

Features

Takoma Theatre Arts Project: expect the unexpected

BY LESLIE SAPP

Amid the pre-show chatter in the auditorium of the Historic Takoma Theatre on Sunday, November 2, nobody but me seemed to notice the two young men in the second row, having a rather heated argument. Suddenly one stood up and leaned toward the other menacingly. The other stood up, too, and shoved the first one out into the aisle, catching the attention of the woman in the seat behind me.

"For goodness' sake!" she exclaimed to her date. The two men started pushing each other around, and then, from who-knows-where, one of them pulled out a big stick and threatened the other man with it. The woman behind me gasped as the other man pulled out a stick, too, raising it above his head menacingly. "Oh, my God," she said to her date, "this is serious—Go find an usher, quick!"

Before her date was able to react, a young woman—presumably the girlfriend of one of the two young men—rushed over and tried to break up the fight. Then the other young man tried to push her out of the way, but then she pulled out a stick, and she and her boyfriend lunged towards the other man, and before we knew it, seven more people with sticks had joined in.

It was at that point that the woman behind me caught on. "Oh, come on," she said. "This is too ridiculous! It's gotta' be part of the show!"

Then the whole stick-wielding group bounded up onto the stage and launched into a stylized fight-dance, accompanied by a live drummer on a full drum kit, set up in the front left corner of the stage. And for the next 70 minutes, the drummer, a reed player, and the ten-member acting ensemble treated the crowd to a vibrant, playful, and deeply moving production of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's classic tragedy of neighbor against neighbor.

A co-creation of Bulgarian puppet-theater troupe Theatre Tsvete and New York-based circus-theatre company Bond Street Theatre, the show has virtually no text (aside from occasional isolated words) and an acutely minimal set (a few wooden scaffoldings, a table, some skillfully-draped fabric). Instead, this *Romeo and Juliet* is told through colorful, cartoonish costumes; an evocative, often jazzy original score; simple but effective lighting; and the myriad talents and skills of the ensemble, including slapstick, *Commedia Dell'Arte*, large-scale puppetry, juggling, combat choreography, shadow puppetry, black-lighted hand-dancing, pantomime, object animation, and stilt walking.

This unique marriage between the infectious whimsicality and impressive physical skills of Bond Street Theatre and the lyrical, magical, image-rich puppetry of Theatre Tsvete vividly portrays the situation of the youth in so many areas of the world today, where the choice between love and violence is a daily dilemma.

During the play's pivotal moment, we can almost taste Romeo's angst, as he witnesses the death of his best friend Mercutio (an impish and most endearing clown, as portrayed by Bond Street's Michael McGuigan) at the hand of Juliet's cousin Tybalt, and is then compelled, against his better judgment, to kill Tybalt in return. Through nothing but posture and movement, Bond Street's Robert Lok effectively conveys the magnitude of the moment after for Romeo, whence he has been changed forever.

Meanwhile, in the background we see Juliet (played by four different actors, according to who is needed for other aspects of the show). Wearing a bridal veil, she stands in the chapel before the Friar (Theatre Tsvete's Konstantin Kostov, on stilts, with giant wedding ring in hand) for a seeming eternity, awaiting the return of Romeo, her secretly betrothed and enemy of her entire family.

Eventually, after Juliet and Romeo's tragic suicides, Theatre Tsvete sparks a bright glimmer of hope and renewal, animating two silken puppet-figures, streaming and swirling under a black light to create a most poetic image of the souls of the lovers, floating out of their lifeless bodies and merging together above them.

The show was originally created for performance in refugee camps in Kosovo in 2000. It was then performed throughout Kosovo, Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia, and Serbia. Although most people in the audience had never even heard of Shakespeare, the show was a big hit in the Balkans, where conflict and death are well known to all. In the words of Arif Muharremi of Prishtina, Kosovo, "This Romeo and Juliet was an extraordinary human tragicomedy....It gave the audience a special message of love, peace, and tolerance between people."

Yet even here in Takoma Park, where few of us have had firsthand experience with violent death, the show was also a hit. As the lights came up after the final bow, the woman in the seat behind me stood up and stretched. "That was fun!" she said to her date. "And I don't even like Shakespeare."

If the Takoma Theatre Arts Project (TTAP) has any say in the matter, such vibrant, original theatre may come to be the norm in Takoma Park.

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For more information about **Bond Street Theatre's** performances, residencies and workshops in physical theatre, stiltwalking and circus arts, visit www.bondst.org or e-mail info@bondst.org.

For more information about **Theatre Tsvete** and their groundbreaking work using puppetry in conflict resolution, visit www.theatretsvete.100megsfree5.com or e-mail theatre_tsvete@abv.bg.