

**From a Crypt, New Life**

Mark S.P. Turvin

[goldfishpublishers.com](http://goldfishpublishers.com)

[mspt@goldfishpublishers.com](mailto:mspt@goldfishpublishers.com)

***Romeo and Juliet***

by William Shakespeare

Directed by **Katherine Stewart**

**Desert Rose Theater, Mesa**

**(480) 329-2460**

**February 10<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup>, 2005**

**\$10.00 - \$12.00**

Save for under very rare circumstances, I forgo reviewing the premier production of a new theatre company. However, **Desert Rose Theatre**, a new classical company with an impressive list of future productions, specifically invited me alone to critique their *Romeo and Juliet*. As I drove through Friday's torrential rain to Mesa, the irony was not lost on me; my last time at this space was a return visit to see the *final* production of The Ensemble Theatre's version of the same show after having been unable to review it the night before because the torrential rain that was pouring down onto the stage and audience through the theater space's leaky roof. This time there were fewer leaks in both the roof and Desert Roses' production. This is not to say that Desert Rose's offering is completely ready for public consumption, but certain surprising elements and moments transcend this generally uneven mounting.

Artistic Director **Katherine Stewart** has been planning this company for two seasons, and this premier is held together more by her determination and a few of the actors' talent than on uniform professionalism. Stewart is a gifted actress, and

here proves herself an adept director as well, with a few flourishes in big scenes like the party and balcony that show a ready understanding of her text and space. A few of her cast of fifteen stand out, several are tentative, and a couple are little more than warm bodies. True to a first time effort, a few last minute cast changes are painfully apparent, especially Stewart's stepping in to become Sister Lawrence after losing a cast member a week before. However, even when she's reading from a book, she is able to connect strongly with her cast members. Fortunately, her strongest actors are in important roles, so that her production rests heavily on shoulders that are mostly able to bear it.

When your two best actors are filling the roles of Romeo (**Scott Brooks**) and Juliet (**Christina Rae Stewart**), hope springs eternal. Brooks is a handsome, magnetic Montague, and while he has a tendency in some sections to rush his line delivery, he is still at home in his role, especially when working with the junior Stewart. The connection between them is visceral. For her part, Stewart is one of the best Juliets I have seen in the valley. She follows the character arc religiously, moving her charge from innocence to experience gracefully. When the couple woo each other on the balcony, it is full of such giddiness and unbridled youthful hope that it establishes itself as the best offering I've witnessed of this moment since seeing it produced at the Delacourt Theatre in New York's Central Park over 20 years ago. Throw in the transgendered but straight-faced offering of **Jere Van Patten** as the Nurse, and you have many scenes that are a delight to watch. Van Patten's presentation is jovial and broad, and he trips sprightly over the double entendres that his masculinity presents.

From here, the performances become spotty. Most everyone else rushes their dialogue with seemingly little realization of what they're saying. **Chris Burk's**

Benvolio is an over-the-top affair which delights in scenery chewing that is at turns effective and embarrassing. His Queen Mab speech is a 200-decibel screamfest but his drunken garden scene with **Shawn Walker's** Mercutio is very funny. Walker's is a more modulated, if solemn performance. **Carson Saline's** Paris is an effeminate County with a gentle demeanor. **Robert Stewart's** Tybalt is a straightforward offering with no surprises. **Matthew Hyde's** Lord Capulet is a subtler creation who takes hold during his confrontation scene with Juliet. One or two of the performances, such as **Hal Key's** stiff Prince, are unmeasured.

The most impressive technical element of the evening is the costuming, attributed to Saline and **Far West Theatre**, which sets the piece somewhere in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The lighting in the small space does not allow for much creativity, but they are able to do a certain amount of mood setting. The uncredited set makes the balcony a major part of the visual elements.

On the strength of the three leads, this is a flawed production with magical moments. In general, this is a cast that is greatly willing if not quite ready or able. With a coming season that includes such rarely seen classics as Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* and Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion*, there's hope that as the theatre polishes their product and caulks their ceiling, they could become a good mid-tier company.