

Shakespeare at the symphony

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Professional actor, director and playwright James DeVita has performed in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" four times, twice as Romeo. But he's never done it like this.

DeVita, known locally as a 15-year member of the American Players Theatre company in Spring Green, will perform spoken word excerpts from the romantic tragedy with the Madison Symphony Orchestra on the weekend of Jan. 16-18. The reading will accompany the MSO's performance of selections from "Romeo and Juliet" by Sergei Prokofiev.

He has never seen the piece performed, so DeVita began his collaboration with guest conductor Daniel Hege by listening repeatedly to Prokofiev's ballet.

"I'm excited because it's very new to me," DeVita said. "How do I become a part of the music and not something separate and distracting from it?" he asked himself. He intends to read some lines before each musical section starts, inserting others in pauses or fissures in the music.

"I certainly hear things in the music that lend themselves to some passages," DeVita said. "I envisioned where I thought (the music) was in the story. ... (For example,) that sounds like old man Capulet seeing Romeo for the first time; that sounds like the nurse there; this is the scene of the dance inside the Capulets' house.

"Was that the composer's intention? I'm not sure, but with my knowledge of the play, it sounds like that," he said.

In the mid-1930s, Prokofiev composed "Romeo and Juliet" as a ballet in four acts. It follows Shakespeare's story of two young, star-crossed lovers who defy their feuding families and, in a tragic misunderstanding, take their own lives.

Three suites for orchestra were extracted from "Romeo and Juliet," but they are not necessarily in dramatic order and follow no plot. For the MSO, Hege selected excerpts from the first and second suites.

Maestro Hege, conductor of the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra, has collaborated with actors on Shakespearean works before. Shakespeare's plays and sonnets are popular among musicians for adaptations, so Hege chooses works that are performed less often: William Walton's "Henry V" overture, Mendelssohn's music for "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Sibelius's "Tempest" and a tone poem by Strauss inspired by "Macbeth."

"There are times when you really want to hear the voice interact with the music," Hege said. "Other times, there are key moments in the music when you just want to take it in ... or take in the text unalloyed."

"You don't want the audience to be thinking about much except what's happening in front of them."

Hege said that he and DeVita worked to minimize speaking over the music and instead to be interactive with it. Text and music engage different parts of the brain, he said; one requires a more cerebral, analytical response and the other prompts an intuitive, emotional reaction.

Hege wanted just enough of Shakespeare's text "to underscore and to basically describe the scene of what we're playing ... to set up the music and the mood we're about to hear."

DeVita said the most important thing is to enhance the audience's experience, to open new opportunities for engaging and understanding the music.

"The point with any performing arts for me is having the most clarity for the audience," DeVita said. "If they're moved by it because they understand it, that's the best compliment you can get."

Other works in the Madison Symphony Orchestra's program for Jan. 16-18 include Mozart's lively and well-known "Paris" symphony, written when he was 22, and the Madison debut of Scandinavian violinist Henning Kraggerud, playing Sibelius' Violin Concerto.