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Tampa's Jobsite Theater brings 1980s flair to 'Romeo & Juliet'

Shakespeare's love story survives the ages in this new local production.

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Kayla Witoshynsky and Darius Autry in Jobsite Theater's production of "Romeo & Juliet." [JAMES ZAMBON | James Zambon Photography]

By **Maggie Duffy**

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For its 20th year of bringing Shakespeare to Tampa Bay, Jobsite Theater is tackling *Romeo & Juliet* for the first time. Modernizing the Bard's most famous play that's been told for centuries while keeping the language intact is a challenge, but Jobsite proves Shakespeare is as relevant and relatable as ever.

In case you need a refresher: The story of the star-crossed lovers emerges from a feud between two prominent families of Verona, the Montagues and Capulets. Amid battles between the respective gangs, Romeo (Montague) and Juliet (Capulet) meet at a masquerade ball thrown by the Capulets, who have decided they want Juliet to marry a young suitor, Paris. Despite their families' feud — the reason for which has been forgotten — the young lovers desperately find ways to be together. This culminates with Juliet's fake death, Romeo's real one and then ... well, no spoilers.



Darius Autry and Kayla Witoshynsky are star-crossed lovers in Jobsite Theater's production of "Romeo & Juliet." [JAMES ZAMBON | James Zambon Photography]

It would have made perfect sense to set *Romeo & Juliet* in present times. People are more divided now than ever.

But instead, Jobsite's production is set in the 1980s. There was plenty of division back then, too, but the pop culture of the era included John Hughes' films that were the quintessential portraits of American teenagers. The soundtracks for *Pretty in Pink*, *The Breakfast Club* and *Sixteen Candles*, all of which focused on romance (some of which is problematic in hindsight), became the music of that generation.

Enter composer Jeremy Douglass, who compiled the 1980s soundtrack and a score that hearkens back to that era. It's remarkable how many songs so perfectly illustrate the story, including *We Belong* by Pat Benatar, *All Through the Night* by Cyndi Lauper and *Eternal Flame* by The Bangles. Sweet-voiced Kasondra Rose occasionally brings the songs to life as the Singer, when she's not playing Lady Montague. (The soundtrack also includes many new wave bands and is available to listen to on [Spotify](#).)



Kasondra Rose and David Warner in Jobsite Theater's "Romeo & Juliet." [JAMES ZAMBON | James Zambon Photography]

The set, designed by Brian Smallheer, is decorated with Keith Haring-esque graffiti. Juliet's bedroom, with its pink walls and colorful bedspread, is a reminder that she is still just a child. Katrina Stevenson designed the costumes, which don't necessarily scream 1980s — in fashion, everything comes back again, so some of it seems modern — with the exception of Paris' (Robert Spence Gabriel) *Miami Vice*-inspired T-shirt/blazer combo.

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While the music, set and wardrobe bring *Romeo & Juliet* into a more modern era, so do the direction and acting.

Most people are introduced to *Romeo & Juliet* in high school, but Shakespearean language can be daunting and difficult to interpret, not to mention recite. The entire cast in this production performs with a rhythm and clarity that showcases the Bard's sublime prose and poetry. One suspects their success comes from David M. Jenkins' adaptation and direction and the text coaching of Jobsite/Shakespeare veteran actor Giles Davies.

As Romeo, Darius Autry has all the swagger of a contemporary teenager, at times delivering his lines with the cadence of a rapper. Kayla Witoshynsky brings a cocktail of teenage angst, aloofness and defiance to Juliet. Together, their passionate chemistry is electric.



Kayla Witoshynsky and Darius Autry share a kiss in Jobsite Theater's production of "Romeo & Juliet." [JAMES ZAMBON | James Zambon]

As Mercutio, Romeo's best friend, Martin Powers steals the show. The physicality they bring to their performance illuminates the prose, packing a punch with flamboyant flair.



Martin Powers as Mercutio in Jobsite Theater's production of "Romeo & Juliet." [JAMES ZAMBON | James Zambon Photography]

As Juliet's nurse, David Warner is hilarious and silly, but he reels it in when also portraying the somber Prince Escalus. Cornelio "Coky" Aguilera plays Friar Lawrence with compassion and concern. Newt Rametta brings a sympathetic quality to Benvolio, another one of Romeo's crew. Stevenson seethes as the menacing Tybalt.



David Warner and Kayla Witoshynsky in Jobsite Theater's production of "Romeo & Juliet." [JAMES ZAMBON | James Zambon Photography]



Martin Powers, Newt Rametta, Darius Autry and Katrina Stevenson in Jobsite Theater's production of "Romeo & Juliet." [JAMES ZAMBON | James Zambon Photography]

Despite the common knowledge of how *Romeo & Juliet* ends, it still hits hard because of the compelling performances.

"For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo."

Romeo & Juliet runs through Feb. 6. Tickets start at \$29.50. An ASL-interpreted performance happens on Jan 30. Proof of negative COVID-19 tests or complete vaccination cards must be shown at the entrance. Masks are required to be worn in the theater. Jaeb Theater, David A. Straz Jr. Center for the Performing Arts, 1010 N MacInnes Place, Tampa. 813-229-7827. [jobsitetheater.org](#).

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