

Montagues at Montalvo

Anne Gelhaus

An artist residency at Montalvo for We Players' artistic director blossomed into a residency for the entire theater company. It also spawned a production of "Romeo and Juliet" that will be staged Oct. 6-16 at the Saratoga arts center—all over the center's grounds, in fact.

Ava Roy, who founded We Players at Stanford University in 2000, spent the summer of 2015 in Montalvo's Lucas Artists Residency Program developing a stage version of "Beowulf" to be performed at Fort Mason in San Francisco. We Players stages "site-integrated" productions—many of them Shakespeare plays—during which the audience literally follows the action from one area of the performance space to another.

"Unlike getting dressed up for [traditional] theater, you have to keep your sneakers on," says Kelly Sicat, Montalvo's residency director. "It's a great way to see theater [and] a fun way to get immersed in Shakespeare."

During her residency, Roy met with Sicat to talk about putting up a show at Montalvo, and how best to incorporate the center's historic villa and lush estate.

"The first play she'd done with the company was 'Romeo and Juliet,'" Sicat says. "We thought it was a perfect fit. We've got balconies."

Balconies were in short supply when We Players staged Shakespeare's tragic teen romance at Petaluma Adobe State Park in August and September. The climate there is markedly different from Montalvo's green, tree-lined grounds, which gave the production a different look and feel.

"The Petaluma Adobe is a dry, dusty traditional California rancho," Roy says. "The cowboy costumes we used there just won't work for Montalvo. Our goal is always to integrate so that the show feels native to the site."

To that end, Roy worked with visual artist Monica Lundy to create masks for the play's masquerade ball scene, each depicting animals native to the South Bay and also reflecting the personality of the character who wears it. Installations created by other artists in residence are being used as set pieces.

"It'll be interesting to see how the same show with the same actors changes and how it affects the audience's experience," Roy says of the venue change. "I'm especially curious to see the reactions of audiences who are able to see the show at both locations."

"It doesn't necessarily change the inner life of the characters because the actors have been with the characters for so many months," she adds.

Roy's company began developing the production in May, when the cast took over eight of Montalvo's 11 artist residency studios for the entire month.

"We were able to witness the artistic process because [the actors] were all over the grounds, reading lines and having swordfights," Sicat says. "It was a common occurrence."

While the studios were initially designed for individual artists and writers to work on projects, Sicat says the residency program is also designed for larger collaborative efforts.

"It's something we try to make room for more and more," she adds. "There's no better way to incubate a large work or group of performers working on the same outcome."

Roy calls her company's residency at Montalvo "a tremendous gift," adding that the experience has been quite different than staging a show at a state or national park.

"The government moves really slowly," she says. "Montalvo is designed systematically to support the arts, and they understand the messiness of the artistic process."

She adds that spending a month living together on the site where they're staging a show was outside of the norm for her whole company. In the case of "Romeo and Juliet," Roy says, the experience was invaluable.

"I try to do intensive workshop-type stuff with my performers, but that's usually, like, for a weekend," says the artistic director. "With such a long run, to have the cast build meaningful relationships, I think, helps."

"Romeo and Juliet" runs Oct. 6-16 at Montalvo Arts Center, 15400 Montalvo Road, Saratoga. Tickets are \$40-\$80 at montalvoarts.org/weplayers or 408.961.5858.