**Tonight, Tonight, It all Began Tonight**  
*An analysis of Romeo and Juliet Film Adaptations*

*Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most often read and well known plays that William Shakespeare wrote. It is often read within high school English courses, put on at various theaters and referenced in various forms of media. However, it is also a popular source for film adaptation. Three of the most famous adaptations on film are Franco Zeffirelli’s, Baz Luhrmann’s and the musical *West Side Story*. All of these adaptations take a different stance on the way Shakespeare can be presented to an audience, whether it is as a close interpretation of the original play, a modern day interpretation, or simply as a great play to base a musical on.

Zeffirelli was famous for his Shakespearean film adaptations, having adapted *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. However, his adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* could be considered his crowning achievement. It was, up until the release of Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet*, the most successful Shakespearean film adaptation ever, having grossed over $50 million in its initial worldwide run.

Like his two other Shakespearean films, Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* stays extremely close to the Shakespearean formula. Except for cutting a few minor scenes, he does not change anything from the original play in the film adaptation. The film clearly made an impression upon audiences, catapulting into critical and commercial success. While audiences consider it a masterpiece, it cannot be denied that Zeffirelli took little
chances with the film. The only risk, and possibly the one showcasing his genius, was casting (at the time) virtually unknown actors within the film. Beyond that, Zeffirelli played it close to the general Shakespeare pre-conceptions. The same can not be said for Baz Luhrmann, the director of the 1996 film adaptation, *William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet*.

“...Shakespeare wasn’t making high art for the elite, he wrote for the masses,” stated John Leguizamo in response to negative reviews of Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (Leguizamo, 166) by several critics. While Leguizamo’s statement is meant to be a defense for the creative vision that Luhrmann demonstrates throughout the film, it can also be viewed as a statement of truth. Luhrmann took one of the most well known Shakespearean plays and decided to deviate from the cultural norm; deciding to create a film ‘for the masses’. While other Shakespearean films were successful in their own right, they rarely strayed away from the preconceived Shakespearean formula. Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* is an artistic endeavor that incorporates creative examples of cinematography, editing and style. He rarely lets the camera remain on one shot for long, always keeping the camera moving to capture the sense of energy that the characters and story demand. Luhrmann tossed away all the formulaic and simply made Shakespeare the way he wished to make it. In doing so, he created a film that was accessible to an entirely new generation.

*Romeo + Juliet* was the second film in Baz Luhrmann’s red curtain trilogy, situated between his first film *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and his third *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). All three films are saturated with Luhrmann’s unique style, popular music, and in some way connected to a classic literary source. *Romeo + Juliet* is the most obvious of
the three when it comes to demonstrating its literary origins, as Luhrmann maintains the
dialogue and narrative of *Romeo and Juliet*. It is only the contemporary setting that
changes, a decision made by the creator to make the material accessible to a younger
generation. By changing the setting and time period of the narrative, to fictional Verona
Beach in the mid 90’s, the audience is able to use the visual clues around them as a
means of interpreting the dialogue to a level of understanding.

Luhrmann’s film is also full of various metaphors and visual clues. By updating
the setting, he could no longer allow the Capulet’s and Montague’s brawls to take place
as sword fights. In the modern setting, swords do not exist as a weapon of choice, while
gun fights were increasingly more prominent in confrontations, often featured on the
news and in media. In the opening brawl between the Montague’s and Capulet’s,
Luhrmann makes Benvolio’s gun the focus, which has ‘Sword 9mm Series S’ engraved
in the side, just before Benvolio states “Put up your swords!” Another similar moment is
a shot on Montague’s gun, which had a plaque underneath it’s mantel that we are to
shown to read ‘Longsword,’ as he says “Give me my longsword, ho!” These two small
moments within the very beginning of the film help the audience to understand that
certain bits of dialogue are going to change context, but only in a small way, and not in
such a way that the integrity of the play is shaken.

Other examples of Luhrmann’s visual clues are the examples of the media
influence within the film. The first image the viewer is greeted with is a black screen with
one single television, where a newscaster is relaying the events of the entire play through
the prologue. The film also ends with the same newscaster, which gives the illusion that
all the viewer had witnessed throughout the film was part of the news story that the media
was portraying. With this taken into account, the viewer is more able to accept the events without as much cynicism. Television news holds other roles throughout the film, such as news anchors discussing the upcoming Capulet feast during the scene where Benvolio discusses Romeo’s love, though the news report is only focused on for a few mere moments of the narrative. In that same scene, the character of Balthazar can be seen writing the name ‘Rosaline’ on a blackboard, another visual clue, that comes in handy later when Romeo is questioned about his love for Juliet by the Friar. This small visual clue is enough for a viewer who has never seen the film to understand that Benvolio and Romeo are talking about Rosaline, that way it is not a shock when Friar starts speaking about the woman, as if the viewer should know who she is.

The media’s influence within the film is also demonstrated through flashes of various magazine covers, billboards and graffiti. In the opening Montage, a row of magazine covers and newspaper headlines are shown to help demonstrate the illusion that the Montague’s and Capulet’s had been in brawls prior to the one demonstrated at the gas station. A magazine cover is also shown when the character of Paris, now christened Dave Paris, is introduced into the narrative. The cover of the magazine ‘Timely,’ which looks suspiciously like the popular magazine ‘Time,’ states that Dave Paris is “Bachelor of the Year.”

According to Norton’s Guide of Shakespeare and Film, Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet surpassed the Zeffirelli version as the highest grossing Shakespeare film to date (Crowl, 18). Bearing this mind, it is not shocking that other film studios and directors would want to try and capture the same amount of success. After Luhrmann’s film was released, several other modern interpretations of Shakespeare were released. These
include Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet*, which starred Ethan Hawke and like Luhrmann’s film updated the setting but maintained the original Shakespearean language, and Tim Blake Nelson’s *O*, which was a modern retelling of Othello. A more recent endeavor was a British Miniseries known as *Shakespeare-Told*, which consisted of four modern interpretations of Shakespearean plays (The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Nights Dream, Much Ado about Nothing and Macbeth). However, none have reached the amount of commercial success of Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet*.

The idea of modernizing the story of *Romeo and Juliet* was not entirely new. While Luhrmann was innovative by updating the story for modern audiences, all the while keeping the original dialogue, another film from the 1960’s had a similar concept. Stephen Sondheim’s *West Side Story* took the story of Romeo and Juliet, using it as a starting point, and updated the narrative to fit within the 1960’s mindset. However, unlike Luhrmann, the creative team behind *West Side Story* was not setting out to make the Shakespearean language accessible to a generation. They wanted to take the essence of Romeo and Juliet but create an entirely new story, with hints to the original source material.

*West Side Story* began as a Broadway musical that opened on September 26th, 1957. It won a Tony award for Cinematography because of its unique use of dancing to symbolize street brawls. It was a project brought to life by Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Arthur Laurents, Robert Griffith and Harold Prince; many of whom are considered to be Broadway legends. By the end of its original Broadway run, it had been performed nearly one thousand times. With success like that, it was
unsurprising that the rights to a film adaptation were sold to the production company known as United Artists.

The United Artists film was released in 1961, having been produced by the majority of the original creative team. Robbins directed a portion of the picture but had such costly demands of perfection that the studio eventually let him go (Maslon, 270). Though the original Broadway play only won one Tony award the year it opened, the film adaptation compensated for the lack of awards by winning a total of 10 Academy Awards, including the Best Picture award of 1961.

The most interesting aspect of West Side Story is the noticeable changes between its narrative and the original narrative of Romeo and Juliet. Aside from updating the setting from Verona to the West Side of New York City, all of the characters take on some noticeable change. The primary rivalry within the narrative does not take place between two warring families, nor is the viewer left with an explanation for the two party’s hatred. Instead the primary conflict is between two rival street gangs, and the hatred spurs from a social issue. In the 1960’s, the issue of racial discrimination was an extremely prominent topic. The two gangs are the Jets, who are the metaphorical Montague’s, and the Sharks, the metaphorical Capulet’s. The Jets are a gang of white Americans, who despise the Sharks simply for emigrating from Puerto Rico to New York. The Sharks in turn despise the Jet’s based on a stereotype that the white Americans are treated better then the Puerto Rican’s, which they feel is a flaw in the basic social system.

The Jet’s are lead by Riff, who is the best friend of Tony and also an unofficial adopted brother. Early on in the film, Riff is trying to convince Tony to join him at a
dance the Sharks will be attending, so he states “Four and a half years I live with a buddy and his family, I think I’m diggin’ a guys character,” (West Side Story, Chapter 5). This quote, along with the rest of the dialogue in the scene, is meant to show the viewer the relationship between Riff and Tony, who are the stands in for Mercutio and Romeo. Just as Mercutio was the best friend to Tony, Riff is the best friend to Tony, even so close that Riff is practically a member of the family. This demonstrates the deep emotional connection that the two share, so that the viewer is not surprised later on in the film when Tony reacts so strongly to Riff’s death.

The Shark’s are lead by Bernardo, who is the symbolic Tybalt and older brother of Maria, the symbolic Juliet. Making Bernardo the brother of Maria instead of the cousin was a wise decision, because it gives Maria more incentive to be upset over his death. While she would have obviously been upset over the death of her cousin, the fact that her lover killed her brother, and basic support system, is a much more crushing blow. Maria does not accept the fact of Bernardo’s death as well as Juliet, from the first moment she sees Tony after discovering the truth; fueled by her own grief she brutally attacks him, It is only after Tony explains the entire situation to her that she manages to calm herself and realize that her lover didn’t intend for it to happen, and has actual regret about the entire situation.

Perhaps the most interesting narrative change is the ending itself. In Romeo and Juliet, both the leads commit suicide. However, in West Side Story, that is not the case. Maria’s intended suitor, Chino (the symbolic Paris), takes on a much more important role as the killer of Tony. That moment within the film is a representation of how killing for the sake of revenge is a never ending cycle, as Chino kills Tony because Tony had killed
Bernardo, who had originally killed Riff. The two lovers do not have the chance to commit suicide and live together in the afterlife. No, West Side Story is crueler to its lead characters.

Maria witnesses the incident that leads to Tony’s death, and she is able to rush to Tony’s side just as he is dying. His last moments on earth are spent with her, which is vaguely reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet, though Romeo had believed Juliet to be dead as he drank the poison that ended his life. Once Tony has passed on, Maria proves to be more strong willed then her original counterpart. Maria does not give in to grief and take her own life. No, she shouts at the two gangs that have surrounded the couple, blaming them all for the deaths of Tony, Riff and Bernardo. She makes the political statement of the film, how the two rival gang’s hatred was pointless and was responsible for the deaths of their friends. That very statement could also be viewed as statement of American culture at the time, a statement against racial discrimination and hatred in general.

All three of the films are considered successes within popular culture. The creation of these three separate films more then likely helped to fuel curiosity of Shakespeare and it is hard to ignore their impact upon cinema and pop culture. The Zeffirelli and Luhrmann versions give the viewer two different ways to experience the world of Romeo and Juliet, while West Side Story takes the story of Romeo and Juliet and uses it to create a narrative and message of it’s own. Whether or not a viewer enjoys any of the films is irrelevant, as the three films are marvelous examples of how Shakespeare can be transferred to film.
Works Cited


