

# The Guardian

## Juliet and Romeo review – star-crossed lovers try couples therapy

### Battersea Arts Centre, London

In Ben Duke and Lost Dog's smart, wryly subversive and sexy dance-theatre piece, Juliet and Romeo didn't die in that tomb. Worse ... they grew old together

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A finely observed portrait of marriage ... Ben Duke and Solène Weinachter in Juliet and Romeo, by Lost Dog, at Battersea Arts Centre, London. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

Shakespeare's lovers sit side by side in matching armchairs, a pot plant in the space between. They're approaching middle age and their marriage has hit a rough patch; they no longer talk, and Juliet starts to reveal that Romeo "is having difficulty ...", before he wincingly silences her. The point is they are now trying couples therapy, and the clever conceit of Ben Duke's funny but achingly sad revision of Shakespeare's tragedy is that the formerly star-crossed lovers are about to embark on a memory exercise in which they have to relive and re-evaluate key moments of their lives.

The first half of the work is pure pleasure as Duke and his partner, [Solène Weinachter](#), dance and talk their way through a blissfully wry, subverted version of Romeo and Juliet. They don't die in the tomb but elope, set up house and produce a daughter, Sophie. The truth of how they fell in love also turns out to be far more prosaic than the rarefied narratives of Shakespeare's play or the [Kenneth MacMillan](#) ballet (both of which Duke adroitly references). When Romeo re-enacts his first encounter with Juliet, his lurching euphoric dance – accompanied by the Beatles rather than Prokofiev – is fuelled not by poetry but blind lust. When Juliet prepares to drink the Friar's sleeping potion, her exultancy is tempered by the memory that the last drug he administered gave her thrush.

Duke's handling of this material is beautifully assured. His writing is fast, inventive and smart; the interleaving of movement, text and music (mostly a selection of pop classics) is expertly paced. And the chemistry between Duke (a bit ruffled and thwarted) and Weinachter (elegantly, sardonically precise) is a joy: every inflection of their vocal and body language feels freighted with the history of the couple's relationship – tender, sexy but increasingly mismatched.



A vicious trading of insults. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

Their performances become deeper and darker in the second half. While Romeo adores little Sophie (it's to her that he speaks the most exquisite lines of Shakespeare), Juliet's weary, claustrophobic experience of motherhood is compacted into a raging solo involving a truculent toddler, a lost wallet and a parking ticket.

On one level, Duke's work is a finely observed portrait of any marriage, where familiarity has replaced the first hormonal, metaphysical rush of desire. On another, the particular pathos of this couple is that they're haunted by the idealised versions of themselves, in Shakespeare's play, which they endlessly reread. When Romeo and Juliet manage 20 minutes alone together, they don't have sex but return to a ritual enactment of their most perfect moment, back in the tomb, when they were prepared to kill themselves for love.

It's that haunting of life by art that makes the death of their marriage so brutal. As the couple descend to a vicious trading of insults, Romeo admits he never really meant to go through with killing himself. While Juliet sits stunned, her sense of self destroyed, he rewinds the events of his life, spooling back to the moment when, instead of approaching her at the Capulet ball, he could have turned away. The shock lies not just in Romeo's rejection of his life with Juliet but also in his demolition of the entire romantic myth erected around them; his final, ironic acceptance that life is just random and art a lie.

• Juliet and Romeo is at Battersea Arts Centre, London, until 24 February. Box office: 020-7223 2223. Then at the Place, London, from 27 February until 3 March.