

ROMEO AND JULIET: PRESS RESPONSES

Headlong, UK tour (2012)

Directed by Robert Icke

www.robeticke.com

THE OBSERVER

Kate Kellaway

I watched Romeo and Juliet in the company of several Southampton school parties – bracing myself for a noisy night ahead. But Headlong, a touring company of generous unpredictability, offers here a production to silence outspoken schoolchildren and docile adults alike. You've got a delinquent in the class? That is nothing to what we have on stage. Everyone knows someone like Tom Mothersdale's exhibitionist Mercutio – charismatic, insecure, flaunting tasteless velvet trousers. And we have all met friendly, drunken fat boys like Danny Kirrane's Benvolio, swigging vodka until their eyes glaze over. But not one of us will have seen a Romeo and Juliet like this before.

What makes this such an extraordinary show is not its wit, its modern dress or its music (the Boomtown Rats' hit "I Don't Like Mondays" features), nor the liberties taken with the text (Shakespeare survives unperturbed). It is its focus on the power of teenage love. In Robert Icke's unfettered production, Romeo and Juliet are not attempting to embody a lofty romantic ideal. Romeo, convincingly played by Daniel Boyd, is callow, naive and a wearer of espadrilles. But when love comes, he can't resist. And when he speaks Shakespeare's most romantic lines, one feels he is trying the language on for size, hoping to impress Juliet, wanting to be grown up. Catrin Stewart's Juliet is one of the most captivating and touching I have seen. Her excitement, playfulness, way of jumping for joy suggest the child she so recently was.

Headlong, whose artistic director is Rupert Goold, is the right company to be entrusted with a love that is headlong and against the clock. Time dominates. A projected digital clock lets time escape before our eyes (designer: Helen Goddard). The cast experiments with turning the clock back. Some moments are daringly replayed as if to test the truth of Juliet's line: "In a minute there are many days." Right up to the end, there is the sense that one extra minute might have saved the day.

The supporting performances are, without exception, terrific. Keith Bartlett's Capulet is oppressively salt-of-the-earth. Caroline Faber's Lady Capulet is beautifully nuanced. Simon Coates's Friar Laurence is an entertaining modern cleric and Brigid Zengeni's Nurse is a scream: a warm, indiscreet shopaholic in patent yellow heels.

But the stars have barely had time to get themselves crossed before the end approaches. Haste, in this production, leads to tragedy. When Romeo kills Tybalt, he is not thinking about consequences. Same thing with Mercutio (there is horrified surprise in Stephen Fewell's eyes when he realises he is dying). No one meant the story to end in death. Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio and Tybalt – they were only playing.

THE GUARDIAN

Lyn Gardner

If we're truthful, Shakespeare's young lovers are often a wee bit dull, and death doesn't come nearly quickly enough. Not so with Robert Icke's revival for Headlong, though, a production that's startlingly fresh. At its heart are Daniel Boyd and Catrin Stewart's affecting, often gauche teenagers, startled by a love that leaves them wrong-footed, tongue-tied, almost stuttering, and at times in pain. I've never seen a production that so clearly captures the internalised world of the adolescent: high as a kite one moment and in the depths of despair the next. Tom Mothersdale's superb Mercutio is in thrall to his hormones, and perhaps to something darker, too.

From its opening moments, when a digital clock starts to count the minutes, Icke offers a story in which elements of time and fate are compressed and heightened. In places it's like Sliding Doors, suggesting alternative scenarios: Romeo and Juliet's paths never cross at the party, and the horseplay of Romeo's friends means the Nurse fails to deliver the message from Juliet to Romeo. It employs the cross-cutting techniques of movies and TV with startling aplomb, and plays on the drama's presentiments of disaster through dreams and hallucinations.

The text is cut (no bad thing), but this never feels like concept Shakespeare. Instead, it offers moments of real clarity on the impossible relationship between Juliet and her mother, the echoing tomb that is the Capulet marriage, the fate awaiting Juliet had she married Paris and the violence that underlies Veronese society. Romeo goes to his wedding bed covered in blood. It's terrific, and hails the arrival of some thrilling young actors and an impressive new director.

THE HUNTINGDON POST

Angela Singer

THIS is a dazzling production. The set is ingenious and the action is slick, often with two scenes gently intertwined on the stage at once. While on an upper floor, Capulet and Lady Capulet mourn the loss of Tybalt in one breath and plan Juliet's marriage to Paris in the next, below on stage, in a giant bed, Juliet and her Romeo celebrate their one night of marriage.

This is a modern dress production that works with great precision. A digital clock on a giant screen reminds us that the whole story is over just five days. There is also a deft rewind of some crucial moments. You see what a close run thing life and death is. Just one flicker of fate and Mercutio and Tybalt would not have died, Romeo would not have been banished. It is the essence of tragedy that it turns on a hair.

The humanity of the characters is brought out here. Keith Bartlett is a wonderfully controlled and exasperated Capulet, the dutiful father who cannot see that he is a bully. He doesn't have to shout to be terrifying. Caroline Faber's feeling Lady Capulet is a mirror to that. Danny Kirrane is a cheerful, relaxed Benvolio, Romeo's great mate, and Brigid Zengeni is a Nurse whose warmth and humour pervades the play. Clever devices are used to make sure the original text fits the modern setting. Simon Coates's authoritative Friar Laurence gives his lecture on herbs with the help of PowerPoint. When Romeo cries as The Nurse enters: "A sail, a sail!" she is carrying shopping bags with "sale" on them. To torment her, Mercutio (a wily, Pete Docherty-esque figure portrayed elegantly by Tom Mothersdale) empties her new clothes on to the floor. Daniel Hooke is a treat as her fellow servant, Peter.

Daniel Boyd and Catrin Stewart give visceral and tender performances as Romeo and Juliet. Juliet's body language as a young girl at the edge of grown-up life is well observed and endearing. However, at times, they each seem to blur the edge between anguish and anger so that they are shouting. Grief cries out but it does not shout.

Director Robert Icke has created a fast-paced, ensemble piece that beguiles throughout, a respectful and loving interpretation of a great play.

THE PUBLIC REVIEWS

Catherine Love

The observation that the audience of Headlong's new touring production of Romeo and Juliet is almost entirely composed of schoolchildren says much about this extraordinarily well-known play. It is starter Shakespeare, the one that everyone is routinely fed at the age of fifteen, the one that has arguably seeped most into our cultural consciousness and the one that is all too often made dull with familiarity when placed on the stage. No fear of dullness, however, in the hands of Headlong.

For the younger members of the audience, it is difficult to imagine a more electric introduction to Shakespeare. It helps, of course, that director Robert Icke's production is modern dress, but it does not rely merely on updated costume to wrench this 400-year-old play into the here and now. To say that the themes are timeless is to quote something of a truism, but Icke and his cast remind us just how strongly this play resonates with the adolescence of today.

In an intriguing central concept, Headlong's young lovers are crossed not so much by the stars as by the unfortunate coincidences of chance. Blinding flashes of light at odd intervals usher in swift, stylised rewinds and replays, illustrating how easily events might have turned out differently – a device whose only error is not being explored to its full extent. At the same time a projected digital clock counts down the time that Romeo and Juliet still have together, while ominous ticking pervades pivotal scenes. Eschewing the more obvious focus on fate and destiny and making the striking decision to cut the prologue, Icke has singled out instead the cruelty of time and its arbitrary nature, an artistic decision that for the most part pays off.

Icke's charged production is pacy, vibrant and almost filmic, snapping swiftly from location to location and ingeniously overlaying adjacent scenes. It makes for an unusually dynamic version of Shakespeare's great love story and a particularly compelling one, even if some scenes could do with being a little less hastily dispatched. Throwing off the dust-cloths that have settled on the script's famous and over-quoted lines, Headlong have invigorated the play in a production that seems to throb with the heightened pulse of adolescent love. Young and fresh are the adjectives that immediately jump to mind.

The cast, too, are markedly and appropriately youthful. The love shared by Daniel Boyd's Romeo and Catrin Stewart's Juliet is the giddy infatuation of teen romance, an emotion that both are trying on for size. Boyd bursts with awkward, gangling charm, while the captivating Stewart is very much a young girl, excited and consumed by the love that seems to grasp her bodily. There are also star turns from Tom Mothersdale as a swaggering, hipster Mercutio with an edge of danger and from Danny Kirrane's drunkenly laddish but well-meaning Benvolio. The same sense of passion and energy found in the performances suffuses the direction, a zest that begs forgiveness for its few stumbles.

All too often Shakespearean productions describe themselves as 'bold' when really they do little more than employ a gimmick for the sake of doing something different. Icke's inventive and effervescent production, however, can lay claim to true creative boldness in presenting a vision that is both true to the text and unlike any other interpretation you are likely to have seen.

THE NOTTINGHAM POST

Sarah Gill

TWO feuding households in the sweltering streets of Verona is the setting for this tragic love story.

Directed by Robert Icke for Headlong, the production effectively encapsulates the Shakespearean tale but with a modern twist; gone is the chorus prologue. And time dominates; a projected digital clock denotes the passage of time in the manner of a tense TV documentary. At its heart are Daniel Boyd as the naïve teenager Romeo and Catrin Stewart as the excitable, childlike Juliet. Together the pair wittily portray the internalised world of the adolescent and the exhilaration of teenage first love.

The supporting performances were all commendable. Tom Mothersdale brought a rakish energy to his role of Mercutio, along with Danny Kirrane as Benvolio who entertained with his cheeky grin and banter.

There is an almost multi-media feel as Icke uses different areas of the stage to run scenes simultaneously, adding to the pace of the drama. And it's a clever set with clock doubling as an alternative stage. The famous balcony scene sees Juliet on her bed and Romeo in amongst the audience - an excellent way to engage us in their romance.

Also to be applauded is the rewinding of pivotal moments in the story, presenting alternative scenarios in a Sliding Doors effect. It's a technique that helps us see how chance and twists of fate have an effect on all of our lives. There is a prevailing sense that one extra minute may have saved the day for these star-crossed lovers.

A fine production and not one of us will have seen a Romeo and Juliet like it.

SALISBURY JOURNAL

Christine Stock

TIME is of the essence for Shakespeare's young lovers Romeo and Juliet and was the central focus of Headlong Theatre's radical interpretation of the 400-year-old play. From the start, a huge projected digital clock demonstrated the cruelty of time as it counted down the hours, minutes, even seconds that Romeo and Juliet had left together.

A flash of blinding light filled the auditorium and the clock would be rewound to replay an alternative version of events, demonstrating what could have been.

The hedonist and heartache of teenage love was played out beautifully by leading actors Daniel Boyd and Catrin Stewart and this energetic and funky adaptation, with its modern clothes and music, was certainly attention-grabbing. Who'd have thought Romeo would be prancing around the stage wearing khakis and espadrilles? Or the lovers would be romping about on a bed to a cover version of the Boomtown Rats' I Don't Like Mondays?

Boyd's Romeo was a romantic fool, full of bumbling energy, while Catrin, as Juliet, was intense, captivating and childlike. Danny Kirrane and Tom Mothersdale injected some welcome humour as Romeo's mates, Benvolio and Mercutio, playing typical lads, drinking and larking around, not thinking about the future and how fragile life is. Brigid Zengeni is also commendable as the warm, but rather indiscreet nurse.

I'm positive the predominantly young audience were able to come away, as I did, with a greater appreciation of the literary giant and I am grateful to director Robert Icke for this contemporary and edgy interpretation.

YORK PRESS

Charles Hutchinson

ROMEO And Juliet is so ubiquitous in teenage culture that two plays already seen in Yorkshire this year, Angus Thongs And Even More Snogging at the West Yorkshire Playhouse and the American musical Bare at York St John University, build scenes around it.

Your reviewer has watched Shakespeare's young lovers more than any other play, dating back to a "young" Ian McKellen and Francesca Annis in 1975 for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Last time it was

on a Hull Truck stage was in 1999 in a "passion hits the Pennines" version, preceded nine years earlier by Fine Young Cannibals' Hull hunk, Roland Gift, stripping to the waist and Juliet doing likewise, which wasn't such a good thing, given that everyone was too distracted to notice if it was the nightingale and not the lark singing.

Headlong's new touring version could be described as Baz Luhrmann's Romeo + Juliet meets Channel 4's hot-blooded teen drama *Skins*. I said "could be". Instead, it stands on its own two quick-moving feet as a thrillingly imaginative, modern-dress reinvention of Shakespeare's teen love story to rival Andrew Manley's never-forgotten nightclub setting with Mercutio high on drugs at Harrogate Theatre.

Shakespeare talked up the "two hours' traffick of our stage" in his prologue, which always seemed ludicrously overambitious time-keeping, but Headlong director Robert Icke leaves you in no doubt that time is ticking for the star-cross'd young lovers. We not only hear the electronic ticking of clocks, we regularly see a digital clock clicking down the five-day romance on Helen Goddard's sparse set design.

The rectangular clock face doubles as a television screen for news conference pronouncements from Matthew Spencer's beleaguered Prince in violent Verona, and also switches suddenly from darkness to light for back-story revelations (Lady Capulet playing away from home) and hallucinations (when Juliet takes her sedative).

More than any other Shakespeare play, *Romeo And Juliet* is driven by the inexorable hand of fate as two families keep going to war. Nothing can stop the bloodletting that ensues, as forewarned by Icke using Buffalo Springfield's hippie classic *For What It's Worth* at the start with its lyric of "There's battle lines being drawn, nobody's right if everybody's wrong, young people speakin' their minds, getting so much resistance from behind".

Icke employs two devices to emphasise the unstoppable path. Blinding flashing lights signify a re-wind and replaying of a crucial moment, in the manner of the film *Sliding Doors*. We briefly see an alternative, such as Romeo and Juliet never meeting or Romeo receiving the letter that never arrived, only for the fateful Shakespeare version to then play its hand. If this is a gimmick, it nevertheless does more than state the obvious blindingly.

Likewise, the moment when Romeo is banished for murdering Tybalt (Okezie Morro) is played out with Romeo receiving the news from Friar Lawrence (Simon Coates) and Juliet hearing it from the Nurse simultaneously, much like television might overlap scenes on a split-screen, with all four on stage at the same time in this instance. Such theatrical bravado not only lends even more urgency to the events but also shows that playing with Shakespeare's text is not a crime, but can benefit it.

So many moments are memorable, be it Romeo arriving on Juliet's wedding bed still in his bloody attire to the accompaniment of Tori Amos's cover of *I Don't Like Mondays* (the day the murder was committed) or Tom Mothersdale's tattooed Mercutio, in his electric blue suede boots, tipping strawberry sauce and Hundreds and Thousands from the Gelato stall on fiery Tybalt's head in the fateful street fight.

Mothersdale's dark and dangerous, insecure and horny Mercutio is but one stand-out turn. So too are Brigid Zengeni's shopaholic Nurse, Danny Kirrane's good-time Charlie, Benvolio, and Keith Bartlett and Caroline Faber's dysfunctional Capulet couple.

What of Daniel Boyd's Romeo and Catrin Stewart's Juliet? More than usual, they really are love-struck adolescents, excited, gauche, rash, pained, he giving his poetry a whirl, she not growing prematurely into a woman, unlike past interpretations.

Every second counts in this Headlong rush and Robert Icke makes every second count.