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Juliet is teased by her nurse in the Hiraeth production *Upstairs* at the Gatehouse in Highgate. Photo courtesy of Hiraeth.

Romeo and Juliet

Review by Sheila Armstrong

The young theatre company Hiraeth, founded by Zoe Ford in 2011, brought their 60s-inspired *Romeo and Juliet* to our local theatre *Upstairs* at the Gatehouse in Highgate in February. The director draws parallels between the feuding of the Capulet and Montague families and *Mods and Rockers'* antagonism to each other. Both the play and the 1960s are about youthful rebellion.

The Who's film *Quadrophenia*, about the summer of a teenage Mod, is mentioned by Zoe as being a major influence. Vintage Sixties clothing and music happily supported the theme.

The famous love story was told with passion, the actors playing the leads – Benjamin Ireland and Maya Thomas – coming to life when they met. The dance of the two young lovers symbolising their commitment was an imaginative touch. Rosalind Blessed

deserves special mention for playing the nurse strongly and with wit; as does Michael Hanratty who played the friar with gravitas.

A few comments from press night: the unused balcony on set was a bit like the elephant in the room and never used, thus avoiding a cliché I suppose. The actors' faces need to be lit as it is so important to see them, and this was not always the case but may well have been rectified after the first night.

Ash disease moves closer

By Ann Bronkhorst

In Norse legend, a giant ash tree grew at the centre of the world; the gods created the first male human from an ash tree, the first woman from the elm. Our ancestors used ash wood for spear shafts, tool handles, furniture and fuel, and thought the leaves and wood protected against evil and cured illnesses. Even today the ash has medicinal uses.

But what will cure the tree itself from *Chalara fraxinea*, the potentially devastating fungal ash dieback disease? How can people identify ash trees, healthy or unhealthy, and what happens if (when) the disease reaches North London? Before Christmas it was reported in St Albans so the air-borne spores will reach us soon, probably via roads and rail tracks.



Recognition

To identify leafless ash trees in winter, look for greyish bark, smooth on saplings but often naturally fissured on mature trees, and for upward-curving branches that may retain a few clusters of winged seeds ('keys'). The leaves, divided into leaflets on a central stalk, emerge in May from distinctive hoof-shaped black buds. Ash trees like clay soil, self-seed readily and are easily spotted along the tube embankments, for example behind Prospect Ring, and throughout Islington Cemetery.

Dieback disease causes abnormal vertical lesions that look like wounds, and dark brown marks inside the twigs and branches. Diseased leaves blacken and the fungal spores they carry are spread by wind, leaf litter and walkers' feet.

Coldfall Wood, Highgate Wood and the main part of Hampstead Heath have few ash trees but the heath extension has plenty and its manager is braced for damage once the spores arrive. Haringey is monitoring about 700 ash trees in parks and estates across the borough, including mature ones in Downhills Way and Parkland Walk. All Haringey's recent plantings seem fine and further surveys will be done this spring.

Guidance

Felling of mature ash trees as a 'control' measure is not advised. Barnet Council provides brief, clear information in the Tree Management section of its website at www.barnet.gov.uk and there's good coverage at www.rspb.org.uk/ashdieback. For disease identification, the Forestry Commission website is excellent, particularly its short video. Try www.ashtag.org for regularly-updated information.

A doula's role in childbirth

Eleonora Lawson explains what a doula is and outlines the benefits of having a childbirth companion in preparation for birth and during labour.

World Doula Week will be celebrated between 22–28 March, the time of the spring equinox and the return of a fertile Earth. A doula is someone supporting mother and partner emotionally and practically during pregnancy, birth and beyond.

She is a trusted companion who has usually undertaken a training course and is someone chosen by the parents. As their guardian, she supports parents, helps them explore the options for the birth day they want for themselves and their baby, protecting their space before, during and after labour and acting as an advocate if needed.

In my doula journey, I am

learning that having an experienced birth companion who knows the NHS system is key for parents. They can enjoy the day without worrying about practicalities that the doula takes care of, so they are free to focus on the experience.

You can find more information at www.doula.org.uk, and Eleonora, based in Muswell Hill, can be contacted via www.lifetouchmassage.co.uk

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