

Jason Sample-March, Craig Lamm, Sam Greenspan and Warren Kluber portray the Montagues and Capulets fighting in the streets of Verona



GRETCHYN DREW

Explosive Shakespeare

Bare set, big emotion in the Leebrick's *R & J*

Four teenage boys possess a battered copy of a play. Ooh, sounds dangerous, right?

Oh yeah, *riiiight*. Especially if the play's that standard of sophomore year English, that whiny teenage lament, *Romeo and Juliet*. But the boys, confined to an orderly, even regimented world in a Catholic boarding school, find that a rudimentary acting of the play brings into question love, honor, loyalty and attraction.

Or so four young actors show in the Lord Leebrick's summer-extra production of the play *Shakespeare's R+J* by American playwright Joe Calarco. That is to say, it's by Calarco the way that last June's *Or Not to Be* was by UO theater prof John Schmor: A reimagining of Shakespeare's tale, reworked, with other Shakespearean bits added.

Leebrick Artistic Director Craig Willis, who chose to produce and direct Calarco's

"They're eager to explore ideas, and they're full of ideas themselves." He notes that with actors as with anyone else, "as we get older, we become more conservative in the things we're willing to attempt, but these guys are young enough that they haven't placed limits on themselves yet."

And they need to experiment and explore, since each of them has various parts to play and only a few props with which to create action. How did the boys pick up *Romeo and Juliet*? Some analyses of the play suggest that they found a hidden copy or that perhaps Shakespeare is forbidden in their school. Willis won't be so definite: "It's theirs, but we don't know how they got it." He says that even if *Romeo and Juliet* had been taught in the school, conservative religious dogma might have meant that it was taught as a morality tale — two teenagers disobey

Four boys in a boarding school find a copy of *Romeo & Juliet* - and learn, by acting it out, how to be men.

play after seeing a number of strong young male actors audition for *Or Not to Be*, explains that there's a lot of complexity to *R & J*. "It's a very conceptual play," Willis says, and one that gives him as director and his four cast members a lot of room to decide on interpretations. After all, the boys never speak their own minds; they decline Latin verbs, read from textbooks and perform *Romeo & Juliet*, but their self-awareness must come from the actors and the director.

Three of the actors had to adjust to the replacement of one of their group when UO student Jared McLean fell ill with mono a week into rehearsals. Willis says that he gave them a choice, and they decided to push on with Sam Greenspan taking over McLean's role, which includes playing the complex Mercutio. The theater moved back opening night by a week to allow more rehearsal time, and the play runs for two weekends beginning with an inexpensive preview night on Thursday, Aug. 7.

Willis says working with a young cast, which includes Warren Kluber, a recent South Eugene High School grad who played a significant role in 2007's *Kimberly Akimbo*, provides some advantages.

their parents and have sex before marriage, and their punishment is death. For the boys to find in it something tender and thoughtful, something beyond the rigid confines of sin and punishment, means a success.

A 1998 *New York Times* review of the play suggested that the boys might all be gay, but Willis says that while emerging sexuality absolutely works as a theme, the play isn't about whether the two playing Romeo and Juliet are attracted to each other.

At least one production of *R+J* has used an all-female cast, which might be a good balance at some point to the intensity of young guys learning about life and love with this cast.

"You do start to see that gender doesn't matter," Willis muses, "and it does make me wish I could see what Shakespeare really was like in the Elizabethan theater, with an all-male cast."

Without the time machine necessary for visiting the Globe Theatre of 1611, Eugene theater fans might opt for the modern interpretation at the Leebrick. More than a rehash of the play, it's a reinterpretation that highlights new themes in a new time. **EW**

Shakespeare's R+J opens Friday, Aug. 8, and runs through Aug. 17. Tix at www.lordleebrick.com or 465-1506.

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