

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh Act the Title Roles in a Revival of Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet' at the Fifty-first Street Theatre

ROMEO AND JULIET, the Shakespearean play in three acts and twenty-one scenes. Production designed and staged by Laurence Olivier; assistant director, Robert Ross; scenery and costumes by Motley; show lighted by Robert Edmond Jones; music adapted and directed by Alexander Steinert; dances arranged by Ernst and Maria Matray; revived by Mr. Olivier. At the Fifty-first Street Theatre.

EscalusWilton Graff
Sampson.....William Barrows
Gregory.....Joseph Tones
Abraham.....Robert Busch
Balthasar.....Jack Merivale
Tybalt.....Cornel Wilde
Chief Officer.....Walter Brooke
Benvolio.....Wesley Addy
Capulet.....Halliwell Hobbes
Lady Capulet.....Katharine Warren
Peter.....Raymond Johnson
Montague.....Ben Webster
Lady Montague.....Barbara Horder
Mercutio.....Edmond O'Brien
Paris.....Frank Downing
Romeo.....Laurence Olivier
Nurse.....Dame May Whitty
Juliet.....Vivien Leigh
Old Capulet.....Morton L. Stevens
Friar Laurence.....Alexander Knox
Apothecary.....Earle Grey
Friar John.....Morton L. Stevens

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Much scenery; no play. Let that serve as capsule comment on the "Romeo and Juliet" which Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh brought to the Fifty-first Street Theatre last evening. After dreaming of the ideal production of Shakespeare's romantic tragedy for a long time, Mr. Olivier has at last mounted it lavishly with solidly constructed sets on a revolving stage and all the accoutrements of an opulent production. He has designed it; he has directed the performance. As Romeo he is appearing in a part in which he has already distinguished himself in England. But somewhere amidst his herculean labors Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" has become completely lost. Excepting a stray scene or two, very little of it can be heard. None of it recaptures the heat and passion of the tragedy. Although Miss Leigh and Mr. Olivier are handsome young people, they hardly act the parts at all, and Mr. Olivier in particular keeps throwing his part away.

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His only passion is one for detail. In twenty-one pedantically staged scenes he has gone through the text with an eye for spectacle. Everything is solid; the doors close with a proper bang; the hardware makes an honest rattle. The costuming is full of splendor, and Robert Edmond Jones's lighting follows the clock around accurately and handsomely. Bells ring off stage. The orchestra is busy all evening with music and "traditional airs." Palestrina chants point up the religious episodes. But you cannot have this sort of spectacle and a play at the same time. To mount it Mr. Olivier has had to set it deep in the stage, where the mechanical equipment moves easily. Even from the orchestra seats the performance seems remote from theatregoing and too far away to be heard. Mr. Olivier's industry is more admirable than his judgment.

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Miss Leigh's slender, girlish beauty is perfect for Juliet. Fourteen years are not too few for the willowy innocence of her personality. Let it also be said in her favor that she makes an earnest attempt to act the part as it was written. But she is not yet accomplished enough as an actress to go deep into the heart of an imaginative character wrought out of sensuous poetry.

Mr. Olivier is more gifted personally than most actors who play the part of Romeo, and he is also a widely experienced actor. The superficiality of his acting is difficult to understand. He is mannered and affected, avoiding directness in even simple episodes. In costumes that flare extravagantly at the shoulders, he looks like a belligerent sparrow when he scurries across the stage. Most of the time he speaks for Juliet's private ear, dropping his voice at the end of the lines as though they did not matter. As his own director, Mr. Olivier has never seen or heard himself in the performance. That is just as well. He would be astonished if he did.

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Some of the acting is audible and some of the characters are defined intelligibly. Wesley Addy's Benvolio is spoken like a man with volume and candor. As Capulet's family errand boy, Raymond Johnson conveys the dazed foolishness of a Shakespearean clown. Theatregoers can be especially grateful



Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, in "Romeo and Juliet."

Willinger.

for the workmanlike acting of Dame May Whitty as the nurse, of Halliwell Hobbes as Capulet and of Alexander Knox as Friar Laurence. They take the audience into their confidence, which is a merciful thing to do, and play character with vigor and frankness. But Edward O'Brien, who once did an excellent Prince Hal for Maurice Evans, plays Mercutio like some private joke and nuts the Queen Mab speech under his atom-crusher. Flying in the face of nature, Mercutio does not come to life until he is mortally wounded, although even

then he chokes himself on the dying lines.

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An enormous amount of labor has gone into this production. No doubt it would be vulgar to mention the money. But there is no avoiding the plain fact that the result is lamentable. Swallowed up in heavy scenery, this "Romeo and Juliet" is tepid and tedious. "Two hours traffic on the stage," Shakespeare promises in the prologue. After trying to eavesdrop on it for three hours last evening, this theatregoer departed, but the traffic was still heavy and tangled.