

Society : SPT
Production : Love Me Tender
Date : 26th June
Venue : SPT
District : 14

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[Show Report](#)

Overview

There is something wonderfully refreshing about youth theatre. It isn't about perfection. It isn't about polished West End performances. It's about giving young people the opportunity to discover confidence, creativity and a love of performing, often for the very first time. *Love Me Tender* by Alison Chaplin provides exactly that opportunity.

A modern soap-opera-inspired retelling of the first half of *Romeo and Juliet*, complete with cliff-hanger ending, the script cleverly introduces younger performers to Shakespeare's characters and themes in a format that feels accessible, engaging and fun. At just 35 minutes in length, it is an ideal vehicle for a junior company, offering a large number of performers the chance to shine while tackling surprisingly mature storytelling.

I was delighted to receive such a warm welcome from the Front of House team at Shinfield Players Theatre, who are always incredibly friendly and welcoming. It was also lovely to reflect on the recent NODA Celebration Day and hear how much many of the members had enjoyed the event.

This production was presented using two casts, which I assume was designed to maximise performance opportunities for the young people involved. That is something I would particularly like to applaud. Youth theatre should be about participation and development, and providing so many children with the chance to perform on stage is something the society should be proud of. On this occasion, I reviewed Cast A.

Overall, what impressed me most was the enthusiasm, commitment and enjoyment visible throughout the performance. Every young performer clearly wanted to be there and threw themselves wholeheartedly into the story. There are, naturally, areas that can continue to develop as these young actors gain more experience. Projection was the biggest challenge throughout the performance, particularly during scenes accompanied by music, where dialogue was often difficult to hear. This is something that will undoubtedly improve with time, confidence and practice. A workshop focused specifically on projection and vocal technique could be hugely beneficial and would help these talented young performers communicate their work even more effectively to the audience.

The pacing occasionally felt a little rushed, which is entirely understandable given the ages of the cast and perhaps a touch of first-night excitement. Taking a little more time with key moments and allowing important lines to breathe would help the storytelling land even more successfully. These observations are very much developmental points rather than criticisms and should be viewed as opportunities for growth because the foundations already in place are extremely strong.

Most importantly, the cast looked like they were having fun. You simply cannot teach that. Their energy, enthusiasm and obvious enjoyment shone through from beginning to end.

Performances

Jess Chishick as Benvolio

Jess tackled the challenge of playing Benvolio with confidence and maturity. Taking on a male role at such a young age is no small task, but she handled it very well and demonstrated a clear understanding of the character's place within the story. She consistently faced the audience, helping her performance connect well with those watching. At times her delivery became a little fast, but as confidence grows, slowing slightly and allowing key moments to land will make an already strong performance even stronger.

Bronte Hoskins and Aarna Das as the Capulet Servants

Bronte and Aarna both delivered their roles with enthusiasm and commitment. Their dialogue was clear and they contributed positively to the energy of the opening scenes. As with many members of the cast, developing stronger projection will help ensure every line reaches all corners of the auditorium, but both performers showed plenty of promise and confidence on stage.

Isla Nicholson as County Paris

Isla brought excellent authority and confidence to the role of County Paris. She projected clearly throughout and held the stage well whenever she appeared. I particularly enjoyed her scenes with Lord Capulet, where she convincingly portrayed Paris's determination to pursue Juliet's hand in marriage. Her strong projection and stage presence ensured the character made a lasting impression despite limited stage time.

Ben Chard as Friar Lawrence

Ben gave a lovely performance as Friar Lawrence, capturing both the warmth and wisdom of the character. He clearly understood the role and delivered it with sincerity throughout. His emotional reaction during the wedding scene raised a genuine laugh from the audience and showed excellent awareness of comic timing.

Penny Langford Leask as Juliet

Penny should be extremely proud of her performance. Juliet is a demanding role, particularly for such a young performer, requiring emotional depth and sincerity throughout. Penny approached the character with confidence and demonstrated a real understanding of Juliet's frustrations, hopes and emotions. She delivered several moments with genuine feeling and brought maturity beyond her years to the role.

Georgie Langford Leask as Lady Capulet

For such a small performer, Georgie brought tremendous presence and authority to the stage. Lady Capulet's dialogue can be challenging, but Georgie handled it confidently and delivered her lines with conviction. I particularly enjoyed the moment where she dramatically knocked over the chair during one of her scenes. It was delivered with real commitment and perfectly captured Lady Capulet's fiery temperament. For such a young performer, she demonstrated impressive confidence and stage presence throughout.

Arnav Das as Lord Capulet

Arnav demonstrated some of the strongest projection of the evening. His delivery was measured, clear and thoughtful, and he gave the impression of genuinely understanding both the character and the story being told. His scenes opposite Prince Escalus were particularly effective and showed a performer who was fully engaged with the material.

Becky Chishick as Mercutio

Mercutio's playful and mischievous nature came across very well in Becky's performance. She captured the character's humour and charm and brought plenty of energy to her scenes. Occasionally some lines became slightly mumbled, but this is something that will naturally improve with experience and stronger vocal confidence. The foundations of a very engaging performance were certainly present.

Coral Chaubey and Evie Batt as the Montague Servants

Coral and Evie both contributed positively to the production and worked well together as part of the wider ensemble. They remained engaged throughout their scenes and helped maintain the pace and energy of the story. Their enthusiasm and commitment were evident whenever they appeared on stage.

Lola Nokes as Nurse

Lola did an absolutely cracking job as Nurse. She brought warmth, humour and a wonderfully endearing quality to the role that made her instantly likeable. Her interactions with Lady Capulet were particularly enjoyable and she handled the comic elements of the character very well. This was a confident and memorable performance.

Jonah Ockwell as Peter

Jonah approached the role with enthusiasm and commitment. He contributed well to the overall storytelling and remained engaged throughout his scenes. As he continues to develop his performance skills and stage confidence, there is plenty of potential to build upon.

Joey Robinson as Prince Escalus

As the voice of authority within the story, Prince Escalus needs to command attention whenever he appears, and Joey did this well. He delivered his lines clearly and brought a measured confidence to the role. I particularly enjoyed his exchanges with Lord Capulet, which helped reinforce the conflict and tensions between the rival families.

Jess Shuttleworth as Romeo

Jess should be hugely proud of her performance as Romeo. She remained in character throughout and demonstrated excellent commitment to the role from beginning to end. Playing a character driven by love and emotion can be difficult at any age, but Jess delivered her dialogue with confidence and sincerity. There were several moments where she truly captured Romeo's passion and vulnerability.

Hazel Dalchow as Rosaline

Hazel gave a spirited and enjoyable performance as Rosaline. She brought real conviction to her scenes and delivered her rejection of Romeo with excellent determination and energy. It was a brief role but one that Hazel made memorable through her confident characterisation.

Jayna Fraser as Tybalt

Jayna impressed with her strong projection and clear understanding of Tybalt's fiery personality. She brought energy, determination and focus to every scene she appeared in. Her performance demonstrated confidence and a good grasp of the character's motivations, helping to drive much of the conflict within the story.

The Montagues and Capulets Ensemble

The wider ensemble **Aarna Das, Alex Chishick, Alex Smith, Coral Chaubey, Darcey Nash-Wortham, Evie Millar, Hazel Dalchow, Jonah Ockwell, Lola Nokes, Luna Slone, Tom Watson**. deserves recognition for the enthusiasm and energy they brought to the production. Every performer appeared genuinely invested in the story and clearly enjoyed being part of the show. As they continue to gain experience, remembering to stay fully in character at all times, even when not speaking, will add another layer of polish to future performances.

Creative Team

Karen Bird, together with **Lara and Sam**, should be congratulated for bringing together a large cast of young performers and ensuring every child had the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the production. Managing a youth cast of this size is no easy task, yet the staging consistently allowed individual performers opportunities to shine. Entrances and exits were particularly well organised, and the overall blocking demonstrated careful planning and consideration.

The stage combat sequences were especially enjoyable. The opening confrontation between the Montagues and Capulets was well staged and showed excellent attention to detail. The later fight scenes also added excitement and energy to the performance. One particular "fatal" wound perhaps landed a little further from the heart than intended, but it certainly raised a smile and reminded us all of the joy that comes with live theatre.

Matthew Chishick was responsible for sound, lighting and projection. The projection elements worked well and helped establish the modern soap-opera feel of the piece. Lighting was used effectively to support moments of tension and drama. The main area for future consideration would be balancing music levels against dialogue. During some scenes the music occasionally overwhelmed performers who were already battling projection challenges. Lowering music levels slightly or exploring suitable amplification options would help ensure every line is heard clearly.

Pete Ashton provided a simple but effective set design that allowed the story and performers to remain the focus. Sometimes less really is more, particularly in youth theatre, and the set supported the action without becoming distracting.

The costume team **Cate Naylor, Debbie Wheeler** made an excellent decision to keep the wardrobe simple and effective. The use of blues and reds to distinguish the two rival households was visually clear and instantly understandable for the audience. It created a cohesive look without becoming overcomplicated or overwhelming the young performers.

Rachel Lockwood, Barbara Richards, Heidi Ashton and Pete Ashton, along with the wider Front of House team, all contributed enormously to creating a welcoming and supportive environment. The warm reception on arrival reflected the friendly atmosphere that Shinfield Players Theatre consistently provides.

Final Thoughts

Youth theatre exists to develop confidence, build friendships and inspire the next generation of performers, and this production achieved all three. Every young person involved should be incredibly proud of what they accomplished. The enthusiasm, commitment and joy on display throughout the performance were unmistakable.

With continued work on projection, vocal confidence and pacing, this already talented group will continue to grow and flourish. Most importantly, they clearly love what they do, and that passion was evident throughout the evening.

Well done to everyone involved. You should all be very proud of yourselves.

Charlotte Gouldsmith Leigh NODA Representative London Region District 14

I had the pleasure of being invited to review the Cast B performance of *Love Me Tender* on the evening of Saturday 27th June.

Performing two shows in one day, while also swapping roles, is no easy task, even for experienced performers. These young people should therefore be warmly applauded for embracing that challenge with such enthusiasm and commitment.

Cast B Overview

The production moved at a tremendous pace, with entrances and exits handled confidently and efficiently. At times, some of the dialogue felt a little rushed and would have benefited from the occasional pause to allow key lines and moments to land more fully with the audience. A few performers were also a little quiet in places; however, having seen Cast A on the Friday evening, I was pleased to notice a definite improvement in projection and confidence across the company. That progress was lovely to see and is a credit to both the cast and the production team.

Tom Watson as Benvolio

Tom gave a promising performance as Benvolio, showing good pace in his delivery and a clear understanding of the character. He interacted very well with Romeo and Mercutio and helped support the relationships within that group of friends. At times, Tom looked a little awkward and had a tendency to rock on his feet, which is often simply a sign of nerves and will no doubt ease as his confidence grows. Interestingly, it did also work quite naturally for Benvolio's slightly uncertain position within the story. This was a good, thoughtful performance with plenty to build on.

Darcey Nash-Wortham as County Paris

Darcey began the role very well, with clear diction and a strong sense of character. She became a little flustered when she needed a few prompts, which is always difficult for any performer, regardless of experience. What mattered most was how well she recovered. Darcey regained her composure and produced a strong finish to the scene, which showed real determination and resilience. Understandably, her lines became a little rushed and her volume dropped slightly, but with greater

security in the dialogue these points will naturally improve. Her characterisation was spot on, and the audience clearly understood Paris's scheming determination to win Juliet's attention.

Evie Miller as Juliet

Juliet is a demanding role, but Evie approached it with confidence and assurance throughout her scenes. She spoke clearly and audibly, with good emphasis and a strong sense of purpose. Her scenes with Lady Capulet worked particularly well, especially as she stood up for herself and made clear why she did not wish to marry Paris. Her interactions with Romeo were believable and natural, and she brought warmth and sincerity to the relationship. This was a confident and engaging performance.

Alex Chishick as Mercutio

Alex began a little hesitantly, but as his confidence grew so did his performance. He delivered a lovely cheeky exchange with Nurse and found the humour in Mercutio very well. His confrontation with Tybalt was also effective and helped bring energy to the developing conflict. At moments Alex rocked on his feet, which again appeared to be nerves, so grounding himself physically and relaxing into the role will help future performances. Mercutio is a difficult part to play, but Alex showed a good instinct for the character's mischief and comic timing.

Luna Slone as Romeo

Luna's Romeo was a boisterous and confident young lad, and she handled the male role very well. Her interactions with Romeo's friends and with Juliet were thoughtful and showed good insight into the character. Some lines were a little rushed, perhaps due to performance nerves, but this will settle with confidence and experience. Luna moved around the stage very naturally and looked comfortable in the space, while the fight scenes appeared well rehearsed and confidently handled. Overall, this was a very pleasing performance.

Alex Smith as Tybalt

Alex entered his scenes with real purpose and looked every inch the menacing Tybalt. His fight sequences with Mercutio and Romeo were well rehearsed and added strong dramatic energy to the production. His lines were delivered confidently, though at times they were a little rushed. Taking a little more time would allow the words to come through even more clearly and give the character's threat greater weight. This was a nicely performed character role with strong presence and commitment.

Overall Impressions

Presenting two casts is a significant challenge, as it inevitably reduces rehearsal time for individual roles, but there was no sense of that in the performance I watched. The company worked well together and there were some standout contributions throughout. Ben Chard once again showed superb comic timing as Friar Lawrence, while Lola Nokes gave a warmly portrayed and very enjoyable performance as Nurse. Arnav Das offered a mature and composed Lord Capulet, and Joey Robinson brought just the right level of authority to Prince Escalus, including a particularly impressive entrance. Most importantly, the whole cast looked as though they were enjoying themselves, and that sense of enjoyment was infectious. This production gave many young performers the opportunity to appear on stage, develop confidence and contribute to a shared piece of storytelling. The directors, creative team and all involved should be very proud of what they achieved. It was a friendly, energetic and heartening youth production, full of promise, enthusiasm and genuine theatrical spirit.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gordon Bird'.

Gordon Bird
NODA Youth Representative - London Region