

ESSAI

Volume 7

Article 23

4-1-2010

Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*

Edward Hren
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai>

Recommended Citation

Hren, Edward (2009) "Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*," *ESSAI*: Vol. 7, Article 23.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol7/iss1/23>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. It has been accepted for inclusion in *ESSAI* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*

by Edward Hren

(Theatre 1100)

William Shakespeare would not only approve of Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film "Romeo + Juliet", a modern film adaptation of his *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* (first printing in 1597), but he would enjoy it as well. In the four hundred years plus that passed between when the Bard's tale of star cross'd lovers was first told to audiences and people lined up at their local multiplexes and video stores to see Luhrmann's translation, a lot had changed. The premise that Shakespeare would indeed enjoy the film comes with one simple and obvious caveat. Under this hypothetical, the hypothetical William would have to be up to date on current pop culture. Imagine a youngster coming to Shakespeare for the first time in this day and age and how difficult it is to grasp it early on. This film would be the same thing for him. Shakespeare's head might explode at the sight of a movie screen let alone a home entertainment center replete with a DVD player and surround sound. The film is a cutting edge slice of modernity, even ahead of its time, so it is definitely light years ahead of Shakespeare's. With that aside, however, Shakespeare would appreciate the homage to his play as he was seen as somewhat of a renegade, much like Luhrmann. The film's inclusion of outstanding music would appeal to Shakespeare's sensibilities as well. Overall Shakespeare would see that through all the glitz and slick production values, Luhrmann not only presented his original themes but illuminated them tenfold so contemporary audiences could understand and be touched by them as much as Elizabethan audiences were back in the days of the Globe Theatre. Beyond all of this, there are a few more road blocks William Shakespeare would need to get over to see the movie in a positive light.

The issues Shakespeare might take with the film may seem small but surely they would come up. Besides setting the play in a place called "Verona Beach", shooting the film with quick, MTV style cuts and upping the firepower of the characters from swords to guns, Shakespeare would have to resign himself to the fact that ample dialogue and even full scenes would need to be cut or have the context completely changed. Luhrmann obviously thought that the masses would need the story wrapped up in pretty bows and modern frivolity in order to accept it. Luhrmann also knew that it would need to come in at two hours or less and be chock full of action from start to finish. Shakespeare would need to understand that the director knew the potential audiences' preferences of film and tailored his vision, wonderfully, to them. Contextually, when Romeo is first seen in the film, Luhrmann needed a way to show his monologues without having him talking to himself, so he was made into a poet. Luhrmann's Romeo was always scribbling Shakespeare's more poetic lines in a notebook. This added a touch of comedy at times. For instance, the audience sees Romeo writing the lines "O heavy lightness, serious vanity. Misshapen chaos of well seeming forms (etc.)" and when he regurgitates them to Benvolio who is speaking plainly while they watch news reports on television that feature Benvolio and the opening fight scene, it prompts him to laugh at Romeo's fancy eloquence. Benvolio's snickering then prompts Romeo's line "Dost thou not laugh?" To which his cousin replies in a heavy modern street slang voice "No, coz, I rather weep." Luhrmann also takes liberty with the sequence of some of Shakespeare's lines. These liberties always seemed to add to the story Luhrmann was trying to tell and enhance Shakespeare's messages without changing or adding any outside dialogue.

One of the many scenes that dripped with emotion in the film saw both major dialogue cuts and a context change that diverted from Shakespeare's original version. Mercutio's Queen Mab

speech was cut in half and delivered with voracious passion, and in drag, in the scene leading up to the Capulet ball. In it Mercutio offers Romeo a psychedelic pill. After the speech Romeo takes it, assured by Mercutio's understanding of the power of dreams. As Romeo enters the fateful party, he prematurely delivers the line "drugs are quick", which is one of his final lines in Shakespeare's published version. It is just after he utters this line that he first sees Juliet, marking the beginning of their love and of his death. Luhrmann's line shift was not just a case of him taking poetic license, it was an aid in updating the scene and charging the line's meaning with duality and foreboding. Another case of scene deletion was Romeo's final fight with Paris. The film's Paris, played by Paul Rudd as a goofy, yuppie senator Dave Paris, was a mere side note in the shadows of Romeo and Juliet's all powerful love and therefore did not warrant Shakespeare's final showdown. There were many cuts and changes but in the final product, all were necessary in Luhrmann's vision. Shakespeare would probably grasp this better than most and abide it well.

William Shakespeare was known in his time as somewhat of a renegade. He revolutionized the theatre forevermore. Luhrmann's film adaptation and countless others are a testament to that. When *Romeo and Juliet* was first staged, it was well known that Queen Elizabeth had a strong distaste for dueling (Botnick 1996), so Shakespeare upped the violence. In 1595 arranged marriages were the norm and the play took a very strong stand against them (Botnick 1996). A little known fact is that the bestselling work of Shakespeare's in his lifetime was not a play but an erotic poem called *Venus and Adonis*. It sold mainly to young men and was written at a time when theatres were closed due to plague. He sold sex, basically, because he was running out of money with the theatres closed. Paramount with his status of rebel was Shakespeare's status of innovator. He coined 1700 new English words in his works. A couple of the more successful ones being "addiction" and "priceless" (Dickson 2009). Shakespeare was also the first playwright to really delve into psychologically identifying his characters. Characters of the day were reduced to mere stereotypes and symbols while Shakespeare's were often provided a back story and depth through his writing. Over time, because of these dramatic, character building techniques, Shakespeare's characters are much more vivid and memorable than any other playwright of his time (Grolier 1996). With these credentials as a cutting edge artist, Shakespeare would surely see in Luhrmann a kindred spirit.

Luhrmann is also considered an outsider and innovator by his peers based on his work. His most successful film to date is "Moulin Rouge" which marries the tale of a poet and 19th century French whore with contemporary musical numbers. It was a great success despite being nothing like the mainstream multiplex draws of today. The previously mentioned liberty Luhrmann took with Romeo's drug fueled party scene is an example of just one extension of Shakespeare's rebellious nature to his own. Luhrmann's take on what is Shakespeare's most well known scene in the play and one of the best known scenes of all time, the balcony scene, may be the biggest of all risks he took in making the film. Shakespeare's scene is perfection. A testament to its wonderful portrayal of the young lovers promising themselves to each other, despite everything that goes against it, is the fact that it endures these 400 years later and is seen as a template in that any scene with a balcony in it, in any medium, automatically inspires thoughts of *Romeo and Juliet*. Here is where Luhrmann's Shakespearean renegade streak as a film maker comes to the fore. Once again, by completely changing all but the words, he not only retains the original sense of overwhelming romance in the scene, but enhances it for a modern generation.

Juliet's room overlooks an opulent swimming pool. Yes, there is a trellis leading up to a balcony, but convention does not sit well with Luhrmann. First, the audience sees a high tech security booth with a guard passively watching monitors focused on Juliet's balcony and the pool area below. He does not see Romeo who has begun his dialogue to himself. Then the balcony is seen but the audience is surprised when instead of Juliet, the nurse is seen peaking out on the balcony. Romeo is halfway up the trellis when she appears, briefly scaring him, and then Juliet arrives; she comes out on the ground floor from an elevator. Juliet delivers her lines as Romeo follows behind her, closer and

closer, listening. When Romeo finally speaks he is practically on top of her and in her fright they topple over each other into the romantically lit pool. Twice the security guard is shown checking the monitors but the heroes are underwater and unseen. When a guard finally appears pool side to check on what he heard, Romeo submerges and the guard is seen looking lustily at a sopping wet Juliet before leaving her alone. Romeo and Juliet deliver a majority of their famous discourse with each other in the pool, floating, orbiting one another. Just before the nurse calls Juliet in the two take a final plunge and share a long underwater kiss. The shot is beautifully lit and in slow motion.

Luhrmann changes one of the most famous scenes in history for the sake of heightening the already groundbreaking sexuality and romanticism it includes. At the play and film's core is love. While Luhrmann's version has enhanced, sped up and has more flashy action and violence, the romance is equally more intense due to his risk taking. Shakespeare, of all people, would notice that.

One other stand-out sequence that has Luhrmann's fingerprints all over it, intensifying the Bard's intentions and thus pleasing him posthumously, hypothetically, is Mercutio's slaying parlayed into Romeo's revenge over the "Prince of Cats." The scene in which the nurse comes to see Romeo when he's with his friends, between the film and play, is relatively similar. In the movie they are hanging out at the beach and when the nurse arrives they tease at her but Luhrmann changes it by having Mercutio fire his gun into the air. The music, the loud carrying on by the men, the beach sounds, everything goes silent. Mortal seriousness is established as Mercutio soberly delivers the line "Romeo, will you come to your father's? We'll dinner tither". The gunshot kills the whimsy as Luhrmann shows that Mercutio knows the dangerous path his friend is walking down with the nurse. This shows the viewers a side of the philosophical party-boy not yet seen. Mercutio, in this scene, shows a deep and abiding love for Romeo and genuine concern for his welfare. Two scenes later Mercutio's blood absolutely boils when Tybalt arrives at the beach in search of Romeo. Because of the previous scene Mercutio's passion is understood and believed when he intercedes in Romeo's favor as Tybalt beats his new (albeit unknown) in-law. Mercutio wails on Tybalt soundly before being stabbed by his hidden switchblade. Mercutio then falls back into his comedian mode with the "look for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man" lines but then brings back the passion, tinged with spite, spitting "A plague O' both your houses!" Quick cut, flash close-ups on Romeo and Tybalt's faces, a storm gathers and Mercutio dies; soon after they are seen in their cars, tearing off after each other through downtown Verona Beach. A fantastic collision in the center of the city and Tybalt's gun falls out of his overturned car. All this insanity instead of Shakespeare's Romeo and Benvolio discussing what just happened until Tybalt's return. All dialogue is cut, and then reenters as both men pick up the gun in the pouring rain, Tybalt's finger on the trigger and Romeo, on his knees, holding the other end and pointing the barrel straight at his own head screams three times "Either I, or thou, or both must go with him!" This spooks Tybalt so much that he drops the gun and staggers back. Romeo is shown picking up the gun and unloading the whole chamber on Tybalt. Romeo is seething as Tybalt dies. These scenes could never be captured this way on stage yet they represent Shakespeare's ideas so clearly.

As for Luhrmann's skill for character development, it is on par with Shakespeare for fully developing them psychologically. Take Brian Dennehy's Lord Montague. He is worried and depressed over not understanding his poet son. Montague is played always slouched over and sad in his tuxedo, almost resigned to Romeo's ultimate fate from the start. Paul Sorvino fills the role of Lord Capulet with relish as a drunken, depraved and angry millionaire who does not take refusals well at all. When Juliet tells him she does not wish to marry Paris he throws her to the ground very violently while screaming his lines. This helps punctuate Juliet's similarly drunken, socialite mother when she responds to her daughter's plea for help directly afterwards with "Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word. Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee." But the main characters, of course, are the most developed. Luhrmann actually literally sets them apart from the fray. In their four main, lengthy scenes together, Leonardo DiCaprio's Romeo and Claire Danes' Juliet are separated from all

the commotion going on around, and because of, them. First, at the Capulet ball they are enclosed, for the most part, in an elevator. Hiding from everyone else as they first kiss and flirt with each other. Next, in the aforementioned “balcony scene” which actually takes place in a pool and underwater they are alone and protected by the water. The third time they are alone together they use the sheets of their marriage bed to hide and avoid the light of the new day in which Romeo is to begin his banishment. Finally, on their death mantel, they are surrounded by hundreds of candles and many neon lit crosses. There is no Paris corpse even in this version, they are alone and surrounded once more.

Quickly, a few more liberties, tricks and devises all cleverly used in the film that Shakespeare would certainly notice and appreciate. When Mr. Montague asks for his “longsword” he is handed a gun and the camera quickly flashes to the brand of gun and it is “Longsword”. The apothecary is basically a tenement junky drug dealer. The fighting between the young Montagues and Capulets all over town is akin to gang wars and is covered by the media and splashed all over headlines and television news reports. The chief of police is called “Captain Prince”. He shouts news of Romeo’s banishment over a bullhorn. Signs for “Montague Oil” are all over and in the center of this industrialized, fictitious city towers two skyscrapers, side by side, loudly billed as the Capulet and Montague buildings. Mantua is a trailer park in the desert. In a very relatable twist for today’s viewers, it is a UPS-type delivery system that flubs the Friar’s letter to Mantua. The film opens and closes with a black screen framing a television set. A news anchor delivers both the prologue and the famous final line “For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo”. Someone who had to fill the female roles of men in his productions would surely appreciate these directorial slights of hand.

Another parallel between the two auteurs is their knowledge and understanding of contemporary music. It is believed that Shakespeare used contemporary music settings by Thomas Morley for the lyric “O Mistress Mine” in *Twelfth Night* (Online Shakespeare 2003). It is also possible to place much contemporary music and instrumentation of the time to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Online Shakespeare 2003). Lurhmann’s grasp of contemporary music is sort of his calling card. As in his hit “Moulin Rouge”, “Romeo + Juliet” features not just beautifully arranged melodies that help notch the romanticism up a level, but songs by such talented and well respected but not vanilla, mainstream acts as Radiohead and The Butthole Surfers. Shakespeare would weep at the loveliness of some music in the film and gyrate to the furiousness of others but he would also marvel at the way they all fit so well.

This movie is independent, anti-authoritarian and rebellious, for this alone, Shakespeare would adore it. The fact that Lurhmann not only kept Shakespeare’s themes but made them explode in the faces of a new audience who needs things to explode in their faces to fully understand them, would leave Shakespeare grinning ear to ear that his message is being told yet, solidifying his immortality. His theme of age versus youth, so controversial in his time is tackled with voracity in the movie. These young Montagues and Capulets are all but giving the finger to the entire civilized world that surrounds them. Car chases and shoot outs, cross dressing, drug usage and of course, a marriage forbidden by violence all done with almost no notice of the parents or authorities. Not only would Shakespeare not mind the slicing of his dialogue and scenes once he sees how they play out, he would cheer Lurhmann on upon the realization that the changes were imperative to the transfer from the page and stage to the big screen. Shakespeare would revel in the fact that his story was told by a fellow renegade and innovator. While Baz Lurhmann may have never actually created words, he has reworked and rewritten touchstone musical pieces so that they sound like they were created for his movies right down to the scene and the second he used them in. William Shakespeare would love this film because it is beautiful but mostly he would love that the film made young people today see the beauty in his story.

*For his masses, and in conclusion
Luhrmann's vision allays confusion
Tho not precisely note for note
T'is, and more clear, what the Bard wrote*

Would William Shakespeare Approve of Baz Luhrmann's Film "Romeo + Juliet?"

Eddie Hren

Theatre App. Tues. PM

"But above everything else, [William Shakespeare] had to deal with a city of 400,000 people and a theatre that held 4,000 and everyone from the street sweeper upwards. Not unlike your local Cineplex, and he used everything possible to arrest and stop that audience - really bawdy comedy and then, wham! Something really beautiful and poetic. Everything we did in *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) was based on Elizabethan Shakespeare. The fact that there was pop music in it was a Shakespearean thing. We would be fearless about the lowness of the comedy" – (Baz Luhrmann)

Works Cited

Luhrmann, Baz. "Baz Luhrmann Quotes and Trivia at Movie Tome." Movietome. Web.
<http://www.movietome.com>.

Romeo + Juliet. Dir. Baz Luhrmann. Perf. Leonardo DiCaprio, Claire Danes, and Pete Postlewaite.
20th Century Fox, 1996. Film.