

CRAZY LOVE

Raising the bar on Shakespearean tragedy.

BY JOHN LAHR



When Romeo Montague first sets eyes on Juliet Capulet, in Shakespeare's "most excellent and lamentable tragedie," he announces, "O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!" Flame—and its antithetical powers of purification and destruction—is the ruling metaphor of Rupert Goold's inspired new Royal Shakespeare Company staging (at London's Roundhouse; Lincoln Center will bring the production to New York next year). Fire is projected onto walls, flourished from torches, belched from beneath the black stage floor, and invoked in warnings to the young lovers, who burn with passion. "These violent delights have violent

ends, / And in their triumph die, like fire and powder, / Which as they kiss consume," Friar Laurence counsels Romeo.

Goold is a great showman, with a sharp critical eye. He begins the production in the present. (The lovers wear modern dress throughout, while the rest of the cast is in Elizabethan costume; the couple's love, if not their context, is contemporary.) Romeo (Sam Troughton) is a camera-toting, duffel-coated tourist, wandering through a church while listening to an audiobook of the play's Prologue, which explains the story of the "star-crossed lovers" and how their deaths buried "their parents' strife." As the words are spoken, in Italian-accented English, the warring

families, in doublets and hose, take the stage in slow motion. By the time the Prologue is over, through the magic of Goold's stagecraft, we have travelled backward with them to the mean streets of Verona, and the rumble is on. And what a fight! A bedlam of tangled bodies. The clang of metal on metal. The air full of smoke and curses. A man in flames. Romeo is absent from the ferocious melee—"Right glad am I that he was not at this fray," his mother says—but the import of the family vendetta is vividly established; it is Romeo's psychological inheritance, and its brilliant staging here makes both his destiny and his tragedy believable.

The social disorder of Verona is matched by the internal disorder of the lovers-to-be. As Romeo, the excellent Troughton is at first a study of lovelorn adolescent self-pity. "Romeo! Madman! Passion! Lover!" Mercutio (the scene-stealing, bleached-blond Jonjo O'Neill) says, teasing his moonstruck cousin. Romeo is full of Petrarchan gas about Rosaline, an offstage heartthrob who is evidently a diehard fan of virginity. "The all-seeing sun / Ne'er saw her match since first the world begun" is Romeo's clichéd lament for her. Juliet (Mariah Gale) may be only thirteen and "yet a stranger in the world," as her father says, but she is also lumbered with an emotional mismatch. Lady Capulet (Christine Entwisle) is trying to talk her into an arranged marriage with a nobleman named Paris (James Howard). As Juliet listens restlessly to her mother, she stands before us in a loose-fitting blue dress and black Converse high-tops, swinging a light at the end of a long lanyard, as if it were some kind of lariat. She's an image of the impudent teen-ager's refusal to think. When her mother asks her bluntly, "Can you like of Paris's love?" she answers, "I'll look to like, if looking liking move." Juliet's pragmatic, pipe-smoking Nurse (the droll Noma Dumezweni) suggests that "women grow by men"; the scene makes it clear that Juliet is still unborn.

Gale is not a conventional beauty; she is square-jawed and short, with an athletic, almost boyish mien. However, at the masked ball, superbly choreographed by Georgina Lamb, where Romeo first spies Juliet, the dance works as a kind of enchantment in which Juliet becomes beautiful before our eyes. All flow and feeling, Gale throws herself into the

Sam Troughton and Mariah Gale as Romeo and Juliet in Rupert Goold's staging.

movement. Her strength and spirit are radiant and irresistible. (She is the only unmasked attendee, because, I guess, as a child among adults she is considered not to have an identity to hide.) When, in the middle of the dance, Romeo and Juliet meet on an elevated platform, they're not just smitten, they're changed—an alchemical transformation that registers in the beauty of their words. Love makes them original. They speak now in poetry, not in platitudes; in fact, they speak in sonnet form. But, instead of making their sonnet the traditional hymn to unrequited love, they turn the genre upside down and end with an embrace. "You kiss by th' book," Juliet says, at a stroke made brazen, witty, and grown-up.

Goold and his actors find the deep, unnerving truths beneath the trappings of melodrama that follow. His rare accomplishment is to make the audience believe not only in the fervor of love—that's easy—but in its grace. After toasting Juliet, Romeo dies with his head resting on her stomach—a stage picture of casual Sunday-morning intimacy. Shakespeare leaves it up to the audience to judge the play's meaning: "Go hence to have more talk of these sad things," Romeo's servant Balthasar says at the finale. Of all the punishing mysteries the tale ponders—love, hate, death—the greatest is the mystery of chance. You leave this eloquent production palpably reminded of the luck of love.

Rupert Goold's production gives sensational vigor to an early tragedy; Michael Grandage's "King Lear" (at London's Donmar Warehouse) gives sensational clarity to a mature one. Grandage has a deft Shakespearean touch: his productions—and this is the best to date—

are swift, limpid, and forensic in their dissection of the text. Here, the hurly-burly of family betrayal is played out in a box of wooden planks, painted in turbulent swirls of white and gray, which lend the space a sense of tempest-tossed motion and abstraction. In Christopher Oram's rough-hewn arena, there is nothing for the eye to settle on except the actors and their actions.

As Lear, the seventy-two-year-old Derek Jacobi gives one of the finest performances of his distinguished career. Pink-skinned and white-bearded, he exudes an air of royal indulgence and hauteur. After decades of working the audience, Jacobi seems to have become all face: his head is a sort of large, flat professional mask that well suits the King, whose last great show of authority is the ceremonial handing over of his land, his cares of state, and his best-loved, youngest daughter, Cordelia (Pippa Bennett-Warner), in marriage. Jacobi winks out the vainglory in Lear's vaunted prospect of a retirement in which "we unburdened crawl toward death." As his command that his daughters compete in avowals of affection demonstrates, Lear is all about the display of power. Cordelia's refusal to play her father's game threatens more than his magnanimity. By reminding him that half of her love and her allegiance belongs to her future husband, Cordelia unwittingly attacks Lear's potency, releasing the first primal flash of his "hideous rashness." He disowns her.

Rage is not only the consequence of events in "King Lear" but part of the play's dramatic substance. In this production, which will play at BAM in the spring, Lear's inclement internal weather is visible; the audience can see the squall of fury

well up in him long before it swamps him. In Jacobi's subtle interpretation, Lear comes to understand his rage, correctly, as madness, not hate, which would fall within the realm of reason. Provoked beyond endurance by the exquisite cruelty of Goneril and Regan—"I gave you all," he tells Regan, who replies, "And in good time you gave it"—he fights a heartbreaking battle for his sanity. "O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! / Keep me in temper, I would not be mad!" he says to his Fool (the excellent Ron Cook), laying his frazzled white head on the Fool's diminutive shoulder.

When Lear does go mad, he's all the more powerful for not being a roaring loony. Instead of ranting into the storm, Jacobi whispers his words—an affecting demonstration of the mind splitting off and burrowing inward. Lear emerges exhausted from his "wheel of fire," but, for both the character and the actor, it's a heroic emotional journey. Jacobi finds just the right tone of enervation and enlightenment. "Pray do not mock me: / I am a very foolish, fond old man," Lear says in his moving reunion with Cordelia. He has gone from being royal to being real, from wanting a performance of devotion to wanting a connection. "Come, let's away to prison: / We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage," he tells Cordelia as they're led off. In this well-cast and exciting production, Grandage adds his own grace note to Shakespeare's: with Cordelia and Lear both dead, he brings the lights up briefly to the sound of bird-song, and then the stage goes black. ♦

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John Lahr's theatrical high points of the year.

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