A Rose By Any Other Name

While Juliet’s rose may have smelled as sweet by any other name, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma’s recent production at the Philadelphia Live Arts festival, Romeo and Juliet, retains the name of the Bard’s classic but offers something completely different. This has led to some confusion. When an opening night in Paris attracted an audience expecting this New York based troupe’s take on the original, some unlucky theatre-goers left promptly – one imagines them in a buffet – without being rewarded with a single “Where art thou.” I call these stiltward crusaders for the canon unlucky because the strange new flower here in bloom, though not a rose, smells just as sweet.

This is not to say that it smells the same. In place of Shakespeare’s tragic tale of forbidden love, directors Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper give us a comic meditation on love, eroticism and memory in our age. The considerable and at times hysterical laughs derive both from the concept of the piece and from the appropriately hyperbolic acting of Anne Gridley, Robert Johanson, and Elisabeth Conner (as the dancing chicken). But one cannot classify this production strictly as Shakespearean parody, and the almost overwhelming funniness eventually yields to a tragic, newly-awakened, well-played love.

At the end, the production is decisively no longer a comedy, but it is not yet a tragedy. As it is revealed here, our age calls to mind Hölderlin’s assessment that “the tragic for us is that we are silently packed up in a container and taken away from the realm of the living, not that consumed by flames, we pay the penalty to the flames we could not tame.” Here the inartificial fire of forbidden love gives way to the disquieting quiet of the silent containers in which we pack ourselves up.

In the discussion following the production I attended, Copper recounted the way she and Liska developed the concept and the language of Romeo and Juliet. In the nascent stage, the idea was to develop the language of the piece – its closest proximity to a script – by recording telephone conversations with a set of favorite interlocutors. Those on the other end of the line were to respond to the simple question, “What is love?” So many of the respondents answered this deceptively simple question by referring to Shakespeare’s star-crossed lovers, however, that Liska and Copper decided to revise the guiding question. Now, the recorded conversations would capture people’s attempts to recall, to recount, to remember the original of which the resulting play would be only nominally a copy. And the result refers to the original according to the logic of the childhood game ‘telephone’: lapses in memory provide interpolations that reveal much more about us than logic of the childhood game ‘telephone’: lapses in memory provide interpolations that reveal much more about us than recall, to recount, to remember the original of which the resulting play would be only nominally a copy.

The tone shifts in what we might call the second act, as Gridley and Johanson join each other on stage for the first time in the performance. Whereas the primarily comedic first act takes place in monologue, the more dialectical second act becomes subdued and reflective as the characters talk about sex and love and, paradoxically, the narcissism of thespian ambition. Whereas the comedic monologues evinced a certain obsession with conflating love and sex, or with reducing the former to the latter, the argument advanced in dialogue attempts to separate the two; the actor can let sex be nothing more than what it is as long as she or he can count on being loved by the audience. The ambivalence and uncertainty with which Gridley and Johanson profess their desire to be loved by their audience, however, marks a wavering threshold between an explanation of artistic ambition and a justification of the loneliness its achievement entails. Because the fires of forbidden love do not consume us, we can pack ourselves up in the containers of our own projects and thereby take ourselves away from the realm of the living. The age revealed here is one that forbids almost nothing, in which the sky portends nothing and loves are not star-crossed but are merely stars, endlessly circling one another without really touching.

The uneasy disquiet of the second act yields, in a postscript, to meditative quiet as the lights are extinguished and Gridley and Johanson perform the canonical-to-the-point-of-elíché balcony scene. In the dark. The intentional over-pronunciation and mispronunciation that characterizes the first two acts (in which ‘poison’ sounds like ‘posion’ and the accent falls with a thud on the second syllable of ‘balcony’) gives way to plainspoken verse, and the previous comic hyperbole disappears. One is tempted to see this as a nostalgic return. Whereas those responding to the question “What is love?” could only do so by turning to Shakespeare and those turning to Shakespeare could only do so in the mode of creative forlornness, the performance ends by giving the Bard the last word. Just as the first two acts creatively distort this canonical text to produce a genuinely contemporary work, however, the return at the end to a straightforward presentation of Shakespeare’s poetry gives new life to words so often forgotten. In the hands of the Nature Theater of Oklahoma this epilogue does not imply a return to the fires of forbidden love and to the penalty they must exact for lack of payment. Such a return would be obscene in our age, as reactionary voices are raised with increasing frequency to divide liccit from illicit love and to thereby determine which lovers may be sacrificed. Here, instead, we hear in these words so often heard a questioning of the fact that we are no longer consumed by flames.

The closed captions that “the tragic for us is that we are silently packed up in a container and taken away from the realm of the living, not that consumed by flames, we pay the penalty to the flames we could not tame.” Here the inartificial fire of forbidden love gives way to the disquieting quiet of the silent containers in which we pack ourselves up.