

## THINGS TO DO

# We Players' Old West 'Romeo' moves the audience, literally



By [SAM HURWITT](#) | IJ correspondent

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Nothing about “Romeo and Juliet” particularly suggests cowboys, but one hallmark of William Shakespeare’s works has always been their adaptability to any number of settings. We Players’ work is all about adaptation and setting; the local theater company partners with the National Park Service and California State Parks to put on immersive, site-specific versions of Shakespeare and other classic works that usually involve the audience hiking around from one spot to another where different scenes are set.

They’ve done “Hamlet” on Alcatraz, “The Odyssey” on Angel Island, “Macbeth” at Fort Point and “Ondine” at Sutro. We Players’ latest production takes Shakespeare’s romantic tragedy, “Romeo and Juliet,” and stages it in the old-time Western setting of Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park, where Rancho Petaluma was established by Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo in 1834, when the area was still loosely under Mexican rule. In October the production moves to Saratoga’s Villa Montalvo.

As amusing as it is initially to see the star-crossed lovers and their warring families duded up in costumer Brooke Jennings’ Old West garb, the picturesque, arid outdoor setting allows for some striking tableaux in the energetic staging by founding artistic director Ava Roy. There’s plenty of room to roam for Benjamin Stowe’s fight choreography, and Maria Leigh’s wonderfully exuberant and headstrong Juliet spends a great deal of time running full-tilt wherever it is she can’t wait to go.

Like most We Players events, this “Romeo and Juliet” involves a great deal of walking around outside on hot days and chilly nights. Before the short hike to the site, audience members are given purple or pinkish red clothes to identify themselves as part of one or the other of the feuding Montague and Capulet families, but nothing ever comes of that. An omnipresent band sets the mood, whether somber or festive, with well-suited brass and drum music by Charlie Gurke.



The play has been streamlined in many ways and expanded in others to make room for a number of audience participation moments, such as dancing and snacking at the Capulet Ball where the lovers meet. These additions are occasionally puzzling, such as a long water anointing ritual at the end of the Ball, but at other times they're quite effective, as when the entire crowd becomes a funeral procession. All in all they stretch the experience out to about three hours without intermission.

Some roles are omitted entirely — Juliet's parents are combined into one mama Capulet (a tempestuous Libby Oberlin), and Romeo's dad never shows up — while others, such as the dim-witted servant Peter (amiably goofy Amy Nowak), are considerably expanded from the original, to lighten the mood and help herd the audience around.

The performances are big and broad in general, which helps fill up the wild open space but also lends an air of goofiness to the whole enterprise. Sometimes that works beautifully, as with Leigh's irrepressible Juliet or Steve Thomas' double role as petulant bully Tybalt and foppish suitor Paris. Other times it's only natural, as with Romeo's bawdy, relentlessly mocking buddy Mercutio, portrayed with wild gusto by Courtney Walsh, who also plays the ineffectual Prince. Jennie Brick as Juliet's comically garrulous Nurse is similarly an outsize personality to begin with.

Sometimes the approach is unnerving. Mohammad Shehata's Romeo is no less manic than Mercutio in a way that makes his bellowing protestations of love appear alarmingly unstable. Rush Rehm's Friar Laurence meddles in Romeo's love life with unseemly enthusiasm. John Steele Jr. is rare exception as Benvolio, just a regular easygoing guy with a fondness for swordplay whose friends have lost their freaking minds.

More than anything, what this approach to "Romeo and Juliet" drives home like a dagger to the heart is that this is less a love story than a tale of catastrophically rash and ill-advised, hormonally addled people making terrible decisions in the heat of the moment. They're star-crossed lovers, sure, but the fault is not in their stars but in themselves.

*Sam Hurwitt's theater blog, The Idiolect, is at [www.theidiolect.com](http://www.theidiolect.com). Contact him at [shurwitt@gmail.com](mailto:shurwitt@gmail.com) or on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/shurwitt>.*

