

# Romeo & Juliet

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Good stories that both entertain and speak to the human condition are hard to find so it is common practice today for script writers for movies, musicals, operas and ballets to turn to the stories of William Shakespeare for inspiration. As the resident playwright for the acting company in which he was a shareholder, Shakespeare, also faced with the need to provide new plays each year, acted no differently. He turned to history, Greek and Roman classics, folk tales, poems and even existing plays as story sources. Thus, Shakespeare used as a source for his *Romeo and Juliet* play (written in either 1594 or 1595) Arthur Brooke's long 1562 poem *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet*.

The story was already well known in Italian, French and English and Brooke's poem was itself taken from the French translation by Pierre Boastuau (1559) of one of the stories in Italian Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* (1550's). Shakespeare copied Brooke's alterations to Bandello's story confirming that it was Brooke's version of the story which Shakespeare used as the basis for his play. Interestingly, Brooke in his address "*To the Reader*" states that he has seen "*the same argument lately set forth on stage*", however no earlier play survives. Shakespeare compressed the action to occur over just five days versus 9 months in Brooke's poem, developed the roles of the minor characters and added in the sword fight in the play's opening scene. During his life *Romeo and Juliet* was one of three works for which Shakespeare was most celebrated<sup>1</sup>. The others were *Hamlet* and *Venus and Adonis*.

Early in his career, Shakespeare provided two new plays each year and, in a few years even 3 or 4 but in his later years he typically provided only one new play each year. This was partly because on the accession of King James I and his arrival in London from Scotland in 1604, accompanied by his court, a new audience was available allowing Shakespeare to recycle his earlier plays. In addition, an outbreak of plague in 1603 saw the intermittent closure of the theatres. Ironically it was possibly the culling of London's rats in anticipation of the king's arrival that saw the now starved fleas jump from rats to people and to be the cause of this plague outbreak.

There had been a major plague outbreak in 1593-94 just before Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* and plague has a crucial part in the play's plot. In Act 3, when Mercutio and Tybalt are duelling, Mercutio is fatally stabbed after Romeo rushes between the two and getting in Mercutio's way gives Tybalt the opportunity to stab him under Romeo's arm. Mercutio then, knowing he has been fatally wounded, curses them calling out thrice: "*A plague on both your houses*". The curse comes to fruition for plague causes the death of both Romeo (House Montague) and Juliet (House Capulet), not directly but as secondary casualties. The friar who was supposed to deliver a letter to Romeo explaining Juliet's drugged condition met a friend who had been visiting the sick and as a result both men were forcibly locked in a

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<sup>1</sup> The Oxford Bodleian Library had a copy of the 1623 First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays. By 1660 the volume had been so damaged by generations of student readers, who were especially fond of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, that the library curators decided to get rid of it.

house<sup>2</sup>, suspected of having been exposed to the plague. Consequently, the letter was never delivered, and Romeo is thus unaware Juliet is merely drugged and not dead.

*Enter Friar John at one door*

**Friar John**

Holy Franciscan friar, brother, ho!

*Enter Friar Lawrence at another door*

**Friar Lawrence**

This same should be the voice of Friar John.  
Welcome from Mantua! What says Romeo?  
Or is his mind be writ, give me his letter.

**Friar John**

Going to find a barefoot brother out -  
One of our order - to associate me (*i.e. keep me company*)  
Here in this city visiting the sick,  
And finding him, the searchers<sup>3</sup> of the town,  
Suspecting that we both were in a house  
Where the infectious pestilence did reign,  
Sealed up the doors and would not let us forth,  
So that my speed to Mantua there was stayed.

**Friar Lawrence**

Who bare my letter then to Romeo?

**Friar John**

I could not send it – here it is again –  
Nor get a messenger to bring it to thee,  
So fearful were they of infection.

*Romeo and Juliet 5.2.1-16*

Let us now move from discussing the play to discussing the ballet. The standard score used for nearly all ballet interpretations of *Romeo & Juliet* is by Sergei Prokofiev. He had left Russia after the Revolution for America and Western Europe and began writing the music in 1934 in anticipation of his return to Russia as opportunities in the West diminished due to the Great Depression. He wrote: *“[The Russians] like long ballets which take a whole evening; abroad the public prefers short ballets .... This difference of viewpoint arises from the fact that we [Russians] attach greater importance to the plot and its development; abroad it is considered that in ballet the plot plays a secondary part, and three one-act*

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<sup>2</sup> Many readers will have experienced obligatory house or hotel room isolation themselves (or if in China been physically locked in), a measure instituted by authorities as a means of preventing the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Basic virus control measures have not changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> Searchers were city employees paid to examine corpses and identify if the cause of death was plague. They were mainly elderly woman of low status as to put it bluntly they were expendable.

*ballets give one the chance to absorb a large number of impressions from three sets of artists, choreographers and composers in a single evening”.*

Prokofiev returned to Russia in 1936 but because of political problems the premiere of his *Romeo & Juliet* ballet, choreographed by Czech ballet master Ivo Váňa Psota (Ivan Psota) to a libretto by theatre director and Shakespeare authority Sergei Radlov and his colleague Adrian Pyotrovsky, took place in Brno, Czechoslovakia in 1938, not Russia. The ballet went largely unnoticed, but Prokofiev himself did make the first recording of the music at this time. The Bolshoi had planned to stage the ballet in 1935 but according to Prokofiev in his autobiography the score had been dismissed as undanceable. Dance critic Zoë Anderson writes that it may have foundered for other reasons: “*Prokofiev was out of favour politically, while his proposed happy ending outraged Shakespeare scholars*”.

It was not until January 1940 that the ballet premiered at the Kirov Theatre, not without many disagreements between Prokofiev and the new choreographer Leonid Lavrovsky. The dancers<sup>4</sup> failed to understand the music and the orchestra, to avoid disaster, tried to cancel the show. Playing on the last lines of Shakespeare’s play there was a saying (attributed to Galina Ulanova) current in the theatre: “*There is no tale of greater woe than Prokofiev’s music for Romeo*”. Despite this unpromising beginning the ballet was well received and was finally presented in Moscow at the Bolshoi Theatre in 1946.

The Bolshoi caused a sensation in the West when it toured the ballet to London in 1956 (with Ulanova as Juliet)<sup>5</sup> and New York in 1959 so it was not long before Western choreographers were producing their own versions. John Cranko first staged his *Romeo & Juliet* in 1958 for La Scala, Milan with celebrated prima ballerina Carla Fracci and principal dancer Mario Pistoni in the title roles. He then revived and reworked it in December 1962 for Stuttgart Ballet where he had been appointed guest choreographer in 1960 and ballet director the following year. Juliet, a shy virginal girl was danced by Marcia Haydée, a role he tailored specifically for her, partnered by Ray Barra<sup>6</sup>.

Cranko’s choreography was flashy, involving lots of acrobatic lifts and bustling crowd scenes including vegetable throwing (reputedly to camouflage the technical weakness of the young company). However, Cranko worked detail into every part so that each character on stage is a complex person, thus providing multiple lead roles for his leading dancers. Cranko retained Lavrovsky’s cushion dance for the Capulet ballroom scene and the plot closely followed

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<sup>4</sup> Galina Ulanova (*Juliet*), Konstantin Sergeyev (*Romeo*), Andrei Lopukhov (*Mercutio*) and Robert Gerbek (*Tybalt*).

<sup>5</sup> According to one critic Ulanova’s performance “*hit our sedate Opera House like a tornado*”. Ballet fans lined up for days to secure tickets.

<sup>6</sup> Barra was an American opera singer, ballet dancer, ballet master and choreographer who from 1959 was a principal dancer of the Stuttgart Ballet. Zoë Anderson in her book “*The Ballet Lover’s Companion*” lists Richard Cragun as partnering Haydée as Romeo at the 1962 premiere but while Cragun joined the company’s *corps de ballet* in 1962 his celebrated 30-year partnership with Haydée did not begin until 1965 when he was promoted to principal dancer.

Prokofiev's composition, becoming a template for later choreographers such as Kenneth MacMillan and John Neumeier<sup>7</sup>.

The Bolshoi returned to London with *Romeo & Juliet* in 1963 and The Royal Ballet, which had been considering its own version for some time first asked Lavrovsky to mount his version for them. He could not find the time so Frederick Ashton, now director of the company, asked MacMillan to create a new version. Ashton had already staged his own version in 1955 in Copenhagen, tailored for the Royal Danish Ballet company, but was reluctant to show this smaller-scaled version in London.

MacMillan's February 1965 production (his first full-length ballet) for The Royal Ballet starred Margot Fonteyn as Juliet and Rudolf Nureyev as Romeo at its gala premiere<sup>8</sup>. This star casting was at the insistence of The Royal Ballet management who, scheduled to open a New York season later in the year, had bowed down to the publicity demands of Sol Hurok, the company's US impresario and tour manager. MacMillan had chosen two young dancers, his muse of several years at The Royal Ballet, Lynn Seymour as Juliet and Christopher Gable as Romeo, had created the choreography on them and resented that his casting choice was overruled. Seymour (Canadian-born) and Gable had earlier performed a version of the balcony scene staged by MacMillan for Canadian television. Although they were a tumultuous hit as the second cast, after such a devastating blow, shortly after both MacMillan and Seymour left The Royal Ballet for Deutsche Oper Ballet in Berlin and in 1966 Gable also resigned, subsequently pursuing an acting career<sup>9</sup>.

MacMillan portrays Juliet as a hot-headed, rebellious teenager, subject to adolescent tantrums, who drives the action rather than the shy girl of Cranko. The biggest departure from Cranko is in the tomb scene when Romeo dances with Juliet's supposed corpse and when Juliet later is dying, she crawls towards Romeo's body but does not make it; the lovers are not united in death.

## Romeo & Juliet at WAB

The earliest WAB production of *Romeo & Juliet* I am aware of occurred in 1983. As WAB only started the process of digitising its visual archives in 2024 the only interesting tidbit I can provide is that The Australian Ballet's long term Artistic Director, David McAllister, appeared in this production as a market barrow boy.

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<sup>7</sup> Neumeier caused a stir with his 1971 choreographic reinterpretation of *Romeo & Juliet* for Frankfurt Ballet.

<sup>8</sup> At the premiere, the cast received 43 curtain calls and nearly 40 minutes of applause. Fonteyn and Nureyev were also leads in the 1966 film of the work.

<sup>9</sup> Seymour and Gable were only scheduled to be the fifth and final cast after the premiere, but because of injury to a ballerina, they appeared on the second night. Seymour wrote: "*Juliet was a priceless gift from Kenneth*" and regarding the blow of being dropped from the premiere: "*Romeo (& Juliet) broke hearts and shattered my life*".

WAB's first 21<sup>st</sup> Century production was Ted Brandsen's stream-lined version in November 2000 featuring Jacinta Ross-Ehlers as Juliet and Callum Hastie as Romeo. The production won the Australia Dance Award - Choreography, 2000.

In 2009, Youri Vámos' 1997 modern-dance adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, brought to Perth by Artistic Director Ivan Cavallari, was a sell-out to Perth audiences. While sticking to the traditional tale, Vámos detached the story from the Italian Renaissance and transformed this powerful drama into 1930's Italy when the Mafia ruled the land. Thus, swords are replaced by guns, and would you believe even bananas to add some comic moments? The rival Montague and Capulet families are two gangster gangs controlled by a powerful but unidentified mafia boss who sometimes appears in a window-blinded car.

Vámos' three-act version was taken on tour of regional Western Australia in 2013. The ballet was reprised in September 2016, for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death, in conjunction with Edward Clug's alternative spin on this Shakesperean classic *Radio & Juliet*. In this contemporary ballet, set to music from Radiohead, it is the modern age and Juliet after waking next to Romeo leaves her fateful tomb and remembers her life in flashbacks. *Radio & Juliet* had first been seen by WAB audiences in February 2014 at the outdoor Quarry Amphitheatre. The ballet considers the question: "*What if Juliet chose to live?*". Clug's choreographic style is edgy and erratic to mirror Juliet's mind and Shakespeare's plot is twisted beyond recognition. Clug explained: "*My intention was not to retell the story but offer the audience an experience from a different perspective*". So different in fact that on first viewing, having taken no notice of the title clue and having never heard of Radiohead, I failed to recognise the story.

In 2023, international freelance choreographer Andrea Schermoly created a full-length three-act *Romeo & Juliet* for Royal New Zealand Ballet. Her production is a standard story version set in Renaissance Verona to Prokofiev's score with Schermoly looking "*to illuminate the youthfulness and effervescence of our young lovers .... who find their few days of undeniable pure love and joy, albeit naively*". The production is a visual triumph having opulent set and costume designs by James Acheson and a lighting design by Jon Buswell that "*envelopes the whole production in a golden haze, reminiscent of an Italian sunset*". As the church was at the heart of society in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Acheson placed the church at the centre of the stage in every scene, even the balcony scene.

Schermoly's production was restaged in September 2024 at His Majesty's Theatre in Perth for WAB. One critical reviewer thought that while the ensemble's performance could not be faulted the choreography, while pleasant and clean, was unremarkable, as a large portion of the performance is spent on the interactions of the characters, as well as lengthy fight scenes. Staged by a fight choreographer (a modern trend it seems) these scenes are meant to look dangerous and exciting while being safe, a contradiction that means they are never convincing – but oh so interminable. There is no display of longer woe than Schermoly's death for Mercutio. Shakespeare had him die offstage in a fraction of the time.

Contrast this with Opera Australia's 1994 staging of Handel's *Julius Caesar*. Here an entire battle between the Egyptian army of Tolemeo, under his general Achilla, and the Roman

Army of Julius Caesar, fighting on behalf of Tolomeo's sister Cleopatra, is skilfully and convincingly staged by the Opera's ballet dancers in a total of 32 seconds. Yes, I timed it.

Modern audiences who have only seen a sword fight in the movies imagine these to involve long clashes, with swords banging together (a sure way to ruin the blade edge) whereas the time spent in what we would consider actual sword fighting would be counted in seconds not minutes. As it was counter thrusts that usually ended a fight it was important to not commit yourself to a first strike unless certain of an opportunity. Thus, assessing your opponent's ability to parry and thrust, looking for weaknesses and seeking an opportunity to make a first strike took up most of the "fighting" time. Here are some actual sword-fighting images from a 1467 manual which clearly show the gap between reality and common perception.

[www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl\\_08970/?st=gallery](http://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl_08970/?st=gallery)

Note the use of the sword pommel to bash an opponent and the use of both hands (one on the blade itself) to protect against an overhead slash. This had the advantage when defending of preventing your blade being forced down to the ground and thus opening your body to a follow-up thrust, plus protecting your sword wrist from excessive jarring that could force you to drop your sword. Opponents would even grab hold of each other's sword blades.

But these were long sword techniques and at the time Romeo was living the long sword was being replaced by the rapier. In Act I, Scene 1, Capulet (Juliet's father) when coming on the fight in the market square calls out: "*What noise is this? Give me my long sword, ho!*", Shakespeare's way of indicating to his audience that Capulet was old fashioned.

The young men in Verona all use "modern" rapiers, a sword almost as long but with a much thinner blade. Rapiers were not just a means for self-defence but a fashion statement and status symbol as swords were expensive and only carried by the upper class. Rapiers were designed primarily for thrusting rather than slashing and were often paired with a dagger<sup>10</sup>. As a sword lunge at your opponent if it missed would leave you close to them and off balance and thus vulnerable to a counter dagger thrust. The dagger could also be used to deflect a counter sword thrust from your opponent.

In addition, daggers were useful in fights with limited freedom of movement such as when indoors, a tavern brawl perhaps<sup>11</sup>, where the crush of people could prevent you from accessing your sword or using it effectively if you did. Besides a dagger was a great table utensil for use when dining.

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<sup>10</sup> Daggers differ from knives by being symmetrical with two sharp edges going down to a point.

<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare's rival and sometimes colleague Christopher (Kit) Marlowe was stabbed just above the right eye and killed in a tavern brawl at Dame Eleanor Bull's house, allegedly over debts he owed, but the story is far more complicated. His attacker, Ingram Frizer, sustained injuries consistent with being pummeled with the handle of a dagger. Pummelling meant that you intended to hurt, but not to kill your adversary.

Today, the story of *Romeo and Juliet* is probably the most popular of all Shakespeare's stories and viewed as a romantic tale about two young lovers. I have always thought of myself as a romantic, but when it comes to this tale, I am very much a cynic. Certainly, it is a story told with great skill. In Act 1 Shakespeare promptly introduces us to all the main characters (except Juliet and her nurse), establishes the existence of a feud between the two families, and makes it clear that the Duke of Verona has the power to command the families and punish them if they break the peace. Well done, William. Next, we meet Juliet and her maid, and this is where the story takes a dark turn for me. For Juliet, a 14-year-old innocent and playful girl is about to be introduced by her own parents to an older man whom she has never met before and who is to be her future husband in an arranged marriage. Really?

And what of the actions of Friar Lawrence? This man is prepared to marry two adolescents who have known each other barely 48 hours and who are not in love but merely suffering from infatuation (or as we colloquially say "a crush"), and to do so without the knowledge of their respective parents. He justifies this reprehensible action to himself by hoping that the marriage will bring the two feuding families together. Later he compounds his sins by supplying Juliet with a potentially lethal drug. Finally, if we needed proof that these two adolescents know nothing of true love, despite having just met they both would rather die than live without the other. That is not romantic love it is a sign of immaturity.