

# The here-and-now insight in Folger's youth-centric, DC-set 'Romeo and Juliet'

*Director Raymond O. Caldwell and others share what makes the acclaimed multicultural production click.*

By **Deryl Davis** - October 22, 2024

Over the 400-plus years of its existence, Shakespeare's most youthful tragedy has been adapted to a wide range of settings and circumstances. Most familiar, perhaps, is the blockbuster musical *West Side Story* (1957), set amid ethnic gang warfare in mid-century Manhattan. But the long list of notable variations includes Baz Luhrmann's action-packed *Romeo + Juliet* (film, 1996), featuring rival crime families who shoot it out in postmodern SoCal; the girl-meets-zombie romance *Warm Bodies* (film, 2013), which takes place in a post-apocalyptic, eerily post-pandemic universe; and Disney's *Gnomeo & Juliet* (animation, 2011), in which a pair of garden gnomes negotiate romance amid inter-garden rivalries. Now, as a divided America anxiously prepares for another contentious election, the Folger Theatre has brought Shakespeare's great tale of passion and tragedy home to a fictionalized version of the nation's capital itself.

Directed by Raymond O. Caldwell, this *Romeo and Juliet* foregrounds the youth of the play's protagonists, as well as the multiple pressures, influences, and stimuli that impact them and the cultures they move in and out of. Politics is certainly forefront, as rival politicians Lord Capulet and Lady Montague duke it out in campaign ads, public speeches, and social media posts projected onto LED screens. But Caldwell is also interested in how media, language, and culture of various kinds impact people who, because of their youth, are still forming ideas about who they are and what the world is like.



*Cole Taylor as Romeo and Caro Reyes Rivera as Juliet in 'Romeo and Juliet.' Photo by Erika Nizborski.*

“We [the creative team] were trying to have a very clear conversation about the here and now,” Caldwell, says, noting that the pressures young people in metro DC face are not so different from those faced by youth around the country. “What gets in the way of love for young people?” Caldwell asks, referencing the central conflict of Shakespeare’s tragedy.

“We know that social media is getting in the way of love for young people. We know our body politic is getting in the way of love for young people. So, this play is actually about a series of things that get in the way of love,” he says.

Noting the various kinds of “substance abuse” that today’s youth may be prone or subject to — including politics, social media, and the 24-hour news cycle, as well as familiar forms of drugs and alcohol — Caldwell asserts that Shakespeare’s famed depiction of star-crossed lovers is best understood as a cautionary tale.

“I don’t think that this is a love story,” Caldwell declares. “It can’t be a love story, because almost every single young person in it dies. For me, it’s this really tragic, scary story.... We know that these two young people [Romeo and Juliet] are acting in incredibly rash ways. And so the question for us as a team was to ask ourselves, ‘What causes young people to act in these rash ways in today’s society, and how can we bake that into this production, so that young people can see both themselves and their world in this fantastical play, and so that the play becomes a lesson for us?’”



Raymond O. Caldwell. Photo by C. Stanley Photography.

The Folger production does depict characters taking drugs and drinking to excess, but it places these behaviors against the backdrop of dominating parents, social and political division, and the constant stimulus of technology — social media posts litter the LED screens throughout the play — suggesting reasons for why the modern-day Romeo and Juliet behave as they do.

Caldwell says that much of his work as a director is, like *Romeo and Juliet*, “steeped in young people.” He spent his early years in DC as a partnerships manager with Arena Stage, facilitating education and community engagement with local schools. “I spent so much time building community with young people and thinking about the state of where young people are,” he asserts. That made it easy to respond to Folger Theatre Artistic Director Karen Ann Daniels’ desire for a youth-centric *Romeo and Juliet* to kick off a season-long programming theme titled “Whose Democracy?” (Daniels is also Folger’s Director of Programming and Performance.)

“We’re exploring the ‘who’ in ... ‘Whose Democracy?’,” says Daniels via email. “My hope was that ... Raymond would see *Romeo and Juliet* as a story that could connect us with the youngest people (Gen Z and Gen Alpha) to make them the lens and target audience for the production. What other Shakespeare play can so directly connect in such an intense way [with] the perspective and values of the young?” she asks.

For Caldwell, the play offered opportunities to connect on other levels, too. He had seen the unusual diversity of the Washington region and noticed a lot of people like himself, a “third-culture” kid who lived not in one world or two, but often in three. The son of a Filipino mother and an African-American father, Caldwell grew up in Germany, now lives in America, and thinks of Washington, DC, as home.

“I wanted to create a *Romeo and Juliet* that was steeped in the backdrop of this city,” Caldwell says. “I wanted the various racial and ethnic groups that inhabit metro DC to have a voice here. And it works just so, with the play having these delineations of family differences as well.”

*Videography by Jeffrey Ray.*

**I**n the Folger production, the Capulets are played primarily by Hispanic actors, although Lord Capulet is a white actor with a noticeable Southern drawl. The Montagues are primarily African American, although Lord Montague is played by an Asian American. The mixed-race casting was intentional, suggesting that *Romeo and Juliet* are themselves third-culture kids, belonging everywhere and nowhere all at once. (As originally written, *Romeo and Juliet* are, of course, natives of Verona, although by rejecting their names and their families’ demands, they essentially make themselves stateless.)

Additionally, some members of the Capulet household (principally, Lady Capulet, the Nurse, and Juliet) speak many of their lines in a Puerto Rican dialect of Spanish. (The English text is provided on screens on either side of the stage.) They also switch back and forth between Spanish and English while in the family home. While this is not the first bilingual theatrical production that Folger has done, it is the first time some of these actors have performed Shakespeare in English (as well as Spanish) and on the

Folger stage. Caldwell notes the important role that native language — language sometimes only spoken in the home — plays in giving third-culture kids a center. But he describes larger aims in adding the bilingual element to this production.

“[T]he conversation I’m wanting to have in *Romeo and Juliet* with the inclusion of Spanish is one of breaking the tradition,” Caldwell says. “I think it’s so important for us to recognize that Shakespeare is performed in many other languages. So to ask audiences to hear Shakespeare in another language is important.”

Dr. Carla Della Gatta, a theater historian at the University of Maryland and the dramaturg on this production, agrees, noting that Shakespeare frequently peppered his work with bits of other languages, primarily French and Latin.

“Shakespeare wasn’t monolingual,” Della Gatta asserts. “There are numerous phrases and some scenes in Shakespeare that are in other languages.... When we flatten Shakespeare to say he’s only in English, it’s actually a bit of a misstatement. So integrating *Latinidad* [Latin American cultural attributes] and the Spanish language, to me, seems very apt for a present-day setting, but it’s also more aligned with one of Shakespeare’s original practices, incorporating the languages that he heard on the street.”

Della Gatta has tracked more than 200 Hispanic productions and adaptations of Shakespeare in her book *Latinx Shakespeares: Staging US Intracultural Theater* and in her online archive, [LatinxShakespeares.org](http://LatinxShakespeares.org). She says that *Romeo and Juliet* is the most adapted Shakespeare play in Latinx cultures for a number of reasons. First, it’s an ensemble play that may be more accessible to actors who haven’t had the benefit of professional training in Shakespeare. Second, according to Della Gatta, it’s assigned to some 90 percent of high school freshmen in the United States. And it’s a play about young people that taps into popular ideas about suffering for love.



Fran Tapia as Lady Capulet (above) with Caro Reyes Rivera as Juliet and Luz Nicholas as Nurse in 'Romeo and Juliet.' Photo by Erika Nizborski.

Both Fran Tapia (Lady Capulet) and Luz Nicholas (Nurse), stalwarts of GALA Hispanic Theatre in DC, had performed Shakespeare in their native tongues before making their Folger debut in *Romeo and Juliet*. But neither had performed in a predominantly English-language professional production of the Bard's work before, and neither is Puerto Rican (the dialect of Spanish chosen for this production). Tapia is Chilean, while Nicholas is from Spain.

"It's a huge step," Tapia says, of the opportunity to perform Shakespeare, in Spanish and English, on the Folger stage. "This is a great moment for the Folger, to be open to telling this story from a Latino perspective, too, and integrating the Latino experience." She agrees that there's nothing new in hearing different languages on stage when performing Shakespeare. It's what she grew up with. And since coming to DC in 2019, she's worked alongside actors and stage professionals from multiple nationalities in Central and South America and beyond.

"My mind was like, 'Oh, my God, what is this?'," Tapia recalls thinking shortly after arriving in the DC area. "It's America! ... It's an illusory idea to think that we're all just one thing. This [Washington, DC] is a mash-up of everyone inside the country, and I love that, and I love that this production [of *Romeo and Juliet*] is showing that."

Tapia, Nicholas, and Caro Reyes Rivera, who plays Juliet and is Puerto Rican, worked together and with dramaturg Gatta and translator Rosa Garay Lopez to determine when and how to use the Puerto Rican dialect of Spanish in the play. As the working-class

Nurse, Nicholas seems to speak more Spanish and less English than her charge, Juliet, or her employer, Lady Capulet.

“It’s very challenging, very difficult,” Nicholas says of the switching between Shakespeare’s English, not native to anyone, least of all a non-native English speaker, and a dialect of Spanish that also is not her own. “Your brain has to be kind of, like, doing mental gymnastics. But It’s fun.”

When she arrived in DC 13 years ago, Nicholas says she could never have imagined one day performing on the Folger stage. “That was the kind of theater that you think, as a Latina, a Hispanic, you’re never going to have access to ... because it’s Shakespeare.”

Dramaturg Della Gatta acknowledges that stereotypes of who or what a Shakespearean actor is probably made it more difficult for Hispanic actors to grace the Bard’s stages in the past. But she points to the long history of Latino actors in English-language Shakespeare productions, such as Jose Ferrer opposite Paul Robeson in *Othello* in the 1940s and Raul Julia in the title role in 1979. It’s the freedom “to use their voice and to incorporate Latinx culture” in Shakespeare productions that is newer for Hispanic actors, such as in Folger’s *Romeo and Juliet*. After all, Della Gatta observes, the concepts of “Latina” and “Hispanic” didn’t even exist when Shakespeare was at work. It was, literally, a whole, new world.

**F**or director Caldwell, the attempt to bring various worlds together in one production — the worlds of Gen Z and Gen Alpha; of politics, technology, and social media; of multiculturalism and bilingualism — is a way, he hopes, of also bringing more young people to the Bard.

“I’m trying to draw a brand-new audience to Shakespeare and inspire them with the idea that these stories are all of our collective stories,” he says. “We see ourselves reflected in the diversity of persons on stage in a Shakespeare production and recognize the universality of Shakespeare and the specificity of Shakespeare all at the same time.”

Caldwell suggests that we can all learn from Romeo and Juliet’s failure to connect on a deeper level, mistaking — at least in his production — fleeting virtual contact for something more real.

“Post-pandemic, how we connect is something we all need to be minding,” Caldwell says, “and the theater gives us a space to connect. So, I’m hoping young people will come into this space, connect to the story, and then want to have conversations about it. Because conversations, real-life conversations — *IRL*, as they say — are the ones that actually have deep, lasting meaning for us.”

Running Time: Two hours and 40 minutes with one 15-minute intermission.

***Romeo and Juliet*** plays through November 10, 2024, at the Folger Shakespeare Theatre, 201 E Capitol Street SE, Washington, DC. To purchase tickets (\$20–\$84, with many discounts available), go **online** or call the Box Office at (202) 544-7077.

To see credits for the cast and creative team, click **here**.

The complete playbill is available **here**.

**COVID Safety:** While Folger audiences and employees are no longer required to wear masks at most events, masks are welcome and remain an important preventive measure against COVID-19. Anyone needing or choosing to wear one is encouraged to do so.

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