

Walton Assesses R & J As Qualified Success

HEAR

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The DGDS production of ROMEO AND JULIET played three nights and two matinees last week to a more or less captivated audience. It represented a tremendous amount of work for a large number of students and several able members of the faculty. It also represented faith in the proposition that Dalhousie drama has for long enough fed its patrons with an unrelieved diet of innocuous musical comedy. It is now clear that the university is extremely fortunate in having such a large number of energetic and courageous people, especially the enterprising Dr. Ripley. It certainly requires courage to attempt such an ambitious project, and it is amazing that the play succeeded to the extent that it did.

Nevertheless, nobody's interests are served by unqualified praise, especially where it is undeserved. And the DGDS ROMEO AND JULIET deserves a few spitballs.

SONG AND DANCE

One of the most impressive aspects of the production was its spectacle. Dr. Crouse and his musicians provided delightful Elizabethan music for the play, and it is to be hoped that we have the opportunity to hear much more of it in the future. Their contribution, however, went shamefully unacknowledged in the program notes. Miss Vallance's costume designs, particularly those of Tybalt and Paris' wedding costume, were beautiful and appropriate. A bit more could have been done with colour, however. The dancing, choreographed by Mrs. Dickson, "made" the masquerade scene. It was, perhaps, a little too wooden, and there was far too little of it.

In almost all the characterizations, there seemed to be a tension between the natural inclinations of the actor and some hypothetical notion as to what his character should be. This tension (if such it was) was particularly destructive in the lead roles. Both Romeo and Juliet were at their best when they seemed to be most natural, but they were not so very often. Romeo was most convincing when in the company of Mercutio and Benvolio, where the emotional intensity was generally at a lower pitch than in, say, the love scenes. Juliet, too, was at her best in the scenes with the Nurse and Lady Capulet. There

was one point, I remember, when talking to the Nurse after Tybalt's death, that she suddenly dropped the breathless hysterics which she sustained throughout most of the play, for a lifelike equanimity which suited the role, at that point, much better.

RESOURCEFUL NURSE

The most impressive secondary role, of course, was Flora Montgomery's Nurse. Miss Montgomery has had professional experience, although this was her first Shakespearean role. The audience unanimously registered their delight at the Saturday performance, when, in the worst scene of the play (and of this production), the curtain over Juliet's bed refused to part, and Miss Montgomery quipped "Sirrah, some help; this curtain doth defy me!" If anything, Miss Montgomery's brilliance was a slight detraction from the play as a whole because it threw the Nurse into greater prominence than Shakespeare really gave her.

This peculiar situation was also apparent in Paul Biscop's lively interpretation of Capulet; most of the actors could have profited by studying his spontaneity and clean diction, and yet in this particular role, it gave Capulet almost too much energy for an aging man. Biscop of the amateur actors, turned in one of the most impressive performances of the play.

He shares this distinction with Ewan Clark, who played Tybalt, although some other actors, including James Richards as Benvolio and Marguerita Mendel as Lady Capulet, were almost as good. What impressed me about Tybalt was the way his personality commanded the stage whenever he appeared: he succeeded in conveying his rashness and

EXHUBERANCE

hot temper, if not the affectedness of which Mercutio accuses him; he was a convincing "King of Cats".

Several of the actors in minor parts displayed abilities which showed they were qualified for more important ones; this is particularly true of John Chatterton and Thomas Dunphy who covered a lot of ground in this play; they filled three and two roles respectively, and they filled them well.

ACTORS

Of the other roles, most suf-



ferred from poor diction, over-acting, or both. Michael Lushington's Mercutio was creditable, but marred by a tendency to slur his lines. This fault, which was also evident in the lead roles, may have been due in part to the acoustic properties of the stage or the gymnasium. In particular, Mr. Lushington was unfortunate in that his sibilants tended to be blocked out by the shuffling of the actors' slippers over the rough plywood surface of the stage. This was particularly evident in his Queen Mab speech and his "conjuring" of Romeo outside the Capulets' garden. He should be commended, however, for his appropriately exuberant handling of the role.

The flaw of over-acting was most obvious in David Troyer's portrayal of Friar Lawrence. This character's high pitch of emotional intensity was inappropriately melodramatic, especially when combined with Romeo's excessive blubbing on the floor of the Friar's cell and the forced emotions of Juliet. I suspect that these three actors were not handling their roles in a way which was natural to them; it seems unlikely that an actor would choose to feign-and sustain - an overwrought manner unless constrained to do so by some misdirected preconception equating bombast and histrionics with good acting. Whatever the reason for them, I feel that these excesses tended to shift the delicate balance of the play away from tragedy toward pathos. ROMEO AND JULIET is one of Shakespeare's early plays, and its faults make it particularly vulnerable to being presented as melodrama. Juliet's death scene in Act IV, for example, detracts from the play as a whole and was badly melodramatized in this produc-

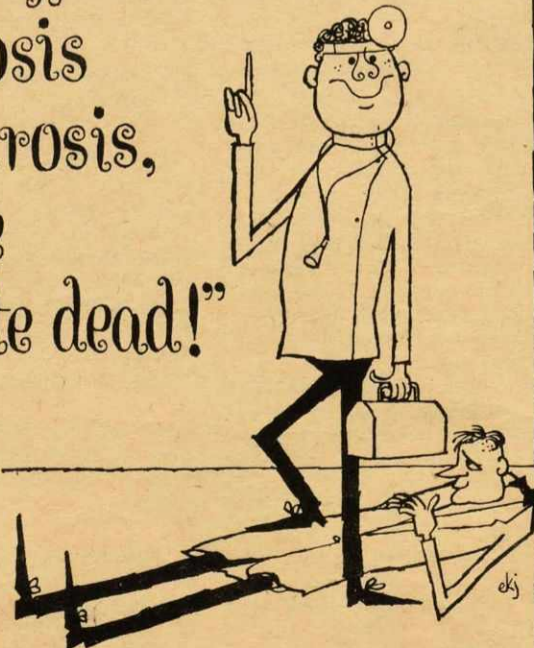
tion. I noticed that Peter Ripley's Paris, for example, for the most part foppishly convincing, was at a complete loss in this scene. The "keening" or dirge in the background only made an unfortunate situation worse.

A BOTCHED JOB

In conclusion, some comment should be made about staging and lighting. The lighting, which was brilliant in some places, was absurd in others; at one point in the balcony scene, for example, Juliet, bathed in the glare of spotlamps, says, "Thou knowest the mask of night is on my face..." There was also far too much light in the tomb scene. The staging, which seemed to have been carefully worked out, misfired, I think, in the dancing scene at the point where Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time. The dancing has been going on for some time, and the script indicates that it should continue during the lovers' conversation, since the 'Maskers', or dancers, do not leave until ten or so lines later. Furthermore, although line 130 of this scene implies that Romeo has not been dancing, surely the highly formal exchange of balanced verses between Romeo and Juliet calls for a corresponding sequence of dance-like, stylized movement between them, with the other dancers as a "backdrop". This production bungled the whole business by clearing off the dancers before the exchange begins, and then conducting it like a Loretta Young love scene.

Dr. Ripley and the DGDS deserve our appreciation for a very entertaining evening. The obvious enthusiasm of the entire cast indicates that a significant temper has been stirred up in the Dalhousie cultural teapot.

A brilliant Med. student once said,
"If a person cuts off his own head,
I'm sure diagnosis
Points to a neurosis,
But, I'm positive
he'd be quite dead!"



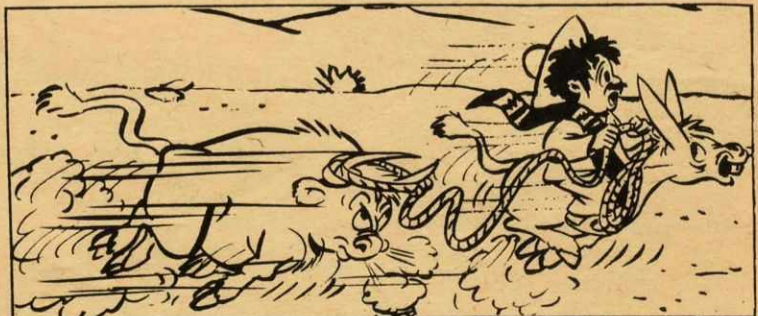
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