

# Theater: Enthusiasm a plus for 'Romeo & Juliet'

Youth Theatre Unlimited presents "Romeo & Juliet" by William Shakespeare, directed by Clay Stevenson, choreographed by Stephen Semien, set designed by Linda M. Glass, lighting designed by Vincent G. Boucher, music composed by Kenneth W. Steen, costumes designed by Lani Beck Johnson and Kenneth Mooney, at the Wadsworth Atheneum's Avery Theatre, 600 Main St. Hartford. Thursday-Saturday at 7:30 p.m. Tickets \$7, call 523-4553.

Tom Caruso



*Actor audience of Ron McClelland, Billy Morrisette, Tyron Leggett, foreground, left to right.*

Enthusiasm can count as much as experience on stage.

Take Youth Theatre Unlimited's "Romeo & Juliet," for example. Despite some sloppy diction and a few shallow characterizations, the cast's vitality helps overcome its lack of maturity.

Yes, the show drags occasionally during its 3½-hour run, but the overall effect is fairly satisfying. Better staging would have helped.

Youth Theatre also adds a novel twist to Shakespeare: an interracial cast. Romeo and the Capulets are black; Juliet and the Montagues are white.

According to director Clay Stevenson, the casting "not only showcases the representative ethnicity of the Youth Theatre's ensemble, but proves that Shakespeare's message is timeless and universal."

Tyron Leggett and Lisa Petrucci put in admirable performances as the star-crossed lovers. They complement each other, too, making their romance credible.

Each starts out weak but gradually gains strength — much as the characters do. As the tragedy progresses, their delivery becomes more confident and their expressions more clear-cut.

Both sets of parents are disappointing. Hank Frazier is flat and stiff as Lord Montague, while Jim Mays garbles his lines as Lord Capulet.

lines as Lady Capulet neatly, while Lauren Wormble adopts an adequate, but overly annoyed, tone as Lady Montague.

With few exceptions, it's the younger members of the supporting cast who carry the show. The exception is Marsha Hogan, who puts in a wonderfully warm and winning performance as Juliet's aging nurse.

Ms. Hogan, commanding clean diction and firm delivery, evokes hearty laughter from centuries-old jokes and captures hearts with her display of affection toward Juliet. She's amazing.

Close behind are South Windsor's Billy Morrisette and East Hartford's David Murphy. Michael Wallace also does well.

But it's Morrisette who excels among the three. His flair, cockiness and nimbleness

but jovial Mercutio, who can be roused to rage in moments.

The highlight of the play is Morrisette's complex soliloquy on dreams, in which he weaves a verbal web of illusions with hardly a dropped syllable. He also speaks clearly and projects well, vital in a Shakespearean play.

Murphy's strong point is his coordination of movement and speech. With the addition of swift gestures and sharp expressions, he projects an intense, almost sexual, power as Tybalt.

And Wallace plays an effectively restrained Paris, the nobleman who would take Juliet's hand in marriage. His movements and delivery are appropriately dignified, as befitting the son of a king.

volio, also deserves hearty applause. His high energy level and deft movements help him stand out.

Erratic lighting and poorly designed staging unfortunately weakened the show. Characters too often were in shadows, while the action in several key scenes was too far in the background.

Handsome costumes and professional choreography, evident in the dueling scenes, help make up for those flaws. Kenneth W. Steen also deserves recognition for his sound design and composing work, which added an eerie but appealing flavor to the play.

(Tom Caruso is a staff writer at