



Review

Charles McNulty
Entertainment & Arts

'& Juliet' euphorically turns Shakespeare's tragedy into a Max Martin dance party



The North American Tour Company of "& Juliet." (Matthew Murphy)



By Charles McNulty
Theater Critic | Follow

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Everyone can use an editor, and Shakespeare is no exception. Fortunately, he married one.

Tired of being cooped up with the kids in Stratford-upon-Avon, Anne (Teal Wicks), wife of the great playwright, pops down to London to see the first performance of “Romeo and Juliet.” The new tragic ending that Shakespeare (Corey Mach) proudly previews to the company strikes her as completely wrongheaded.

“What if ... Juliet doesn’t kill herself?” she proposes. As strong-willed as her husband, she doesn’t wish to argue the point. She merely wants to put her idea to the test.

Behold the premise of “& Juliet,” the euphoric dance party of a musical that updates Shakespeare with a dose of 21st century female empowerment. The production, which opened Friday at the Ahmanson Theatre under the fizzy direction of Luke Sheppard, reimagines a new post-Romeo life for Juliet while riding [a magic carpet of chart-toppers from juggernaut Swedish producer Max Martin](#), who has spun gold with Katy Perry, Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys, among other pop titans.



Teal Wicks, left, and Rachel Webb in the North American Tour of “& Juliet.” (Matthew Murphy)

This good-time jukebox musical relies as much on its wit as on its catalog of pop hits. The show’s music and lyrics are credited to Max Martin and friends — which sounds like a low-key cool table at the Grammy Awards. The clever book by Emmy winner [David West Read](#) (“Schitt’s Creek”) creates a world that can contain the show’s musical riches without having to shoehorn in songs in the shameless fashion of “Mamma Mia!”

Take, for instance, one of the early numbers, “I Want It That Way,” a pop ballad made famous by the Backstreet Boys. Anne starts singing the song when Shakespeare initially resists her idea of giving Juliet back her life. She wants him to go along with her suggested changes not because she’s sure she’s right but because she wants him to trust her as an equal partner. The song is redeployed in a way that has little bearing on the lyrics but somehow feels coherent with the original emotion.

Obviously, this is a commercial musical and not a literary masterpiece on par with Shakespeare's tragedy of ill-starred lovers. "& Juliet" would have trouble withstanding detailed scrutiny of its plot or probing interrogation of Juliet's character arc. But Read smartly establishes just the right party atmosphere.

Juliet (a vibrant Rachel Webb), having survived the tragedy once scripted for her, travels from Verona to Paris with an entourage to escape her parents, who want to send her to a nunnery for having married Romeo behind their backs. Her clique includes Angélique (Kathryn Allison), her nurse and confidant; May (Nick Drake), her nonbinary bestie; and April, her newbie sidekick out for fun who Anne plays in disguise. Shakespeare casts himself as the carriage driver, allowing him to tag along and keep tabs on the cockeyed direction his play is going.

In Paris, the crew heads directly to the Renaissance Ball, which has the look and feel of a modern-day mega-club. Entry is barred to Juliet, but not because she's ridiculously underage. Her name isn't on the exclusive guest list. So through the back door, Juliet and her traveling companions sashay as the production erupts in "Blow," the Kesha song that encourages everyone to get their drink on and let loose.



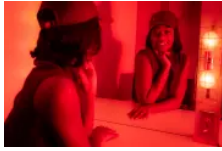
Rachel Webb and the North American Tour Company of “& Juliet.” (Matthew Murphy)

The dance setting — kinetically envisioned by scenic designer Soutra Gilmour, lighting designer Howard Hudson, sound designer Gareth Owen and video and projection designer Andrzej Goulding into a Dionysian video paradise — provides the all-purpose license for Martin’s music. It’s the atmosphere and the energy that matter most. Paloma Young’s extravagant costumes raise the level of decadent hedonism.

In this welcoming new context — imagine [“Moulin Rouge! The Musical”](#) suffused with girl power — there’s never anything odd about the characters grinding and wailing like karaoke superstars. The ecstatic motion of Jennifer Weber’s choreography renders dramatic logic irrelevant.

But love is the name of the game, and both Juliet and May fall for François (Mateus Leite Cardoso), a young musician with a geeky sense of humor who’s still figuring out his identity. May doesn’t expect romance to be part of their fate. In the Spears song “I’m

Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman,” they give powerful expression to an inner confusion this musical romance is determined to sort out with an appropriate partner.



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

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Aug. 15, 2025

Unlike for the original characters, a happy ending is no longer off-limits. Shakespeare and Anne wrestle to get the upper hand of a plot that seems to have a mind of its own. Shakespeare pulls a coup at the end of the first act that I won't spoil except to say that what's good for the goose proves dramaturgically viable for the gander.



Teal Wicks, left, Rachel Webb, Nick Drake and Kathryn Allison in the North American Tour of “& Juliet.” (Matthew Murphy)

This spirited competition stays in the background, but their marital happiness matters to us. Mach's Shakespeare has the cocky strut of a rapper-producer with a long list of colossal hits. Wicks gives Anne the heartfelt complexity of one of her husband's bright comic heroines. There's a quality of intelligent feeling redolent of Rosalind in "As You Like It" in [Wicks'](#) affecting characterization and luscious singing.

But the musical belongs to Juliet, and Webb has the vocal prowess to hijack the stage whenever she's soaring in song. If Juliet's character is still a work in progress, Webb endows her with a maturity beyond her years. She makes us grateful that the Capulet daughter is getting another crack at life. When the big musical guns are brought out late in the second act ("Stronger," "Roar"), she delivers them as emancipatory anthems, fueled by hard-won epiphanies.

Allison's Angélique is just as much a standout, renewing the bawdy earthiness of Shakespeare's nurse with contemporary sass and rousing singing. If the supporting cast of men doesn't make as deep an impression, the festive comic universe is nonetheless boldly brought to life.

"& Juliet" bestows the alternative ending everyone wishes they could script for themselves — a second chance to get it right. This feel-good musical is just what the doctor ordered in these far less carefree times.

'& Juliet'

Where: Ahmanson Theatre, 135 N. Grand Ave.,
L.A.

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 8 p.m.
Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 1 and 7 p.m.
Sundays. Ends Sept. 7

Tickets: Start at \$47.15

Contact: (213) 628-2772 or
[CenterTheatreGroup.org](https://www.centertheatregroup.org)

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes (one intermission)

Where: Segerstrom Hall, Segerstrom Center for the Arts, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 2 and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays, 1 and 6:30 p.m. Sundays. Runs Sept. 9-21

Tickets: Start at \$44

Contact: (714) 556-2787 or [SCFTA.org](https://www.scfta.org)

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Charles McNulty

Charles McNulty is the theater critic of the Los Angeles Times. He received his doctorate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism from the Yale School of Drama.

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