

ENTERTAINMENT | PERFORMANCE

# Uneven 'Romeo' woos audiences outdoors

By **Lily Janiak**  
Aug 22, 2016



Romeo (Mohammad Shehata) and Juliet (Maria Leigh) share an intimate moment.  
Lauren Matley/We Players

For most We Players shows, outdoor adventure in a public park is just as salient a part of the experience as the theater is. The company, which Ava Roy founded in 2000, has staged "Macbeth" at Fort Point, "Hamlet" on Alcatraz, and parts of "The Odyssey" on Angel Island and on a 19

century schooner as it sailed the San Francisco Bay.

But its latest, "Romeo and Juliet," isn't much of an excursion. It's staged now at Rancho Petaluma Adobe, before transferring to Villa Montalvo in Saratoga in October, and the show feels constrained in that North Bay state park. The site features a mid-1800s adobe ranch house, towering dramatically before farm fields flecked with lowing cattle, but scenes take advantage of only two sides of that structure, and none inside.

That does entail less hoofing — previous We Players productions have required audiences to cross from one side of an island to another between scenes, straining pretty much everyone except the athletic actors — but it makes the setting feel more like a static backdrop than a park with which you can actively engage.

Still, Roy, who directs, makes some lovely choices within these constraints. The famous balcony scene is not only staged on an actual balcony, but it also places audiences on the line between the shadow and light of the setting sun, so that the tragedy's famous line that Romeo (Mohammad Shehata) speaks, "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun," takes on additional, site-specific resonance.

Roy also does extraordinary work with the scene at the Capulets' masked ball, which Romeo and his Montague clan, sworn enemies of the hosts, crash. Ensemble members give the audience masks to wear, serve them peaches and cheese, and incite them to dance what's essentially a goyish hora. It's all wondrous fun; then suddenly, the jazzy, brassy live music (by longtime We Players composer Charlie Gurke) ceases, the swirling, dancing trains halt, and in the center are Romeo and Juliet (Maria Leigh), catching sight of one another for the first time, with all the audience members as breathless, complicit party guests. If ever a scene of theater could make love at first sight credible, this might be it.

While Maria Leigh is excellent as Juliet, making her character's desire feel at once innocent and carnal, finding fresh intonations that make immortal lines seem new and interesting, other ensemble members fall short. It's telling that at our first sighting of Shehata's Romeo, he's ardently penning lines into a journal; throughout the show, he seems more enraptured by his own declarations of love than by his supposed beloved.

Courtney Walsh makes for a bewildering Mercutio. Playing the character whose name has the same origin as the word "mercurial," she's all one shouty note; no seismograph would register a difference between when she urges Romeo to party and when she dies.

Other actors amplify the script's comedy, with Amy Nowak finding funny meanings between the lines as a servant, Jennie Brick bawdy as Juliet's nurse, and Steve Thomas akin to Yosemite Sam as Tybalt and Paris. (Fitting with the show's setting, costume designer Brooke Jennings gives the show a cowboy feel; even sword holsters sport an extravagant three buckles.)

But that antic energy doesn't give enough reason that this tragedy needs to be staged in this particular park, especially when the biting winds pick up after sunset, leaving all but those who prepared for polar temperatures to shiver as the lovers meet their untimely end.

It's tough to feel pathos when you're quaking in your boots and when the acting isn't more powerful than the elements.

*Lily Janiak is The San Francisco Chronicle's theater critic. Email: [ljaniak@sfchronicle.com](mailto:ljaniak@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: [@LilyJaniak](https://twitter.com/LilyJaniak)*

ALERT VIEWER **Romeo and Juliet:** By William Shakespeare. Directed by Ava Roy. \$45-\$80. Through Sept. 25. Petaluma Adobe State Park, 3325 Adobe Rd., Petaluma. Oct. 6-16. Villa Montalvo, Montalvo Arts Center, 15400 Montalvo Rd., Saratoga. Two hours 45 minutes. [www.weplayers.org](http://www.weplayers.org)

To see a video: <https://vimeo.com/178635784>

Aug 22, 2016



By **Lily Janiak**



Lily Janiak joined the San Francisco Chronicle as theater critic in May 2016. Previously, her writing appeared in Theatre Bay Area, American Theatre, SF Weekly, the Village Voice and HowIRound. She holds a BA in theater studies from Yale and an MA in drama from San Francisco State.

She can be reached at [ljaniak@sfchronicle.com](mailto:ljaniak@sfchronicle.com).

**SFGATE**

Top ^



About 

Contact 

 Privacy Settings