



6/21/2016 1 Comment



Above: We Players' Maria Leigh as Juliet and Mohammad Shehata as Romeo. Photo by Tina Case.

For the month of May 2016, the Lucas Artists Residency Program (LAP) turned the eleven artist studios on our orchard site over to the [We Players](#), a remarkable site-specific theater company, as they developed a new production of *Romeo and Juliet* that will be performed throughout the Montalvo grounds in October. Founded 16 years ago by Artistic Director Ava Roy, the We Players adapts classic pieces of theater for historic places and keeps audiences on their toes as their performances wend their way through these striking environments. The We Players have performed *Ondine* in San Francisco's Sutro Baths, *Macbeth* at Fort Point, and *Hamlet* on Alcatraz, creating once-in-a-lifetime experiences for audience members.



Lundy stepped out of her comfort zone and agreed to develop a series of animal-themed masks for a key scene of *Romeo and Juliet*—the ball at the Capulet residence that initiates the drama of Shakespeare’s classic tragedy of love, risk, and miscommunication.



Above: Amy Nowak as Peter, Libby Oberlin as Lady Capulet, and Jennie Brick as the Nurse. Photo by Tina Case.



Above: Courtney Walsh as Mercutio, John Steele Jr. as Benvolio, and Mohammad Shehata as Romeo. Photo by Tina Case.

The We Players are renowned for their ability to draw audiences into their dramatic tableaux, and in a stroke of brilliance, the company leads in to their season of performances of *Romeo and Juliet* with an immersive teaser—a series of Capulet Ball experiences, which participants attend as masked guests and experience, in person, the charged scene of Juliet and Romeo’s first encounter. “It’s great fun, and no one dies,” says Roy. How can you resist an invitation like that?

As the We Players developed these experiences at Montalvo, the villa and its gardens rang with new sounds: the clash of swords on the front lawn, the calls of the characters’ spirit-animals, the music of a *rueda* on the villa’s front terrace, and the loudest artist dinner ever held in the Lucas Artists Program Commons. One Thursday night, the full cast of *Romeo and Juliet* came to dinner in character, each armed with secret instructions designed by director Ava Roy to build insight into their character—instructions that also served to create maximum drama, hubbub and happy consternation. A night of hilarity and chaos ensued, the windows shook, and culinary artist Andrea Blum and lone novelist Lynn Freed leapt for cover as the We Players brought their characters to life at full throttle.



said “coyote,” and it was coyote. Lundy conjured the spirit of the female mountain lion that has been sighted with her cub near Montalvo—tagged and dubbed the largest mountain lion in the Santa Cruz mountains. Dessert was served, and “Capulet” came into being—mother mountain lion, a one-character amalgam of Juliet’s domineering parents who truss their daughter up in duty and send her to her death.

Above: Masks designed by Monica Lundy. Photo by Tina Case.

Over a month, Roy walked with the actors on the trails, orchestrating the exploration and building of their characters. The actors lived and ate meals with each other and did that deep work that actors do—the invisible and little-appreciated preliminary work of coming to understand the characters they will inhabit. They read and reread Shakespeare’s script. In his pajamas on his day off, actor John Steele Jr. made word-cloud images of the animals built of the dialogue of each character. They worked from ten in the morning until ten at night.

And Monica Lundy went to work in the clear light of studio 41. She hand-formed the mask of hummingbird as Romeo walked in Montalvo’s rose garden, learning how that bird loves. She gilded the frizzled brow of the sphinx moth carefully as Juliet explored what it means to love a flame. And the animals came to rest in the characters’ natures, and the characters came and inhabited the animals, and the play was born.

We Players will perform *Romeo and Juliet* in two locations, at Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park in August and September, then at Montalvo from October 6-16, 2016. Visit www.weplayers.org for details.

The Characters, their Animals, and their Humans

Nurse (quail): Jennie Brick

Juliet (sphinx moth, also known as hummingbird moth): Maria Leigh

Peter (mouse): Amy Nowak

Lady Capulet (mountain lion): Libby Oberlin