

SHAKESPEARE

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sword fights, there'll be guns and knives.

"Our approach is very modern," says Chris McElroen, executive director of the Classical Theatre of Harlem. "We rip these plays up and put them back together so they are relevant for a young, contemporary audience."

McElroen's well aware that some people feel intimidated by the idea of classical theater. They think they won't like it and fear they won't understand it.

"No question, 'classical' is a dirty word," McElroen says. "It implies boredom and irrelevance. We tear that idea to shreds. We're presenting a 21st century approach to the classics. We don't approach them as museum pieces, but that these are great plays with universal themes."

Alfred Preisser, artistic director of "Romeo and Juliet" and, along with McElroen, co-founder of the Classical Theatre of Harlem, has seen more than his share of bad classical theater. "I think a lot of classical theater is boring and does not [represent] the original spark of what was there in the first place."

Classical plays, such as "Romeo and Juliet," have something to say about the state of humankind, he says.

"You seize upon the thing in the script that you understand. Present that work as theater, not literature. Shakespeare is being taught a great deal as literature."

But on the stage, it needs to come alive.

Preisser calls Shakespeare's work "populist plays...comical theater [that was] very bumptious. There were all kinds of people in the audience," he says, "queens and people who cleaned out the public toilets."

He describes this production as "the greatest story ever told, set down in the hip-hop nation...It has a very young, urban sensibility. It has music you'd hear in a club tomorrow. The fighting is very gritty. It's fast, violent, with lots of contemporary music."

Though he's set the classic play in modern times, his "Romeo and Juliet" isn't gimmicky.

"It's not a matter of updating," he says. "...Our 'Romeo and Juliet' happens to have taken a modern dress. We almost never do that. It's unusual for us. We play it rapidly. We focus the majority of the story on Romeo and Juliet. You can do this play where Juliet is Palestinian and Romeo is Jewish. Or Romeo is black and Juliet is white. That's not the way I see the play. There is enmity between the families...they just don't like each other."

The play, as he sees it, is about "Love, the first time you fall in love, the hypocrisy of the adult world and their inability to understand that. We fall in love for the first time. We then think that our parents are wrong. They don't have all the answers. [Romeo and Juliet] only know each other for a couple days. They live in that pure moment of falling in love."

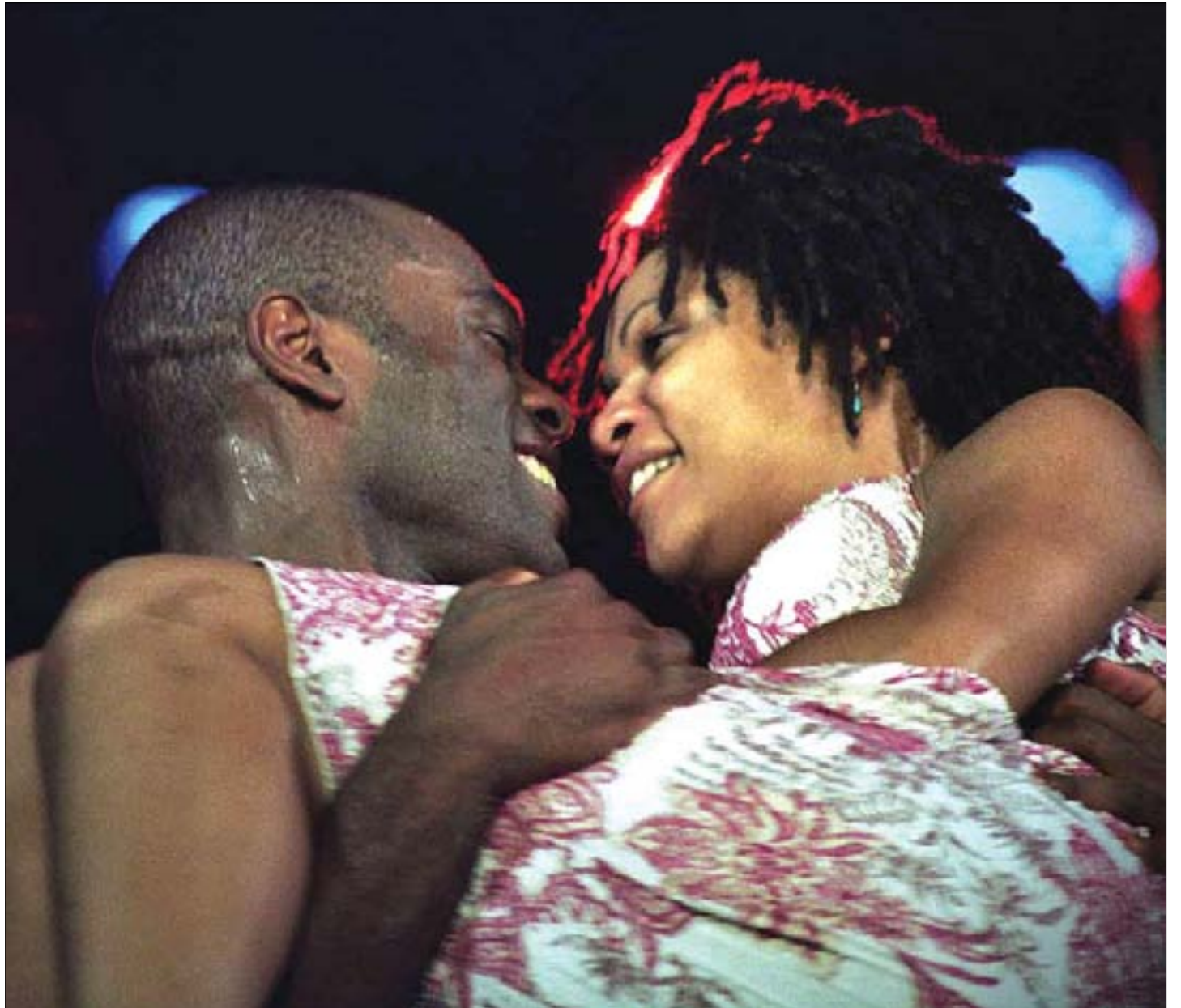
Preisser recalls first reading "Romeo and Juliet" as a teen.

"It made my heart feel joyous," he says. "It was speaking to things I was just beginning to feel as a 13-year-old guy who was beginning to appreciate the opposite sex."

The company gave three performances of the show in New York City parks this August, playing to over 5,000 people. And after Fort Myers, they'll perform in Miami, then at Duke University in Raleigh-Durham, N. C., then Pittsburgh.

In addition to a Drama Desk Award

"Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo? Deny thy father, and refuse thy name"
 "But soft, what light from yonder window breaks? ...It is my Lady! O, it is my Love!"
 "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet"
 "O true apothecary! Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die."
 "Eyes, look your last! Arms, take your last embrace!"



Duane Allen and Robin LeMon as Romeo and Juliet.

CLASSICAL THEATRE OF HARLEM

If you go

>>What: Chico's World Classic Initiative presents "Romeo and Juliet," A Classical Theatre of Harlem Production

>>When: Sept. 14 through Oct. 6, 8 p.m. Friday and 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday

>>Where: Florida Repertory Theatre at the Arcade Theatre on Bay Street between Hendry and Jackson in downtown Fort Myers

>>Cost: \$34 - \$38, \$17 for selected seats. Pay what you can performances at 8 p.m. Monday, Sept. 17 and Monday, Sept. 24

>>Information: Call 332-4488



Duane Allen as Romeo at the Florida Rep.

CLASSICAL THEATRE OF HARLEM

for Artistic Excellence and five Obie Awards (the Off-Broadway version of Tony Awards), the Classical Theatre of Harlem was named "one of eight theaters to watch" by the Drama League. It also receives consistently positive reviews from New York critics. The New York Times said, "That giant-killer of a company, the Classical Theatre of Harlem, is a troupe that makes a habit of locating the most challenging works in the canon and knocking them off as with a slingshot." And, "Three adventurous productions this year put it on the map as a company to follow and

relish."

And NYTheatre.com said: "The Classical Theatre of Harlem has become one of the most consistently intelligent and dramatically compelling companies in New York City. The founders, Alfred Preisser and Christopher McElroen, direct timeless dramas by paying respect both to their playwrights -- Euripides, Shakespeare, Ionesco -- and to their audiences -- African-Americans, New Yorkers, Americans, human beings."

Cacioppo's thrilled that the Classical Theatre of Harlem will be presenting

the first play in his new annual series and hopes it's the start of a long, rich relationship.

"It's very exciting," he says. "We want to form a bond with them."

As part of Chico's World Classic Initiative, Cacioppo wants Florida Rep to present a classic every year, such as "Medea," "Julius Caesar," "Lysistrada," "The Crucible," "Death of a Salesman." And, with funding from Chico's Charities and the Foundation for Lee County Public Schools, Florida Rep will present a classic play free of charge each year for 5,000 Lee County high school students.

This year, approximately 5,000 11th-graders will see "Romeo and Juliet" for free. Cacioppo and his wife, the actress Carrie Lund, have two children in high school, so Cacioppo knew that "Romeo and Juliet" was required reading for Lee County high school students.

"For some, it'll be their first performance of Shakespeare," Cacioppo says. "But for most, it'll be their first professional play. For some of them, sadly, the only play they'll ever see. And for some, we hope, it'll be the start of a lifelong love of the theater and of Shakespeare." ■