

Not Just Another Romeo

British director Bill Alexander turns the Victory Theater into Verona.

by Gerard Raymond



Clive N. Totman

Director Bill Alexander

“NOT ANOTHER ROMEO AND JULIET”

you groan to yourself. But Theater for a New Audience's production of the oft-performed Shakespeare classic, which recently opened at the historic Victory Theater on 42nd Street, is a most

refreshing experience. The production is well spoken and visually interesting, and moves at an exciting pace. The director, Bill Alexander, has never worked in the United States before. In his native England, however, he is regarded as one of the leading directors of Shakespeare.

For the past 14 years Alexander has been working full-time with Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company. In 1988 he was appointed Artistic Director for the RSC London season when Terry Hands took a leave of absence to direct the ill-fated *Carrie* on Broadway. Alexander first distinguished himself by directing new work by upcoming playwrights such as Barrie Keefe, Howard Barker, and Stephen Poliakoff and then moved to directing critically acclaimed Shakespeare productions: *Richard III*, *The Merchant of Venice* (both with An-

thony Sher), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Olivier award for Best Director), and *Cymbeline*.

"I think he is a very unconventional director," says Jeffrey Hornbeck, artistic/producing director of Theater for a New Audience. "He is adventuresome but has a solid background with text." Hornbeck first approached Alexander to direct a production for TNA three years ago. But Alexander only became available last year. The director chose *Romeo and Juliet*, because he had never done it before. "*R&J* was the play that I most wanted to do from the canon at this moment. I felt I had an attitude to it," Alexander explains.

He concedes that with Shakespeare's well-known plays, one is consistently trying to find something different. "There is no point in just doing a play because it is there." His

take on *Romeo and Juliet* is that it is about relationships: between parents and children, families and communities and their reaction to authority. "How important is the control of emotions and the exercise of reason in the life of the individual and in the life of the society?"

Alexander is also interested in exploring the "the relationship of the play and what it says to the Renaissance world." Placing his productions in specific historical contexts is very important for Alexander. He set *The Merchant of Venice* in 1620, presenting the anti-Semitism of Venetian society of the period with startling realism. His celebrated *Merry Wives* took place in 1959. This *Romeo and Juliet* is set in mid-July 1492. That particular date is "a sort of homage" to his being in America, but Alexander feels a play has to be anchored to an actual date. "How does a character play existing somewhere in the 14th century? You have to exist in a month and a year."

Alexander evokes the period of his *Romeo and Juliet* through arresting sets and costumes designed by Fotini Dimou. She also designed Alexander's production of *The Duchess of Malfi* at the RSC last year. He began working with Dimou on the look for this *Romeo and Juliet* while they were still in England. "We tried to create a set that was reminiscent of the old world, the Roman world, which was being restored by the Renaissance. The clothes are of the Renaissance but have a slightly heightened feel to them." Alexander believes that a sense of authenticity is often best conveyed by surprising the audience slightly. "I think that absolute literal authenticity can look like just staginess."

In the play, some of the young men wear watches and one scene opens with a giant clock being erected in

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the town square. Romeo slays Tybalt by shooting him with a pistol, stunning everyone by the suddenness of this violent action. Does this seem odd for the period? “Those things were totally in period,” Alexander gently points out. “People don’t associate guns or watches and clocks with the Renaissance, but, of course, they were becoming very common. It was a time when technology was beginning to emerge as a force. Cellini, in his autobiography, goes on about making himself a gun. People were beginning to understand the power of the gun, though probably most people had never heard one go off or seen anyone killed by one.

“What excites me about things like that is that it was a turning point—the old orthodoxies were being challenged by science, immorality, and philosophy. I wanted the production to be about the balancing point between an old, medieval world with its codes of honor and a modern world.”

Alexander’s early career, between 1973 and 1976, was spent at the Bristol Old Vic and the Royal Court Theater, mainly directing new

plays. In many ways this proved to be good training ground for his later work on Shakespeare. “When you are working on new plays you become aware of the problems of structure because of the difficulties a lot of writers have with it. You work with writers closely, often shaping the play. I think the hardness of that work makes one very appreciative of structure in Shakespeare’s plays and gives one an insight into how to use that structure, how it serves dramatically Shakespeare’s ends.”

Alexander says his previous work on new plays also gave him an “increased respect” for Shakespeare’s use of language. “A lot of the exercises I do have developed around that central idea of the dynamic of the word: the sacredness, the danger, the beauty, and the magic of words. Rather than thinking in terms of beautiful poetry, it is: What is a word? What damage can a word do? What peace, what joy can it bring? And therefore how do they combine in poetry? How does an actor maintain a spontaneous relationship to that language?”

But Shakespeare also progressed in his writing and the earlier plays

show his immaturity; Alexander acknowledges that *The Taming of the Shrew*, which he directed for a 1991 tour of Japan, is one of these plays. “And yet in *Romeo and Juliet* (which was probably written only shortly after *Shrew*) you see this extraordinary, enhanced sense of the power of the language in some scenes, while others are very crude.”

Would he treat Shakespeare the way he would new writing? “I remember cutting scenes from *Richard III* because I thought they were unnecessary and I am not absolutely convinced that Shakespeare was right to include the final Paris episode in *Romeo and Juliet*. If I were to talk to him about it we would argue. I could see his reasons for doing it, you know, but I am not hundred percent convinced that in the last resort it was a good choice.”

In the current production, the scene where Romeo kills Paris at Juliet’s tomb is indeed deleted but the reasons for this are more mundane than an artistic disagreement with the author. No Theater for a New Audience production can last longer than two and a half hours because their plays are performed

Martha Swope Associates/Carol Rosegg



A fight scene from Bill Alexander’s production of *Romeo and Juliet*.



Miriam Healy-Louie and Mark Niebuhr are Juliet and Romeo.

for school children as well as adults. The kids are bussed to the theater from all parts of the city by regular school buses. TNA cannot afford private busses so the school buses have to be sent back to the schools on time. Alexander signed a contract which stipulated that he would ensure that the three-hour play ends in the allotted time, so that the buses could get back to school.

This April, Alexander leaves the RSC to teach at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London and write some books about directing Shakespeare. "Teaching is a deliberate choice on my part, because I don't want to do any directing for about a year. I want to experiment with the basic vocabulary of theater and ask myself some questions about my own technique, my own style and values. Teaching

seems to be the best way to do that and by going back to school myself, in a way, I hope to come out with an even clearer idea of what theater is."

The timing for Alexander's departure from the RSC is significant. In April, Adrian Noble officially takes over as Artistic Director of the company. Noble and Alexander are roughly contemporary, both having worked at the Bristol Old Vic and starting at the RSC at about the same time. The year Alexander administered the company in London, Noble ran the Stratford branch of operations. It looks like Noble is beginning his regime with a clean slate. The RSC's new season indicates that a younger generation of directors will be working with the company. "I think we are all moving on," is Alexander's diplomatic comment. □

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