

# Interracial 'Romeo and Juliet': Thought-Provoking Production

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Why not think of *Romeo and Juliet* — Shakespeare's "star-crossed lovers" — as an interracial couple? Why not think of racial hatred as the explosive, foolishly tragic catalyst in the bloody feud between the fair young lovers' families, the Montagues and the Capulets of Verona?

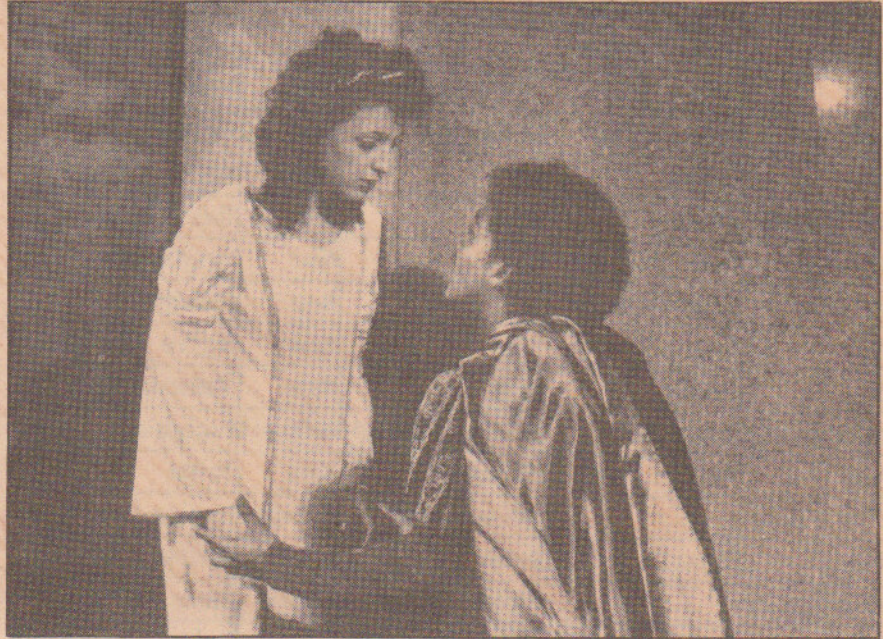
These are some of the ideas that director Clay Stevenson hopes will stimulate the audience Thursday night when the Youth Theatre Unlimited opens its interracial production of "*Romeo and Juliet*," with Romeo played by a black actor and Juliet by a white actress. Made up mainly of an integrated cast of teenagers, the theater group will present its unusual production through March 24 at the Wadsworth Atheneum's Avery Theatre, 600 Main St.

"By making it interracial and by not changing any of Shakespeare's intent," says Stevenson, "I wanted to combine more modern terms with the Elizabethan — especially modern American terms, since race is something we're so conscious of. Emotionally and intellectually, what Shakespeare is saying about the breakdown of these two families is that it's tragic nonsense — just the sort of tragic nonsense that can be stated clearly in terms of what we understand as racism today."

Stevenson, who has been associated with theater projects and teaching posts at the Artists Collective, the Hartford Stage Company and the University of Hartford, says he sticks to the text and retains the romantic Elizabethan sense of the play.

"I did try to give it an urban sense, even if it's urban Verona," he said during a rehearsal break earlier this week.

Stevenson's Romeo is Tyron Leggett, a 17-year-old Bulkeley High School junior who first studied the play in ninth grade. Leggett has extensive amateur acting experience and is a member of Looking In, Hartford's teenage improvisational group. Last year he performed in a production of James Baldwin's "*The Amen Corner*," presented at Weaver High School and at the Old Place, the



Thomas Giroir

Lisa Petruzzi and Tyron Leggett rehearse a scene from "*Romeo and Juliet*."

original home of the Hartford Stage Company.

Juliet is played by Lisa Petruzzi, a 19-year-old Southington resident who has acted in local church and school productions.

The two don't seem at all intimidated by their demanding roles, nor by Shakespeare himself.

"Shakespeare never really turned me off," laughs Leggett, who's decked out in his Romeo duds, complete with foil.

"I was always curious about studying his works, but I never really thought I'd be acting him," he says.

Sitting on a couch next to her Romeo, Petruzzi, who's wearing the white garb of fair Juliet, also says she never suffered from that common affliction known as Bardphobia while in high school.

"This role is good therapy," she says. "Juliet ranges from one such emotional extreme to another that you can't help but learn something about yourself when you're working on the character."

The cast of 30 includes the Youth Theatre Unlimited's adult ensemble, with additional supporting roles from

the theater's newly formed dance company.

The Youth Theatre began 10 years ago as an educational program in the Hartford public school system, where it put on theater seminars, workshops and teacher training programs.

When Stevenson joined the organization in 1978, it expanded from presenting just skits and one-act plays to more ambitious works. At its former home at the Old Place it presented such plays as "*Antigone*" and "*David and Lisa*," both of which it later took on tour in Greater Hartford schools.

The theater group is now a professional training center for the theatrical arts with an enrollment of between 100 and 125 students, according to Executive Director Alan Levy.

"*Romeo and Juliet*" will be performed Thursday through March 24 at the Wadsworth Atheneum's Avery Theatre. Performances are Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m., with a 10 a.m. matinee on Wednesdays and a 3 p.m. matinee on Sundays. Tickets are \$7, evenings, and \$5, matinees. They can be purchased at the Avery Theatre box office, 600 Main St., or by calling 523-4553.