

Skylight's *Count* competes for audience with *Romeo and Juliet* in summer park performances

by ALEX PATTERSON

Toronto's two outdoor theatres are at it again this summer, vying for the attentions of the same public and those ever-scarcer arts grants. Impoverished drama fans can take in free performances of *The Count of Monte Cristo* until July 28, and *Romeo and Juliet* until August 11.

"The Drama In High Park" is what the Toronto Free Theatre is calling their production of *Romeo and Juliet*. The name has stuck from their previous years' presentations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but is appropriate for the love tragedy too as it contains much dream imagery.

The less-publicized *Count* is by the Skylight Theatre, in Earl Bales Park at Bathurst and Sheppard, and is known as "the other play, in that other park." The Drama In High Park has been drawing huge crowds as per usual, while at Earl Bales you can arrive fifteen minutes before the 8:30 "curtain" and still pull up a square foot with a good view.

The Count of Monte Cristo, from Alexander Dumas' Romantic novel, is a classic tale of injustice and revenge. Edmond Dantes, a decent young chap, about to be married, about to be promoted from firstmate to captain of his ship, is framed by men jealous of his favoured positions, and hauled off to prison. Wasting away for fourteen years in the dungeon, at the hospitality of the State, Dantes befriends an Italian priest who makes him his heir to a great fortune on the island of Monte Cristo. When the priest dies, Dantes escapes from the Chateau d'If by hiding in his body-bag. He collects the loot, becomes the Count, and sets out to wreak havoc on his old enemies. After enough plot twists for two plays—some of them ingenious, some incredible—and some mind-boggling coincidences and A Strange Series of Events, he rights his wrongs. But, he can't win back the woman he loves because his lust for vengeance has hardened his heart. This conclusion satisfies the nineteenth century Catholic's twin de-

sires to (1) see justice done, and (2) punish the hero for taking into his own hands what should have been God's job.

As Dantes, Kimble Hall is a bit and uncomfortable in the first act, but, like the production itself, loosens up and improves in the second. Don MacQuarrie lurches and bellows in the roles of the shipowner Morrel and the imprisoned Father Faria. Victor A. Young brings out the arrogant selfishness and malice in Fernand, but wisely stops short of twirling his moustache. Cynthia Dale is radiantly beautiful as Dantes' beloved Mercedes, and she is possessed of a fine singing voice. Unfortunately, in this story and many others from the period, the hero's girl isn't given much to do...except, of course, wait around for her man to complete his exploits and return to her. The songs that she and the rest of the cast are given to sing are nothing special, pleasant but innocuous, and instantly forgettable.

The lighting and the sound have been thought out sensibly and deliver the goods under what must have been very trying circumstances. This spot does not lend itself to plays



quite as handily as the natural amphitheatre found in High Park, but every member of the audience could hear every word, which is more than can be said for *Romeo and Juliet*. The Skylight people also have made maximum use of the small forest onto which their set backs: directors Lewis Baumander and Patrick Christopher send their wards scurrying in and out of the trees on the edge of the playing field in a way which opens up the stage, theoretically, into infinity. This makes use of the presence of the outdoors in a surprising and pleasing manner. Doing a play outside is not

the same as doing it inside, and the directors have acknowledged this fact and worked it to the show's advantage.

What they haven't acknowledged, however, is that times have changed since Dumas was around, and the modern audience is jaded and cynical about stories like these. *The Count* is still fairly diverting stuff, because it is a clever yarn, but to play it perfectly straightfaced in the 1980s is to risk seeming archaic. In an age when everybody from Hanna-Barbera cartoonists to the Monty Python gang has had a go at the classic novels and legends, it is impossible to take them entirely seriously anymore.

Luckily for the High Park thespians, the Bard is immortal and problems of relevance do not have to be overcome. Overall, their *Romeo and Juliet* is the better bet this summer for those who like greenery with their scenery. The natural setting was a natural choice for an earthy comedy like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but the Montagues and the Capulets are more uptown, so Jim Plaxton has provided an abundant set. It comes complete with a sliding balcony which can be moved to the left or the right as the situation demands.

It is on this balcony that is played out an innovative approach to the "balcony scene." It is amazing to find how funny this scene can be,

since usually it is milked for its tenderness and romance. When Juliet is trying to conduct her illicit rendezvous with Romeo below, she is being beckoned by her relatives inside the house; customarily, these are suspenseful moments, because of the risk of their being caught. Here it is played for laughs, and gets them, as Juliet confidently stalls her parents and goes right on talking. The humour works thanks to Kate Trotter's unconventional portrayal of the heroine. This Juliet is refreshingly gutsy rather than wistful, and any lovesick mooning is left to Romeo.

Lovesick mooning is precisely what Paul Gross' Romeo does too much of, at least in one regrettable scene which mars an otherwise solid performance. When Romeo first goes to Friar Laurence, someone has encouraged Gross to reel around like a drunkard and run directly into a tree, as a depiction of amorous joy subtle enough for Saturday morning TV. It is understood that the audience needs comic relief, but they don't need it this badly. As the Friar, Errol Slue barks his lines with such passionate intensity that most of them can't be understood. In later scenes, this is less of a problem (or perhaps our ears just need time to adjust to his accent and phrasing) but in their first scene together it is a meeting of the unintelligible and the unintelligent.

David Ferry's Mercutio displays excellent comic sense, combining manic delivery with clear enunciation. Maurice E. Evans as Capulet seethes with rage as he instils the fear of the Father into daughter Juliet. His is easily the most "Shakespearean" performance of the night. The supporting players, the ladies and gentlemen of Verona, are strong, and are moved about the stage with aplomb by director Guy Sprung. Their entrances and exunts are briskly handled and help to keep the pace from lagging.

Sprung also has managed to coach the actors' voices to deliver blank verse that is faithful to Shakespeare and, at the same time, is accessible by the late-twentieth century ear. This is a challenge even at the Stratford festival, but moreso here, where much of the audience do not regularly attend plays, Elizabethan or otherwise. It is unfortunate that what renders some of the language incomprehensible is not any fault of the company's, but that of the sound system. The P.A. system is located in a tree above centre stage, but the sound can't be made to carry to the back rows without deafening those up front. The trouble is not any lack of volume, but with the evenness of its dispersion. Two additional speakers, one at either side of the stage might solve this, but the Parks people are notoriously particular about this sort thing, and there is also the perpetual paucity of funds to consider.

As difficult as these obstacles may be to overcome, they are nothing compared with trying to keep the crowd quiet. Many are in the habit of talking to their neighbours in their usual speaking voices during the performance. There are also those who bring restless young children. The actors have enough to contend with in the form of jets passing over head and bleating sheep and goats waiting in the wings, without competing with people who display poor etiquette.



AGONY OF INNOCENCE: Dantes (Kimble Hall) gets hauled off to prison.

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