



“Romeo and Juliet” at Chashama

June 15, 2012, Contributed by Robin Elisabeth Kilmer

Modern renditions of *Romeo and Juliet* aren't rare, but remakes set in a taxi garage are. Such a setting puts Empirical Rogue Theatre Company's rendition in the same borough as the *West Side Story* and Baz Luhrmann's movie version of the Bard's most popular play. There are glaring differences, however, that place it in a neighborhood of its own.

This *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Tim Eliot, uses a cast of only four actors. That each actor plays several roles is meant to reflect our own multifaceted identities and relationships. It was especially interesting to see Jacob Martin, who plays Romeo, rise to the challenge of holding Susannah Hoffman as Juliet in a lovers' embrace in one



scene and later give her a mother's caring hug as Lady Capulet. Sarah Baskin as both the indomitable Nurse and Paris effectively demonstrates feminine tenderness and sternness as well as masculine craving for Juliet. Susannah also appears as Mercutio and Prince Escalus, Sarah Baskin also plays Tybalt and Montague. Doug Chapman is the only actor who survives the play in his roles as Friar Lawrence, Capulet and Benvolio.

The one entity that did not have multiple identities was the garage. Rather than camouflaging it to look like Verona, the taxi garage ambience was embraced entirely. Like a fifth actor, its personality set the tone of the play.

Empirical Rogue Theatre Company is renting the taxi garage through Chashama, an organization that rents unutilized spaces to artists at a subsidized rate. The garage's office

is a small space the size of a suburban walk-in pantry adorned with two large glassless window frames. Perched atop a small flight of stairs, it makes the perfect balcony for Juliet.

It is also the ideal space for Tim's vision of Verona as a gritty town in which trade and land ownership are the biggest sources of wealth. Trade and land ownership were also ingredients in the concoction of modern New York City. The abandoned taxi garage with its exposed cinderblock walls, against a backdrop of new Long Island City condos, is a perfect microcosm of modern New York and the political climate of Renaissance Verona from whence the story of Romeo and Juliet originates.

To depict the beef between the Capulets and Montagues the cinderblock walls are splashed with the Capulets and Montagues distinctive graffiti tag. An entire wall of the garage is painted with a mural of Verona that has been intentionally distressed to reflect urban decay. The scaffolding used in the process was left abutting the wall. The scaffolding blends well into the set and into the story: it seems natural in a garage, and Romeo obviously needs something to climb on for balcony scenes. Lights were purchased directly from a hardware store and nothing resembling anything that might have originated on Broadway was used. Other garage type elements were conjured from the space to use as props. Wooden palettes are used as the lovers' deathbed, milk crates are used as seats, and though it never enters the garage, a revved up truck also makes an appearance as Romeo, Mercutio and Benvolio crash the Capulet's ball (which in this version resembles a block party).

The gesture is an homage to the taxi garage as well as a great deal of fun. In their efforts, the Empirical Rogue Theatre Company makes using a gritty, abandoned space look not like a challenge, but a game, and this game of four players is definitely worth seeing.

Advance tickets: \$15

General Admission \$18

Buy tickets at: <http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/233663>

Chashama

26-15 Jackson Avenue

<http://culturalcapitol.com/2012/06/15/6865/>