

Romeo and Juliet

(Tragedy -- Lowell Davies Festival Theater, Old Globe Theater; San Diego; 612 seats; \$39 top) An Old Globe Theater presentation of the tragedy in two acts by William Shakespeare. Directed by Daniel Sullivan.

Escalus - Rob Nagle
Mercutio - Scott Parkinson
Paris - Scott Ferrara
Montague - Jonathan McMurtry
Lady Montague - Rosina Reynolds
Romeo - Neil Patrick Harris
Benvolio - Peter Smith
Abram - Matthew Troncone
Balthasar - Aaron Krohn
Capulet - Mike Genovese
Lady Capulet - Lynnda Ferguson
Juliet - Emily Bergl
Tybalt - James Joseph O'Neill
Old Capulet - Jonathan McMurtry
Nurse - Katherine McGrath
Peter/Capulet Servant - James Wallert
Sampson - Scott Ferrara
Gregory - Christian Casper
Tybalt's Follower - Michael Cruz
Friar Lawrence - Richard Easton
Friar John - Baylen Thomas
Apothecary - Rob Nagle
Paris' Page - Matthew Troncone
Watchman No. 1 - Christian Casper
Watchman No. 2 - Michael Cruz
Watchman No. 3 - Baylen Thomas

By [DAVID MERMELSTEIN](#)

"Romeo and Juliet" must be the most durable play ever written. It has, after all, survived Leonard Bernstein transforming it into a snappy musical and Franco Zeffirelli viewing it through a gooey, hyper-romantic lens. It has weathered a host of avant-garde interpretations and been staged in the nude. So there was never any question that one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies would survive Doogie Howser. Yes, Neil Patrick Harris, once beloved by television audiences as a pint-sized physician, is currently playing the male lead in Daniel Sullivan's new staging of "R&J," at San Diego's Old Globe Theater. And, perhaps to the surprise of some, both Harris and this taut production are worth seeing.

In fact, casting the young-looking Harris as Romeo was an inspired decision. Though 25, Harris seems far younger, if not quite as young as Emily Bergl as Juliet. Thus things start out right here: with a Romeo and Juliet who actually look like teen lovers. But the success is greater than that, as the two leads find a real rapport with Shakespeare's text. These young actors connect with the Bard's tender and impassioned poetry and play their parts with an admirable naturalness that ought to win over even the most experienced theatergoer.

Sullivan's production is fittingly placed outdoors, at the Old Globe's Davies Festival Theater, in many ways the ideal setting for any play by Shakespeare. The director eschews a fancy set for rough-hewn wooden planks and poles sturdily

assembled by the able Ralph Funicello. The effect doesn't exactly conjure fair Verona so much as suggest a dilapidated pier, but no matter, for it provides a fine platform on which to stage this play's many conflicts, both physical and moral.

Robert Morgan's costumes, too, possess a weathered look. They are made of coarse cloth and complement Funicello's scenic design. Peter Maradudin's lighting lends the production an eerie air, particularly in the fight scenes, which are very effectively choreographed by Steve Rankin. And together with Jeff Ladman's sound design, David Van Tieghem's jangly, thumping score, provides an almost cinematic ambiance.

All this, of course, would come to nothing were Sullivan not a fine director and his cast not an able group. But while there's always room for quibbles, this production is extremely persuasive and occasionally downright moving. In addition to Harris and Bergl, both of whom lighten the gravity of this play with appropriate wit and playfulness, a host of memorable supporting players also shine.

Lynnda Ferguson, as Juliet's mother Lady Capulet, bears a striking resemblance to Glenn Close, and she carries herself with the same sort of dignity. James Joseph O'Neill's Tybalt, pumped up and with a bleached-blond buzz cut, emerges as a scary street tough whose preening is far from sissified. Conversely, the frail-looking Scott Parkinson's Mercutio swishes around the stage like a gay David Spade. Richard Easton, a touch of Derek Jacobi about him, proves terrific as the well-meaning Friar Lawrence, whose best intentions, ironically, bring about incalculable harm.

As Juliet's loyal nurse, Katherine McGrath nicely combines the bumbblings and sputterings of a servant with genuine love for her charge. And in the role of Peter, a Capulet lackey, James Wallert hilariously demonstrates that even the tiniest part can be made rewarding.

To Sullivan, though, goes the most credit --- for taking a familiar work and making it fresh again. Not by grafting on to it all sorts of extraneous or fashionable ideas, but rather by keeping it true, by trusting in the material itself. Some might think such an approach lazy or uninspired; in fact, it shows great insight and not a small degree of courage. **Ensemble:** Amy Chaffee, Andrea Cirie, Michelle Cordero, Leslie Kalarchian, Caitlin Muelder, Heather Raffo.

Scenic design, Ralph Funicello; costumes, Robert Morgan; lighting, Peter Maradudin; music, David Van Tieghem; fight direction, Steve Rankin; choreography, Bonnie Johnston; sound, Jeff Ladman; stage manager, Joel Rosen. Opened, reviewed Sept. 5, 1998. Closes Oct. 10. Running time: 2 HOURS, 45 MIN.