

'Romeo and Juliet' strictly for laughs

By CARL LEOVITZ



If you've seen the ads for the current EIU production of "Romeo and Juliet," you may have been led to expect some sensual, erotic love scenes. For the ads (and, for that matter, the program notes, as well) show the unclothed star-crossed lovers locked in an embrace, much as in the Zeffirelli film.

Well, shucks, there ain't no such scene. Romeo and Juliet do some smooching, but always fully clothed and with about as much eroticism as Ma and Pa Kettle.

Director E.G. Gabbard plays this "Romeo and Juliet" strictly for laughs. There's lots of broad, coarse, earthy comedy in the first half. The young blades roister and brawl and engage in wrestling and horseplay.

There's an overlong, elaborately staged fight scene that comes straight out of an Errol Flynn or Douglas Fairbanks adventure movie.

Even the balcony scene is played for laughs, so that there is no sense of passionate love or the romantic and wistful

poetry of the moment.

In fact, that's what's missing from the entire production — poetry, for Gabbard ignores Shakespeare's language. Instead, he goes the commedia dell'arte route, which works in something like "The Taming of the Shrew," because there's not much poetry there anyway. But "Romeo and Juliet" is another matter.

By the time things begin to get serious in the second half and build up to the inevitable tragic climax, the EIU audience is so conditioned to expect comedy that they go right on laughing.

The acting doesn't help much. The big test for an actor is a Shakespeare play is to make the great lines sound as if he always talked that way. The EIU players fail the test. The music, lyricism and poetic rhythms of the lines are missing.

Instead, they just seem a funny way of talking that is hard to understand and the actors themselves may not understand. If they want to convey intensity of emotion, the actors almost invariably raise their

voices and speed up to a machine-gun delivery.

Jeff Bennett plays Romeo like an Andy Hardy with a bad case of puppy love. Jeanne Waller makes a pretty Juliet, but she chirps like a bird and is generally ineffectual.

Lynn Lupo is amusingly bawdy and intelligent as the nurse, but should be more warm-hearted. And if she complains of her aching bones, she should show it in her movements.

Clay Peterson, in the relatively minor role of Capulet, is about the only performer who manages to convey some out-sized emotion and passion.

This "Romeo and Juliet" has the dramatic style that Shakespeare himself parodied in "Pyramus and Thisbe." (You may recall this as the little play-within-a-play staged by Peter Quince and his company of rustic craftsmen in "A Midsummer Night's Dream.") There are performances in the Fine Arts Center Theatre at 8 p.m. this coming Saturday, Monday and Tuesday and at 2 p.m. Sunday.