

We Players bring 'Romeo and Juliet' out in public

In a state park, as it happens, as We Players take the Bard out in public | 



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Petaluma, CA, USA. Thursday, July 21, 2016._ The band performs during the We Players Theatre group's rehearsal of their upcoming performance of Shakespeare's 'Romeo & Juliet' at the Petaluma Adobe State Park. (CRISSY PASCUAL/ ARGUS-COURIER STAFF)

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A small gray lizard darts out from under a wooden plank at the edge of the main building at Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park, but suddenly stops. A four-piece band has abruptly launched a boisterous tune, while directly in front, a troupe of actors, happily shouting and clapping, begin to move in a large, celebratory dance.

The tiny reptile has just found itself in the middle of a rehearsal for We Players' production of William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," running several weekends at the Adobe beginning with previews offered Aug. 4

to 7.

Apparently, even lizards can be critics.

In a fraction of the time it takes the dashing Romeo (Mohammad Shehata) to fall head over boots for the lovely and exuberant Juliet (Maria Leigh) – which is to say, instantaneously – the scaly little visitor has turned tail and disappeared back into the warm historic edifice of the Adobe.

“We’re doing a cue-to-cue of the Capulet ball scene, where Juliet and Romeo will see each other for the first time,” says stage manager Moira McGovern, of Sonoma, pointing to where director Ava Roy is now chatting with member of the band. For those unfamiliar with theater language, “cue-to-cue” is insider speak for the process of plotting out and practicing key transitional moments within a play.

“This show is particularly tricky in terms of transitions,” says McGovern, “because it takes place in several different places all over the Adobe, and the audience has to move with it, and even join in sometimes. Plus, there’s live music, so today we’re figuring all of that out.”

Welcome to the weird world of We Players, a 16-year-old company committed to “site-integrated performance,” a fancy way of saying they stage classic plays in public places, with emphasis on state parks. Over the years, the company has staged “Hamlet” on Alcatraz Island, performed “Macbeth” at Fort Point, and led audiences on a seaside journey through the aquatic French fairytale, “Ondine,” at San Francisco’s Sutro Baths. Stories like “Beowulf” and “The Odyssey” have been brought to life on board the historic clipper ship Alma, the sands of Angel Island, and the mysterious, echoing chapel at Fort Mason.

This is hardly passive theater.

In fact, while attending a We Players production, one should expect to do quite a bit of walking and standing.

“We do have stools for those who want them, light enough to carry around from scene to scene,” points out McGovern, with a smile. “And we have ‘kneelers’ for those who want to kneel or sit.”

According to director Roy, the Petaluma Adobe is more than just the location where folks will watch the show. The park, in a very real way, is also a co-director, and a major actor in the production too.

“I knew I wanted to set ‘Romeo and Juliet’ in a place that was warm,” Roy says, “because, honestly, what happens in this play – which Shakespeare set in Italy in the summer – would never happen in San Francisco. It’s too cold. This is a very warm weather play.”

Not only will audiences experience Shakespeare’s beloved romantic tragedy in a theatrical style they’ve likely never seen, but Roy and her team have made a number of audacious choices in how the actors will portray their characters.

“It’s fabulous!” says actress Libby Oberlin, of Sonoma, who plays Capulet, a deliberately bipolar fusion of Juliet’s

mother and father. "I do all of their lines," she says. "It's really fun. In the scenes where Capulet usually argues with Lady Capulet, I'm actually now arguing with myself. It's kind of fun, and kind of scary."

This is Oberlin's third consecutive production with We Players, and she gladly admits that staging this one in Sonoma County thrills her.

"I've been commuting to San Francisco for years," she says. "And now that we're doing one right in my backyard, I'm just trying to get absolutely everyone to see it because it's so unique. It's a very different experience of theater, because as an audience member, you are actually in it."

That's not just a metaphor.

When the characters eat, so does the audience. During the party scene, the audience is invited to learn the steps of the ancient Capulet dance and join in. When Friar Lawrence appears to perform a sacred water ritual – a kind of soothing Shakespearean "baptism" – Juliet and her family anoint with water any audience members choosing to participate.

That water ritual, director Roy points out, goes back to her point about "Romeo and Juliet" taking place in a warm climate.

"Why are the Capulets and the Montagues feuding?" she asks. "What if it's about water? Why not? It makes sense. Water is a precious resource, and people fight and kill for it. Everyone needs it to survive, and they need it to cool down. That's what these people really need, to cool down."

"Seriously. If it had only rained more often," Roy laughs, "Romeo and Juliet might have had a happier ending."

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