



Postmodern Shakespeare: Strictly *Romeo*

William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet is deceptively titled, because it is really Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo & Juliet*. Visually it is more *Strictly Ballroom* than strictly *Romeo*, though the dialogue—what survives of it—is strictly Shakespeare. It would get high marks if its evaluation were strictly verbal, perhaps, but the setting is so visually bizarre that its “fidelity” is questionable. The film’s spectacle constantly overpowers and overwhelms the poetry. This *Romeo & Juliet* is packed with about as much exuberance as one might expect from writer Craig Pearce and director Baz Luhrmann, the creative team that made *Strictly Ballroom* a high-camp triumph.

The text is delivered oddly and anachronistically but not completely. Part of the Prologue is there, delivered by an anchorwoman (Edwina Moore) on a tiny television screen that expands out to reveal the scene of “fair Verona,” updated (but not upgraded) to a Hispanic ghetto called “Verona Beach.” Can Shakespeare’s tragedy withstand the shock of the modern and the playful inventiveness of such postmodern tomfoolery as this movie employs? It’s a judgment call at best.

At least Luhrmann gets the lines right, anachronistic though they may seem (though many lines are cut as a favor to actors who cannot deliver them effectively and coherently). Unlike Zeffirelli’s visually splendid but textually goofy *Hamlet*, most of the lines seem to be in approximately the right places. Claire Danes handles Juliet’s lines a great deal better than Leonardo DiCaprio handles Romeo’s lines, but, as an awestruck student reviewer noted, they sure are a fine-looking couple. Of that there can be no doubt.

It’s been nearly thirty years since Franco Zeffirelli’s operatic and Italianate version of 1968, so perhaps a “new” version was overdue, reinventing the play for a new generation. The Zeffirelli production followed the play closely, for the most part—at least up to Romeo’s banishment. Friar John and Paris somehow got bypassed in Zeffirelli’s film, though Milo O’Shea’s Friar Lawrence made his expected and cowardly appearance at Juliet’s crypt, as he fails to do in the Baz Luhrmann version. Luhrmann kicks Paris and the priest out of the death scene and turns Friar John into a somewhat tardy FedEx delivery boy, indicating that a misplaced letter can have tragic consequences. Friar Lawrence is upgraded to the priesthood.

Like Zeffirelli, Luhrmann selected hot young actors to play the star-crossed lovers. To

make the story "relevant," he boots it out of Italy to an ugly twentieth century urban setting for 20th Century-Fox, hence "Verona Beach." The film opens with a rumble on the beach and looks like a cross between *West Side Story*, *Miami Vice*, and Fellini's *Satyricon*, making the film (which was shot in Mexico) visually astonishing and intellectually confusing.

The casting is no less peculiar. Mercutio is played by an African-American in dreadlocks and drag as Luhrmann makes this flaming creature speak of "Queen Mab, the fairies' midwife." Gender confusion seems to explain his melancholy, along with the fact that he is high on drugs. In Zeffirelli's *Romeo*, John McEnery played Mercutio with melancholy brilliance. In Luhrmann's *Romeo* it is hard to believe that Harold Perrineau even understands most of Mercutio's lines. If this Mercutio is indeed Romeo's cousin, a number of genetic tricks must have been played. Captain Prince (Vondie Curtis-Hall) also disturbs the ethnic mix of the play, though this actor seems to understand his lines and delivers them with authority.

In Zeffirelli's *Romeo* Michael York's Tybalt was no less amazing than John McEnery's Mercutio. In Luhrmann's *Romeo* John Leguizamo's Tybalt has all the dignity of a pimp or a drug-dealer. The world of this film is perverse and confused. Swaggering out of his pimpmobile, Tybalt cannot be taken seriously, except as a killer-thug. By killing this hood-hothead, Romeo is doing a service to society and to Shakespeare, by removing one of the film's worst manglers of the text. All of the junior Capulets look like high-octane drug-runners. One might expect the Montagues to be less ostentatious than the Capulets, as Zeffirelli's costuming clearly suggests, but Luhrmann makes the "Montague boys" tattooed bully-boy punksters. Only sourful Romeo and peacemaking Benvolio (Dash Mihok) appear to be borderline normal, though Benvolio looks like a candidate for the Miami Dolphins' defensive line.

Romeo's father, "Ted" Montague, is played by Brian Dennehy, hardly an Italian actor, but the Montagues seem to be Irish hoods. At least Juliet's father (Paul Sorvino) looks like he might be Italian. Juliet's nurse (Miriam Margoyles) might do well enough in a pizza commercial, but, *mamma mia*, the film has stripped this Latina spitfire of most of her lines and charm. Capulet's banquet looks like Trimalchio's feast, the guests borrowed from Fellini's central casting, and Paul Sorvino's toga borrowed from *Caligula*. The film offers up a little Roman decadence, or maybe a lot.

Claire Danes is ravishing as Juliet, done up as an angel with wings at the banquet. There is no Mooriska in this production. Instead, love at first sight is established when the two lovers first examine each other from opposite sides of an aquarium. As Mercutio remarks in the play (but not in *this* film), "Oh flesh, thou art fishified!" A water motif flows through the film. The lovers make quite a splash out of the balcony scene. Captain Prince has a SWAT team in hot pursuit of Romeo on his way to the crypt scene. M. Emmet Walsh makes a creepy Apothecary, but creepiness is this character actor's speciality. Thumbs are bitten, hearts are smitten, and dreamboats collide as this play takes its expected suicidal trajectory. The lines are often right, but the context is most peculiar. Janet Maslin described this postmodern, kitschy *Romeo* as "headache Shakespeare" in her *New York Times* review. But they certainly are a fine-looking set of lovers. Stodgy old Shakespearians should see the film because their students will have seen it and perhaps approved of its excesses, but they would be well advised to take a second look at the Zeffirelli version, the excesses of which will seem moderate in comparison.

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William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet. Directed by Baz Luhrmann. Screenplay by Craig Pearce and Baz Luhrmann. Cinematography by Donald M. McAlpine, A.S.C. Edited by Jill Bilcock. Production Design by Catherine Martin. Music by Nellee Hooper. Original Score Composed by Craig Armstrong, Marius De Vries, and Nellee Hooper. With Leonardo DiCaprio (Romeo), Claire Danes (Juliet), Miriam Margoyles (Nurse), John Leguizamo (Tybalt), Harold Perrineau (Mercutio), Brian Dennehy (Ted Montague), Christina Pickles (Caroline Montague), Paul Sorvino (Fulgencio Capulet), Diane Venora (Gloria Capulet), Pete Postlethwaite (Father Lawrence), Paul Rudd (Dave Paris), Dash Mihok (Benvolio), Jesse Bradford (Balthasar).