

Barrington Stage Company, Pittsfield, MA
A Tender Thing by Ben Power. Directed Alan Paul.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Inside the bottom of our grief.”

Romeo and Juliet lived. They married, abandoned their warring families and had one of their own. Now, nearly forty years later they live in an ocean-view house, quietly but passionately together. Their love has sustained them in their solitude. Their language, still Shakespeare’s words, are as expressive and angular as their minds. They touch one another physically and emotionally. They are Romeo, the lover and Juliet, the mystic; they are eternal. Except. Except that Juliet is ill, dying, needy. Romeo is himself and that’s just not enough in this situation.



Derek Smith as Romeo, Candy Buckley as Juliet; Photo: Ron Rader

Juliet has cancer. It slowly erodes her body but never touches her heart. She remains the thirteen-year-old girl she was at the beginning. She loves without conditions. She loves with her entire self. Romeo loves as he must, with a combination of worship and lust his heart as overflowing as his loins. He wants what he wants and he wants her. From the start of the play until the end of the play Juliet is his obsession. It is beautiful, intense and exhausting.

Playwright Ben Power has used Shakespeare’s words from *R&J*, *Twelfth Night* and the sonnets to create this more modern retelling of their love story. Every once in a while a contemporary phrase would be welcome but he never steps away from his source. He stays the course and drives through the history of the English language to sustain the mystery and the miracle of creation. And it is that beauty that challenges both the actors and us.



Candy Buckley; Photo: Ron Rader

Candy Buckley is the fair Juliet. From her first gravel-voiced moments through her last she depicts a woman whose intense gravitas is never frivolous but rather always serious. She uses every word she utters and brooks no resistance. Even when her language is light and lovely she is clearly out to make a point and make it she does.

When I read about her doing this play I thought “what odd casting,” but now that I’ve seen her do it I can only admire director Alan Paul for placing Juliet in such remarkable hands. She brings a great and honest beauty to the role. As her character’s illness proceeds Buckley steps into it, moment for moment, making it almost too realistic to watch. Her use of support props is almost as sensitive as her line readings.

I recently lost my husband of 49 years and watching the gradual progression of Buckley’s realistic Juliet was almost too much for me, so honest and so reminiscent was it. Shakespeare loved death scenes; he would have adored this one.

Derek Smith’s aging Romeo is half boy, but three-quarters man. He is more than one person, conflicted and confused, questioning just about everything, refusing to accept the inevitable, seeing what he needs to see and ignoring the rest while still being helpful and kind and considerate of the Juliet he loves.

Smith’s use of this language is as natural as chewing gum might be, almost second nature. He rattles off words while his body expresses his feelings with even greater speed and passion. It is a performance like no other I can recall. How any Juliet - young or old, female or male - could resist him cannot be explained. I could watch him draw the curtains for hours on end.



Derek Smith; Photo: Ron Rader

What *Romeo & Juliet* has always needed is a happy ending. Ben Power and Alan Paul have given us that, at least on the face of things. We need to remember that in the face of death and destruction, of friends, children, family there is still love, perhaps great love. To keep our world motivated. The author and director give us this before its all done.

Marsha Ginsburg's glorious set is perfection. Ricky Reynoso's costumes perform psychological miracles. Robert Wierzels lighting design is very special indeed. Paul has coordinated the best possible presentation of this difficult but so worthwhile play.

+ 06/28/2024 +

A Tender Thing plays on the St. Germain Stage at Barrington Stage Company's Sydelle and Lee Blatt

Performing Arts Center, 36 Linden Street, Pittsfield, MA through July 11. For information and tickets call 413-236-8888 or go to www.barringtonstageci.org.



Derek Smith, Candy Buckley; Photo: Ron Rader