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## Timeless love story

Theatre LILA presents a gender-fluid "Romeo+Juliet"

BY VICTORIA DAVIS

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*Kelsey Rodriguez, left, and HJ Farr rehearsing Shakespeare's tragedy.*

While most of the lines have remained the same, [Theatre LILA](#)'s production of Shakespeare's *Romeo+Juliet* departs from the original in one significant way. The company has revamped one of theater's most iconic love stories for the gender-fluid generation, casting HJ (HeatherJane) Farr as a strong, short-haired Juliet and Kelsey Rodriguez as a soft and poetic Romeo.

"With everything that's going on politically, this is very much a play about 'love is love,' and how to portray that in a way that does justice to same-sex couples," says Rodriguez. "It shouldn't be about gender. It should be about how you feel."

For the past couple of weeks, Rodriguez, Farr and the rest of the cast have been rehearsing in the music hall studio of Madison College. Red-rose party masks rest in bouquets on chairs while three ladders function as the foundation of the set, serving as a centerpiece for each scene. Notebooks filled with actors' notes, along with a green and gold hardcover of *Romeo and Juliet* fill two fold-out tables in the rehearsal hall. Director Jessica Lanius sits on the studio floor, observing every move the actors make and every line they speak.

"We're not trying to convince the audience that Kelsey is a man," says Lanius. "We're trying to convince the audience that the story, and its message, is exactly the same even if Romeo were a female."

Watching Farr and Rodriguez rehearse, it's easy to believe they are lovers, or at least real-life best friends. But they have only known each other for a few weeks.

"*Romeo and Juliet* has been one of my favorite Shakespeare plays forever," says Lanius, who spent almost 15 years brainstorming this idea. "I've fallen in love so much with Kelsey and HJ and the care they've taken with these roles. I can't wait for people to see the beautiful moments that they share together, which feel so natural." LILA's show runs March 14-17 in Overture Center's Promenade Hall.

The two leads and director Lanius all attest to the fluidity of Shakespeare's script.

"I was pretty astounded and excited with just how the original script almost reads as two women," says Farr. "You change some pronouns, and it's perfect. After reading it a million times, Romeo is so obviously the romantic one, and Juliet is so tough and analytical. So, society's masculine and feminine roles were already switched."

Lanius is also a skilled choreographer, trained in the discipline of "physical theater." In the production, ensemble dancers help embody the unfounded hate and the adolescent love in Shakespeare's work.

This is not the first time Theatre LILA has revamped Shakespearean works. In 2009, the company put on a production of *Hamlet*, with actress Alexandra Niedt playing the lead. In 2003, LILA showcased *Shakespeare's Women: Under the Corset*, expanding on the stories of Helena, Juliet, Lady Macbeth and Ophelia.

"There's so much more diversity and gender-bending that Shakespeare allows than what we typically see in other types of work," says Rodriguez. "LILA wanted to make this play as diverse and inclusive as possible, and that's what really intrigued me to be a part of it."

"I've also always wanted to play Romeo," she adds. "There's something so interesting about someone who's so young and still so articulate."

There's another level to this reimagined *Romeo and Juliet*. Along with two female leads, Lanius' production also touches the topic of race: The Capulets are a white family, while the Montagues have an Afro-Latino heritage.

"Everyone has a lot of preconceived notions on what love is, what same-sex love is, what gender fluidity is, and what race is," says Rodriguez. "But there comes a point where the lines aren't clear, and they shouldn't be."

"We all bring our own histories to it as well," adds Farr. "Everyone comes in with their own personal background and what we've experienced, or haven't experienced, in our lives. Souls are being bared on this stage."

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