

EDUCATION

Using Shakespeare to beat today's problems

By Fawzia Moodley

SHAKESPEARE would surely turn in his grave at the Nu-West Secondary School's version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Or would he?

Actually, the production, dubbed *Ramesh and Julie*, by the school's Std 9 speech and drama class does share the basic theme of the star-crossed lovers made famous by the English bard.

The difference is that it is set in Newlands West in 1992 rather than Verona, Italy, in the 16th century.

And instead of beautiful Juliet Capulet and the dashing Romeo Montague whose romance was the victim of a longstanding feud between their families, here we have Julie Daniel, a Christian, and Ramesh Singh, a Hindu, whose love is doomed because of religious differences.

The purists may be outraged but the Nu West pupils remain unapologetic about these local twists to Shakespeare's classic love story.

Their creativity knows no bounds — they have given similar treatment to Shakespeare's other great tragedy, *Othello*, as well as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, which tells the story of a man who unwittingly married his mother and killed his father.

Although some feathers may be ruffled, the Nu West pupils proclaim that their cause is just — they are using drama to tackle social problems and galvanise their community into tackling its problems, one of which is the spiralling teenage suicide rate in the Newlands area.

At a recent public production of their plays they invited a member of Durban's Child Protection Unit to give a talk, and by the end of the show a support group of about 50 parents was formed.

The idea is for them and the pupils to learn communication and problem-solving skills in a bid to prevent the tragedy of teenage suicide.

It all started with their drama teacher, Mr Faruk Hoosain, who does not believe in conventional methods of education.

He believes that pupils must be taught to become

independent thinkers and learn to challenge the injustices and ills of society.

His pupils have learned to use the traditional western techniques of speech and drama and combined them with modern trends such as rap music, and even Indian cultural practices like classical dancing, to create a unique drama with which the local community can identify totally.

Thus while most modern children are unable to identify with Shakespeare's work, these pupils can relate to the universal message contained in his works.

It is obvious that Mr Hoosain's methods work, in his pupils' innovative approach to speech and drama.

Instead of following the normal trend of producing their set works, the Nu West pupils decided to make their productions relevant to their own lives.

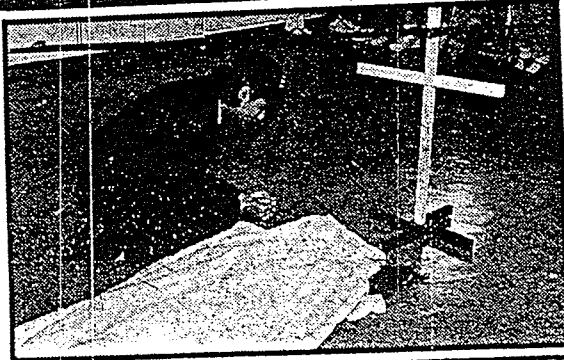
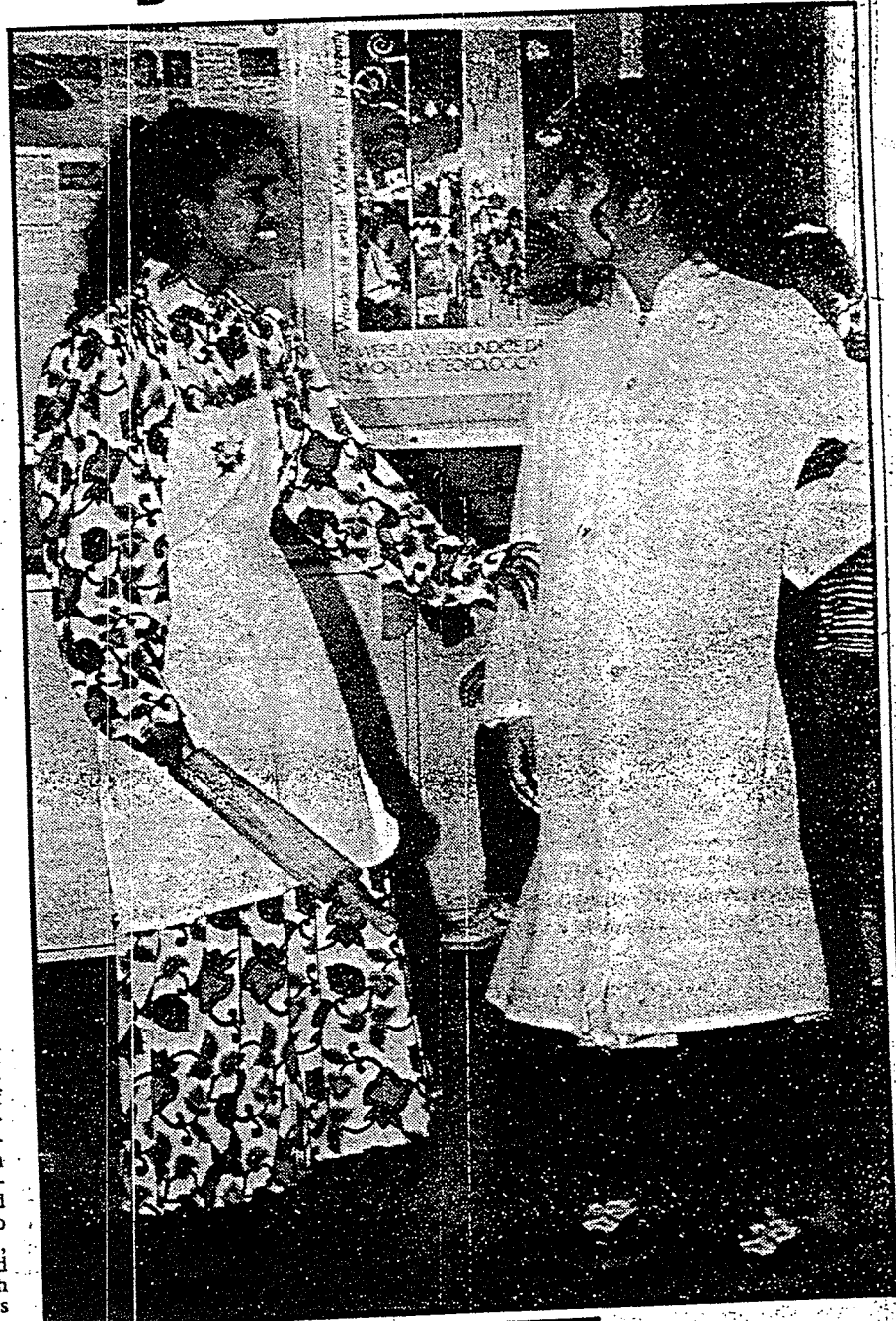
"They looked at the most common problems in Newlands, workshopped various ideas and came up with the three short plays loosely built around *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Oedipus Rex*," Miss Simi Devraj, 23, a final-year trainee teacher who was block teaching at the school and who helped them in their production, told Post Natal.

"We have had a spate of teenage suicides in Newlands West and most of these stemmed from parental opposition to their children's relationships with someone across the religious line," explained Chantal Reddiar, 16, who plays the role of Julie, whose parents are opposed to her romance with Ramesh for religious reasons.

Their other two plays combined the themes of incest from *Oedipus Rex* and jealousy and possessiveness from *Othello* to tackle the problems of alcoholism and sexual promiscuity.

Mr Hoosain and his pupils are ecstatic about the results of his "theatre for development".

"We have proved what can be achieved even within the confines of the current education system," he said.



Scenes from *Ramesh and Julie*: local gossips aggravate the problems of the lovers. Left: Chantal Pillay — Ramesh — mourns the suicide of his girlfriend, Julie