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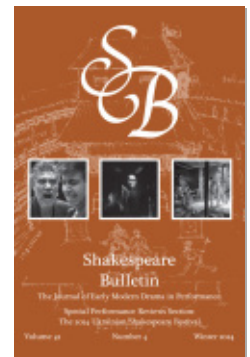
Romeo and Juliet. Dramma per musica dir. by The Ivan Franko
National Academic Drama Theater in Ivano-Frankivsk (review)

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most famous words in the play, concluding the monologue with “Who’s there?”, thus returning to the play’s starting point.

Taking Hamlet underground, making him expose his “mad” identity, and tailoring the representation of the other characters to this postmodern vision created an unorthodox and unexpected production that gave us a *Hamlet* for Ukraine today. This *Hamlet* made a peculiar kind of sense in its new space, this “basement showground,” which is now both theater and bomb shelter.



Romeo and Juliet. Drama per musica

Presented by **The Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theater in Ivano-Frankivsk** at the Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ivano-Frankivsk Drama Theater Basement Stage. 21 June 2024. Translated by Yurii Andrukhovych. Adapted and directed by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi. Music by Roman Hryhoriv and Illia Razumeiko. Set design by Yuliia Zaulychna. Choreography by Olha Semioshkina. With Oleh Panas (Romeo), Inna Bevza (Juliet), Oleksii Hnatkovskyi (Friar Lawrence), Olha Komanovska (Nurse), Ihor Zakharchuk (Montague, Romeo’s father), Yurii Khvostenko (Capulet, Juliet’s father), Ivan Blindar (Mercutio), Yurii Vykhovanets (Tybalt), Andrii Melnyk (Paris), Mariia Stopnyk (Erina), Nadiia Levchenko (Erina), Olesia Pasichniak (Erina), and others.

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Romeo and Juliet. Drama per musica, performed at the Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk on 21 June 2024, is the second part of a dramatic diptych by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi based on tragedies by Shakespeare. The first part, *Hamlet. Neo-opera-horror*, was shown at the festival three days earlier, and together these two performances formed a holistic impression of the post-apocalyptic world, through the gloomy labyrinths of which, according to the director’s concept, the viewer should walk together with Shakespeare’s characters in search of answers to the questions that are so urgent for our time: is there any place in this life for living humans and true feelings?

We perceive these stagings of Shakespeare tragedies as a diptych due to several shared elements: common principles of spatial organization, substantial similarities in their musical arrangements and, most of all, a post-apocalyptic interpretation of their plotlines. The acting space for both tragedies directed by Derzhypilskyi was in the basement of the theater: semantically, we saw this as a living realm of death. The left part, which was used as the cemetery, with all the characters lying motionless in the “coffins” at the beginning of *Hamlet*. *Neo-opera-horror*, served as a place of brutal orgy at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*. The common musical idiom resulted from using music written by the same Ukrainian composers—Roman Hryhoriv and Illia Razumeiko. In the genre titles of the productions (*Neo-opera-horror* and *Dramma per musica*), the director indicated a correlation between these productions and the art of opera, which was born in the Renaissance and has been undergoing a period of revival in modern Ukraine. Additionally, both plays were staged using translations by Yurii Andrukhovych. The uniqueness of the translations made by this well-known postmodern writer lies in the fact that, while skillfully reproducing all the linguistic variety of Shakespeare’s originals, Andrukhovych adds numerous allusions to the contemporary reality of Ukrainian citizens. Easily recognizable by the audience, this intertextual code created a special playful situation where the viewer was able to enjoy both Shakespeare and Andrukhovych, engaging in the discovery of relevant meanings in classical texts.

As the audience descended the steep and winding staircase into the basement of the theater, they encountered monks, their faces hidden under dark hoods, who supported and guided the audience. This movement created a gothic atmosphere and a certain psychological tension, which soon gave way to other sensations: the spectators found themselves in the basement, where they took their seats on long wooden benches. In front of them was the acting space, dominated by a large metal cage in the center; to the left there were wooden boards, used as stretchers, on which human bodies lay, wrapped in foil. But as soon as the spectators entered this so-called theater hall, they were drawn to a prominent tableau. Crossed beams of light focused attention on a living sculptural portrait—Juliet (Inna Bevza), sitting in the metal cage, dressed in a dazzling white fur coat and holding the body of the dead Romeo (Oleh Panas) in her arms, evoking obvious visual associations with Michelangelo’s *Pietà*. During this scene, which opened the performance, the music of a symphony orchestra accompanied Bevza as she sang the poignant aria “Lascia ch’io pianga” (“Let Me Weep”) from Handel’s opera *Rinaldo*. The

aria's beauty contrasted strikingly with the dank, utilitarian space in which we sat. Thus, in the very first minutes of the performance, the director broke the sequence of the play's events by indicating Romeo's death and Juliet's mourning while contrasting post-apocalyptic Verona, into whose sullied atmosphere the audience would soon be plunged, with the world of the young lovers, whose harmonious unity could not be destroyed even by death. This tragedy of Romeo's suicide marked the beginning of the director's investigation: what caused the catastrophe, the death of the young heroes?

The metal cage was the center of the universe for the living realm of death: it was multifunctional and polysemantic. It served first as a gym where the youth of Verona hardened their bodies; then as a ring where Ivan Blindar and Yurii Vykhovanets, as Mercutio and Tybalt, enacted a frighteningly real cage match; as Juliet's room, where she drank the Friar's potion; and as the crypt where Romeo came to die. It was in this cage that Friar Laurence (Oleksii Hnatkovskyi) read aloud the text of the Apocalypse at the beginning of the play's second half. And finally, all the characters circled this cage in a frenzy after learning of Juliet's supposed death.

The action was transformed by the modern setting: instead of an exquisite ball, there was a laser show in a nightclub, and orgies in which members of rival Mafia clans indiscriminately came together. The director cut some characters from his production (Benvolio, Escalus, Apothecary, Friar John, and the servingmen), and added some new ones. Thus, the three Erinyes (Nadiia Levchenko, Olesia Pasichniak, and Mariia Stopnyk), who are like Moirai spinning the threads of Romeo and Juliet's short lives, were associated with dark forces. They entered the post-apocalyptic space with the words of the witches from *Macbeth*: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." A dozen silent monks who accompanied the audience as they descended into the basement continued to serve as extras, including as a chorus chanting "Dies irae, dies illa" in disco style. It was the monks and Erinyes who provided the play's voiceover, which became particularly disturbing, like the buzzing of a fly, in the second half of the play. In the space of the basement, which lacked proper acoustics, it was a functional necessity for the actors to use radio microphones. The multi-decibel music by Razu-meiko and Hryhoriv, performed live and creating a series of bold stylistic contrasts, was also part of the technogenic style of the performance.

One of the strongest points of the production was the decision to use uncanonical interpretations of the characters of Friar Lawrence and the Nurse (Olha Komanovska). At the beginning of the play, Lawrence appeared as a priest who had lost his faith, a man in a state of existential



Romeo (Oleh Panas, above) and Tybalt (Yurii Vykhovanets, below) in *Romeo and Juliet*. *Dramma per musica*, dir. Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi. Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival, 2024. Photo by Bohdan Savliuk, courtesy of Ivano-Frankivsk Drama Theater.

despair. He was so well versed in herbs that he even tried to communicate with God through drugs in order to overcome his spiritual crisis. This circumstance explains the exaltation in Lawrence's first monologue and his outrageous behavior later on. The appearance of Romeo restored the Friar's clarity: having agreed to help Romeo and Juliet marry in secret, he saw this act as a blessing from heaven and believed that God had sent him a chance to serve a godly purpose. However, the music suggested that this adventure would fail, as the monks and witches sang "Kyrie eleison."

In the second half of the performance, Lawrence appeared as a respectable lawyer who began by reading from the Book of Revelation and ended by commenting on the respective guilt of each Capulet and Montague for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. When Lawrence read about the angels cast down from heaven, all the characters, dead and alive, walked in front of the audience and sat down to listen to him as if at a church service. However, the logic of Lawrence's actions at the decisive moment of the tragedy remained unclear. It was he and not the Apothecary (missing from Derzhypilskyi's production) who gave Romeo the vial of poison and addressed the audience, saying, "To die young is happiness; Heaven loves the pure." We guessed that Derzhypilskyi wished to present Romeo's

death and Juliet's suicide as a subtle maneuver by the pastor to re-educate the two clans through the death of their descendants, a kind of sacrifice. But this was only our assumption, as there was no clear indication either way. The final confusion in the portrayal of Lawrence, the lovers' lawyer, emerged from his final monologue, in which Lawrence mentioned his messenger, who had come under fire and never delivered the letter to Romeo. But we had just seen Lawrence "call" Romeo to Verona himself and hand him the poison!

The second character whose portrayal was startlingly original was the Nurse. In the play's first half, she resembled a German governess whose speech was a mixture of Ukrainian and German words—easily recognizable to the audience as verbal clichés. She was vulgar and spoilt, engaged in anonymous sex, and drank to drunkenness. Nonetheless, she loved Juliet in her own way. In such a modern revision, Komanovska recreated the farcical nature of the character in Shakespeare's tragedy. Her role also highlighted one of the play's themes. The carnal relations between the two great lovers of life, Mercutio and the Nurse, offset the purity of the relationship between Romeo and Juliet.

Throughout the play, the *mise-en-scène* provoked the actors to active physical action on the verge of physical theater. All scenes except for the relationship between the lyrical characters were based on active action and struggle. Romeo and his father (Ihor Zakharchuk) talked about love while exercising in the gym, and behind them, the witches rode the trainers like horses, invisible but ever-present, waiting for their victims. This feature of the space between the two worlds, where spirits or the dead were mixed with the living, was also seen in the second act. Romeo, as if in a suicide note, apologized to his father, Paris (Andrii Melnyk), Tybalt, and Mercutio for taking his own life, or theirs, or their love. At the moment of Juliet's death, when the Capulets found her dead, the vengeful Mercutio danced with her body behind the cage, as if the regiment of the dead had arrived.

Romeo and Juliet. Drame per musica, which was staged for the first time in 2021, in the seventh year of Russia's recent campaign of aggression towards Ukraine, ended with Lawrence's verdict, "Everyone is guilty," after which Capulet and Montague reconciled in front of the coffin with the dead children, saying, "They are both victims of our war." The theme of war and the peace that should prevail after the sacrifice of these youths sounded the final chord of the production with Lawrence's words: "And in the end, peace."

