

THE DEFIANT OPTIMISM OF YOUNG LOVE

BY LOUISA MULLER, *DIRECTOR*

The tragic and timeless tale of *Romeo and Juliet* has sparked the imagination of artists and audiences alike, starting 50 years prior to the creation of Shakespeare's play. The story belongs neither to the 16th century of Shakespeare nor to the 19th century of Gounod, and it has been adapted to every conceivable historical and geographical context. We have chosen to bring our protagonists forward in time and make them contemporary teenagers we recognize. Romeo, Juliet, and their compatriots are young people on the brink of adulthood who bridle at the constraints placed on them by the older generation and struggle to take control of their own destinies. Each claims autonomy and agency in any way they can—through bravado, violence, and radical acts of love. While the adults ostensibly hold all the power, their interventions (Capulet's attempt to honor Tybalt's dying wishes by marrying Juliet off to Paris and the Friar's efforts to end the family feud by collaborating in Romeo and Juliet's secret wedding) fail on every count. Through their defiant choices, the young people drive the narrative throughout. I can think of no better company than Wolf Trap Opera, cast entirely with singers at the beginning of their professional lives, to tell a story about characters whose youth is so fundamental to the action.

The piece bears all the hallmarks of a French grand opera, but despite its scale, at its heart the work is an intimate one. By bringing it into The Barns, placing the full-size orchestra onstage, and thrusting the action forward, we are able to heighten its intimacy and distill the storytelling to its essentials, without sacrificing any musical excitement. Gounod anchored the opera on a series of four duets for our star-crossed lovers, following Shakespeare's structure closely and focusing on Romeo and Juliet. Through the duets, we watch their relationship develop from playful teasing, to bold declarations of love, to defiant optimism, to passionate goodbyes. We watch them grow up, knowing all the while that they will never have the chance to grow old.

What is it that brings us back to this story again and again, despite knowing exactly how will end? I think we go along on their journey every time. We fall in love with these characters and desperately hold out hope until the end that somehow this time, things will turn out differently for them.