of characters. Listen closely and you'll hear subtle changes in Shakespeare's verse. All the Elizabethan pronouns and verbs — the thees and thous, shalt and goests — have been updated to "you" and "shall" and "go" (with one exception, Juliet's invariablely famous "Wherefore art thou Romeo?"). These and other substitutes for archaic terms are intended to make the play more accessible to the production's Gen X and Y target audience — young people for whom the antiquated language is unfamiliar and alienating. The changes are minimal, though, almost subliminal, and most of the Bard's words are intact, along with his iambic

pentameter and rhymed couplets, which the student actors speak with an emphasis more on straightforward meaning than lyrical flights.

Of all the modern retellings of this classic tale — from Zeffirelli in wide-screen Technicolor to Leonardo DiCaprio as Venice Beach slacker in Baz Luhrmann's adaptation to *Shakespeare in Love* — the one Vesce was most influenced by is *West Side Story*. Vesce's *Romeo and Juliet* reaches for the same modern, edgy feel, the same closed universe ruled by kids — though Vesce has consciously tried to avoid any specifically contemporary connotations. And while it's not a musical, this version places a similar emphasis on music and movement; in fact, the production's focus is more on action than on language. The masked ball where the young lovers first meet has an explosive tension expressed in an MTV-style dance routine (by choreographer Teri Parker) and



In this staging of *Romeo and Juliet*, Verona is a closed universe ruled by kids.

the lethal fight between Mercutio (Ricardo Foster) and Tybalt (Uzay Turner) is positively acrobatic.

Much of the play is cinematically underscored with music by guitarist Pat Metheny and his collaborator, Lyle Mays. For Vesce, Metheny's eclectic sampling of musical styles and reworking of the jazz masters provides a fitting counterpoint to his own rethinking of Shakespeare. Both are attempts to pay homage to masterworks without simply restating them in slavishly literal performances, but rather by injecting them with new perspectives.