

# An interview with the Director

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## **Why choose *Romeo and Juliet*?**

Why did I decide to do *Romeo and Juliet*? First of all, we have a peculiar system in our own department where people make a suggestion for a season. We had decided to do a Shakespeare season and I have long wanted to do *Romeo and Juliet* for many reasons. But primarily, over the last decade or so, I think because I think it's one of those plays that speaks very much to our time; very much to what is happening at the end of the century, particularly in terms of our acceptance of ritualized violence in our society and what in particular has been happening in places like the Middle East or places like Ireland. Where really the people who are suffering the most are the children. And where there have been situations where children from opposing sides have indeed fallen in love with one another, and -- at the end of the 20th Century -- still bore the brunt of ancient grudges and hatreds.

So the *Romeo and Juliet* story to me is very much alive. Just a couple of weeks before we started rehearsal for my production the news of the tragedy at Omagh had just arrived, and there, you know, for the first time the Irish had decided [that] enough children had died -- and hopefully they can keep that strong in their minds. Also I happen to have a number of very exciting young men and women in the casting pool who I thought might be able to carry this kind of a show.

## **Why set the play in the present?**

We wanted very much to reach out to students on our campus; I feel very strongly that one of the ways to do that is to make Shakespeare very sexy

-- you don't have to try to make him relevant because he already is relevant. So my aim was to put *Romeo and Juliet* very much in 1998 and to bring out those things in the text which the students themselves have a personal sense of, both in the news media and in the world around them.

Both families are sophisticated, well-educated, highly thought of in their communities and neither Montague or Capulet is an ogre. They are men who loved their families -- and their extended families -- and so we are looking at parallels that we can draw in the world today; whereby you have within a very complex society really nobody who is the villain, and a point where an argument has long been forgotten but remains now the point of a grudge. But there is also a condoning within society, in passing on to young men the accepted idea that their participating in a world of ritualized violence is not only acceptable but admirable.

For example, I fixed on the idea of establishing within the modern context a society where young men are very used to dealing with self-defense. [When the nurse comes to visit Romeo](#) to arrange the assignation, she comes to a Martial Arts Academy where the young men are in the middle of a lesson -- they're doing kata. And up above on the second level we have Tybalt and Paris working out with foils. We have old Capulet and Montague on their way to the baths so they are wrapped in towels, and they just happen to encounter each other. So here we have the two generations, all men, in this one enormous place where the nurse as a female comes. She is very much out of place but at the same time absolutely mesmerized by all the young men. We had them naked to the waist doing their kata -- something that is happening right across the world where young men have embraced an Asian discipline in the martial arts. We established a group of young men who are very powerful and very proud of their prowess, and this gave us the excuse to take it into the street.

### **Why does Friar Lawrence flee at the crucial moment in the last scene?**

It was that kind of thinking that I thought would get a group of young people very excited. I wanted for example, a very young priest in Friar Lawrence. It's traditionally played by a very old fellow, a rather doddering old man, and here I thought it could be played by a young Jesuit or young Franciscan who has everything at stake, who has his whole career ahead of him, and who thinks with his heart instead of with

his head. And then who at the last moment panics and flees the mausoleum at the end. It would be understandable, because he is still young, but he is also accessible to the young people and used to counseling them; used to working at every level of his parish.

When Romeo first comes to meet Friar Lawrence, he comes to a counselor who is [giving a talk to a group of young men and a group of mothers about substance abuse](#) -- and he happens to have a little marijuana plant and he's got a diagram there and he is showing the mothers exactly what this looks like -- and of course if they ever see it they will know exactly what to do.

### **How does the production deal with Capulet's sudden anger?**

I wanted to have Capulet and Montague who were just in middle age, both of them with very much younger wives. So when Lady Capulet talks to Juliet about the fact that she was a mother much on the years that Juliet is now a maid, one can assume that here we have a setting in Italy where still today brides are very young, and young women are married to very successful, very well heeled Italian patricians -- businessmen who are very much caught up in a sophisticated world. In this world status is everything. So you have a young Lady Capulet who is very much under the governance of her powerful, influential husband -- who is in fact the most wonderful husband, the most affable man, beloved of all of his family and friends -- and yet when crossed immediately has a violent flash of temper.

In the debriefing after our show I was asked the question about Capulet's flashpoint of a temper, because up to that time he had been the affable host, the generous father, then all of a sudden when crossed the man just blew up. And I pointed to the behavior of my own father who was a sophisticated, urbane fellow who loved his family and friends, and who was always entertaining -- but could never be crossed. And the moment he was crossed he had a flash of a temper that was nothing you wanted to mess with. Afterwards one particular student came back and he said, "You know something? You're quite right. My own father is that way. But it is something I care not to acknowledge because I am hoping that I am not that way." I think that a lot of people recognize their fathers in Mr. Capulet.

### **[The opening](#) : why the choice of a funeral procession?**

I wanted to make the parallel with our world. I mentioned earlier the prevalence in the news today of what's going on in the Middle East and Ireland where very often it is over the funeral or in the midst of the funeral that passions are highest. And the prince says to us in his opening speech that there have been three civil brawls. So I brought that very close to home, assuming that the last one resulted in the death of a Capulet. This is a Capulet funeral and all the Montagues are watching. Everybody's watching. They just buried somebody, and there's been blood in the streets already. The opening funeral allows us to book-end the play with dying, and the sound of the funeral bells. It echoes and re-echoes in our minds the consequence of this kind of permissiveness, this kind of violence within our society. That was the idea.

### **The sound track and music**

The play was set in Italy, but our set can be the Capulet villa, it can be the church, it can be streets in the city -- and it's both old and very modern at the same time. And what I wanted was to tie in a modern world that is also very ancient, as so much of Europe is. So for example, the Capulets have a party and they do what so many people like to do in Europe, especially in Italy -- they have a costume ball. But what are they doing? They are dressing up and doing the Latin American thing which everybody is so hot to do right now. And so our music, for example, during the ball scene, is Latin American; we have the salsa; we have a tango going on while Capulet and Talbot are having a wrangle on the upper level. Underneath we have the tango where Juliet is first dancing with Paris, and where Romeo is watching her dance.

What I wanted was to create a world of Verona which is sophisticated; then when Romeo is banished he goes to Mantua, which is a seamy nightclub world of neon lights, full of prostitutes and drug addicts. It's the very world where he would hide in -- the not-so-nice part of town -- and of course the song that covers us is [Tom Waits'] "Romeo is Bleeding" which I thought was great fun -- it was our own little joke within the play.

### **The stage and the use of the space**

We were working in the Chief Dan George theater, which is our thrust stage. I was working primarily with a group of students who are learning how to use the concept of a thrust theater going back to the earlier Elizabethan space. It's a very personal, very intimate space -- the audience is very close. I wanted to try and nonetheless stretch the verticality of the

space, so we tried to create a set that was working on different levels, and also to create the walls of the city, so that we got the feeling of the town square on the streets. But I could actually have people going over those walls, so that Romeo could descend into the space of the garden or ascend and climb over the walls and get out. Behind the main wall we had a ramp which allowed citizens or people to come down and then go down a ladder -- unseen but it made them look as if they were coming down a terraced city street.

Then I opened up the trap: Juliet does her potion speech on the balcony and she runs off -- presumably her balcony is on a higher level. When we come back and have the nurse find her in the morning and [she is lying "dead" on her bed](#) we open the trap and have the nurse come up the stairs from below. We created with just the lighting plot a sense of the light shaft of the window on Juliet's bed; we created the sense that the nurse had come up a very narrow space in one of those old Italian villas to the very top of the house where Juliet's room is. Then that scene is immediately juxtaposed to the Mantua scene, and I kept the trap opened and had the apothecary carrying on down below in the trap -- in a sort of dungeinous area where he is in fact selling drugs. In our production as in the modern [Luhmann] film a drug dealer as opposed to an apothecary.

That's how that space translated for us. With a bit of lighting we had an orchard, and with a transition into the morning we had the Capulets having coffee out on their morning terrace. We moved from there to it being the ante-room of the ball and then our gates opened and we were able to take the entire cast out of that area into presumably the banqueting area beyond. The gates closed and Romeo and Juliet were left in what had been the space where everybody had been dancing only moments before to have their first meeting. So the set worked on so many different levels spaciouly so that we could get as much fluidity as we possibly could.

### **Principles and constraints in casting**

First of all, we do two shows in the fall and two in the spring so the director for the Stoppard's *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* was casting at the same time I was. So there were certainly cast members traded back and forth. People whom I wanted he also wanted so we had to toss a coin, or otherwise make a deal. But I ended up with what I wanted most and that was a tight ensemble. I wanted to build two very strong families

so that the heat of their love is what creates their animosity toward one other.

Then there is the problem that Shakespeare does not have many female parts and we have a majority of women in the Department. One of the nice things about *Romeo and Juliet* is that you've got wonderful parts: the nurse; and we made Lady Capulet a very strong part; and there is Juliet. I also brought in other female characters: I made our chorus female, for example: she became [old Lady Capulet](#) , the grand dame of the ancient family tradition. I gave opportunities to some of the girls to be in the gymnasium scene. They became [ambulance attendants](#) and security types and we have a wonderful scene in the opening scene of the fight where two of the girls come in and they just knock those fellows down, do a arm twist and a head lock and they've got the hand cuffs on in no time. We had some very interesting opportunities for some of the women that I thought worked very well. I made Father John for example into [Sister Joanna](#) , so it was the nun who was the go-between.

### **The fight sequences**

One of the interesting things for me was how we handled the fight scenes. I mentioned the fact that I wanted to have [the kata](#) done -- it's a term in martial arts for the little ritual that you do, like a warm-up. We had Nicholas Harrison as our fight director and then Paul Donison, my assistant director, is also very good at marital arts. We created a working session where we had a dance rehearsal every night starting at 6:00, then the fight rehearsals; and we did that every night so that we were able to get the kind of precision we needed for those martial arts scenes, and for the dance scenes, with Kelly Arnsby coming in to teach all the students the salsa and the tango.

One of the things that I think a lot of the people don't realize is that, with students performing, the training is enormous: to be able to have a three week run of a show we need at least six weeks in rehearsal to do the training, not only on the text, but on visualizing the text. In six weeks some of these students went from not having looked at a Shakespeare script to putting on the show. And in a very short time just learning to handle the text itself is a real challenge.

### **The costumes**

I think my difficulty would have been much greater if we had set it in

period costume -- not that we could afford to do that anyway. We had ninety odd costumes for the show and exactly two thousand dollars for the costume budget. So in order to do that kind of thing within an Elizabethan context would have been prohibitive. The costume sketches reflect the working process that Mary and I had to come with up with: a very modern, sophisticated world at the ball, contrasting that world to Mantua -- which is its own kind of party. It was a wonderful opportunity for young designers to do the masks for the ball, and to create the costume for the transvestite in the Mantua scene -- all of that was a creative opportunity for them to do something with a text that is four hundred years old, in a very modern context. [\[top\]](#)

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