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Exploring William Shakespeare's **Romeo and Juliet**

Upperstage : Mar 13 - Apr 24, 2004

"never was a story of more woe"

Movie mogul Irving Thalberg produced a film of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1936 and described it as "the fulfillment of a long-cherished dream." *Romeo and Juliet* is perhaps Shakespeare's most familiar play. Its story of forbidden love translates into all cultures and has served as inspiration for artworks of music, opera, ballet, film, and painting. Even people who have never read or seen the play know lines from it, so pervasive is its influence in our culture.

Nearly every generation since Shakespeare wrote the play in 1596 has had a cherished production of this play: In the recent past, the musical *West Side Story* (stage 1957, film 1961), based on Shakespeare's play, caught the imagination of a generation in its portrayal of the feuding Capulets and Montagues as rival street gangs in New York City. Franco Zeffirelli's lush film of *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), starring teenage actors, made Shakespeare come to life for millions of young adults in the turbulent sixties. In 1996, Baz Luhrmann's kinetic *Romeo + Juliet*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes, used the rapid-cutting film techniques of music video to capture the play for the MTV generation.

The story of *Romeo and Juliet* dates back to medieval times and was already well known to Shakespeare's audiences. After a brawl between the rival families of Montague and Capulet, the Prince of Verona threatens with death anyone who "disturbs our streets again." Romeo, the heir to the Montague family, attends a

masked ball at the Capulet house, where he meets and falls in love with a girl he later learns to be Juliet, the daughter of his family's greatest enemy, the Capulets. As he leaves the ball with his friends, he overhears Juliet, on her balcony, profess her love for him. Their balcony scene, in which they share words of love and plan to marry, is one of the most famous in literature.

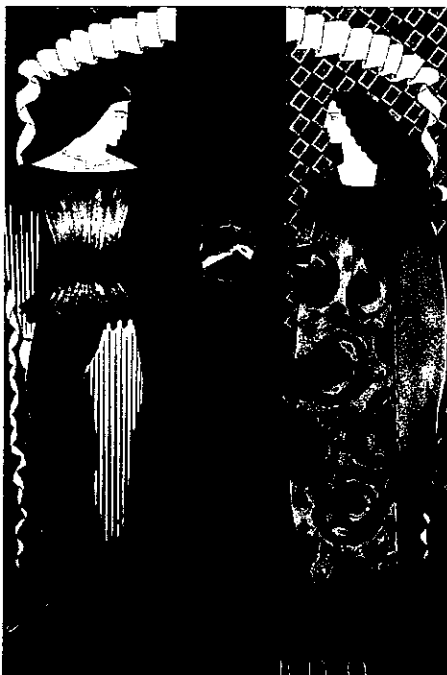
The next afternoon, with the help of Juliet's nurse (or nanny), Romeo and Juliet are secretly married by Friar Lawrence, Romeo's friend and advisor,

who believes that he might heal the war between the two families by uniting their children. After the wedding, Romeo encounters Tybalt, Juliet's temperamental cousin, who attempts to provoke him into a fight. When Romeo refuses, his friend Mercutio takes Tybalt's challenge himself. As Romeo attempts to part them, Mercutio is killed by mistake. Romeo, in grief and anger at the loss of his friend, kills Tybalt. As the angry families blame each other for this new violence, the Prince sentences Romeo to banishment: he must leave Verona forever.

Retreating to Friar Lawrence's rooms, Romeo learns of his sentence and weeps at the idea of life without Juliet. Lawrence arranges for Romeo to live in nearby Mantua until the Friar can arrange to bring Juliet to him.

Meanwhile, in grief over the loss of Tybalt, Juliet's parents decide to marry her to Count Paris. When she refuses, her father threatens to disown her. She goes instead to Friar Lawrence who devises yet another plan to aid the young lovers: Juliet is to take a drug which will put her in a death-like trance for 24 hours, at which point Romeo will rescue her and take her away with him.

Juliet carries out the Friar's plan, and her family, believing her dead, places her body in the family mausoleum. But the Friar's message to Romeo does not arrive; instead, Romeo hears what everyone believes, that Juliet is dead. This confusion leads inevitably to the play's tragic conclusion. ★



Shakespeare

Although William Shakespeare is generally considered the greatest dramatist in the English language, few facts are known about his life. Only a handful of legal documents verify his existence. He was born at Stratford-upon-Avon, a small market town, on April 23, 1564. His father, John, was a glove maker who became High Bailiff of Stratford, a position very much like our mayor.

As the son of a leading citizen and public official, Shakespeare would have been expected to go to school as soon as he had learned to read and write. The Stratford grammar school, one of the town's prized institutions, was excellent by comparison to similar schools in bigger towns. School was in session in summer and winter, and students attended for nine hours a day. The curriculum was limited, consisting almost entirely of Latin: grammar, reading, writing, and recitation.

By the time Shakespeare was a youth, many traveling theatre companies of significance had visited Stratford, so it is fair to guess that Shakespeare had seen some of them and admired their art.

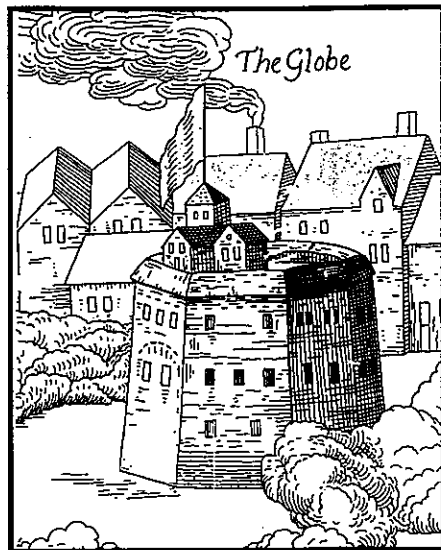
At age 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior. Six months later, Shakespeare's eldest child, Susanna, was born. Two years later he became the father of twins, Hamnet and Judith. Little is known of Shakespeare's life at this time. It is clear that by the early 1590s, however, Shakespeare was a part of the theatrical

scene in London, although we know nothing of the circumstances by which he left Stratford and his family to become an actor and playwright in the city. In 1594 Shakespeare was established at the center of theatrical activity, for he is recorded as a shareholder in the famed Globe Theatre on the south bank of the Thames, across from the Tower of London.

Shakespeare wrote 37 plays, several narrative poems, and over 150 sonnets in the next fifteen years. By the turn of the century he was the most popular playwright in London, and his company enjoyed a unique advantage in the city's highly competitive theatrical world. He was granted a coat of arms, thus officially making him a gentleman, and he bought sizeable pieces of real estate in and around Stratford with his earnings. His plays also exhibit not only a fine sense of poetry and stagecraft, but an excellent awareness of the political and literary atmosphere in which he lived. These were tempestuous times socially and politically, and Shakespeare used his plays metaphorically to suggest how order could be made out of chaos in a changing society.

By 1604 his company was named the King's Men, for they had attracted the favorable attention of the new monarch, King James I. Their fortunes continued to rise as their plays drew well at the Globe, and the number of command performances at Court doubled and tripled. Within a single decade, Shakespeare created a wealth of drama such as the world has never seen.

Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616—his 52nd birthday—and is buried in the church chancel in Stratford. The greatest testament to Shakespeare's genius occurred in 1623, when two of his fellow actors cooperated with a London printer in publishing a collected edition of Shakespeare's plays. This kind of publication was rare in its day, as plays were valued for their commercial appeal on the stage, with little thought of them as literature to be preserved. It is safe to say that some of the texts were reconstructed from memory or from a stage manager's promptbook. In any case the First Folio, as this first collection has come to be called, is a document of great historic and literary importance, for it preserved for posterity some of the greatest writing in the English language, allowing us to study and perform Shakespeare's plays over 400 years later and for generations to come. ★



Going to see a play at the Globe was an adventure. The theatre was located on the south bank of the River Thames in London, and on performance days a yellow silk flag fluttered above the roof. The Globe stood out like a beacon above the low, narrow houses that lined the streets in this rather disreputable part of the city.

In Elizabethan times, playgoing had become enormously popular for all classes of people, and a new generation of brilliant playwrights—like Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe—had done much to make the new theaters that were springing up highly successful. Of all the theaters, none was more popular than the Globe, built in 1599 by Shakespeare's company. A round wood and plaster building, it featured galleried walls that were only about 30 feet high with just a few tiny windows; the only public entrance was through a narrow door in a small tower.

By noon on a performance day, a crowd would begin to gather for the three o'clock performance, and soon the air was filled with shouts and cries as people jostled for a place near the front of the line. Before long, the noisy, colorful crowd began to file through the small entrance door. Above the door hung a sign like a wooden flag. It showed the Greek god Hercules holding a globe on his shoulders.

As you entered, you paid your penny entrance fee and stepped through into the large round yard, open to the sky. Then, there was a rush to grab the best spots just in front of the huge stage. The theater held more than 2,000 spectators, and popular plays often sold out.

Once you had your place, though, you could talk with your friends for a couple of hours before the play began. It was difficult to get bored. Sometimes a man selling nuts would thread his way through

The Globe

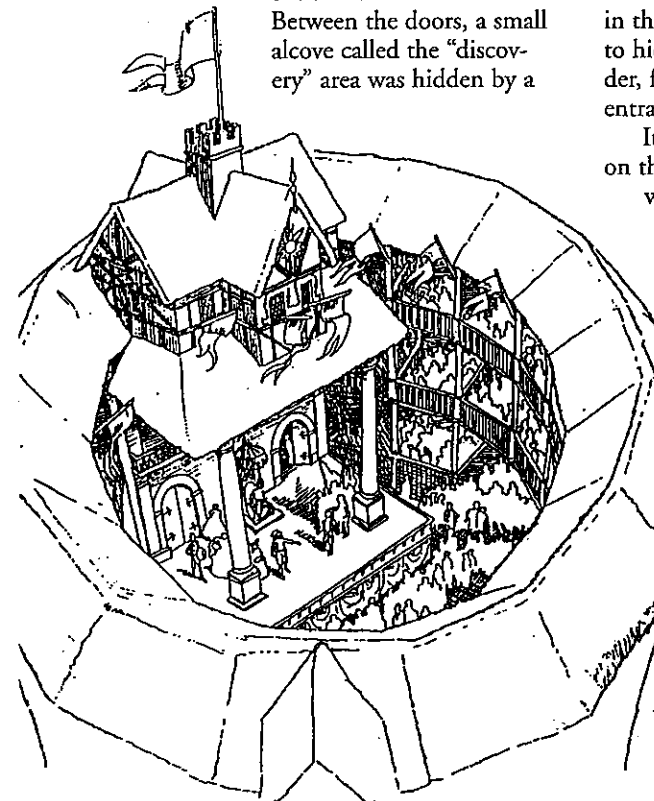
the mass of bodies or a woman carrying jugs of ale would trip and spill the ale down someone's neck—much to everyone's amusement. An exchange of insults between two noisy wits near the stage would bring hoots of laughter from the people nearby. And soon everyone would start pointing and joking, as the richer people began to file into the galleries that fringed the yard.

You paid a few pennies more for a place in the gallery, but it was more comfortable and bought a seat protected from the weather. Even more money bought a seat in a private box, or lord's room, near the back of the stage, so close to the actors you could almost touch them. Fashionably dressed youths often sat there, whiling away the time before the performance playing cards on a rich cloak spread over their knees.

Newcomers to the theater gazed in amazement at the splendor of the empty stage that jutted out into the center of the yard. On each side of the stage, supporting the roof above, towered two tall pillars painted in gold and bright colors to resemble the palaces of kings and princes. Underneath the roof, the "heavens" were painted sky blue and decorated with silver stars. At the back of the stage, on each side, were two doors through which the

players usually made their entrances and exits.

Between the doors, a small alcove called the "discovery" area was hidden by a



brightly painted curtain; during the play, actors could stay here out of sight.

Once everything was ready for the performance to begin, three loud trumpet calls announced the play. Latecomers hurried in and, for a moment, the audience was hushed. Then the actors stepped onto the stage to transport the audience to an imaginary world where all sorts of strange and magical things could happen.

There was very little scenery on the Elizabethan stage, but there were gorgeous costumes. Fine taffeta, silk, lace, and tinsel in brilliant colors dazzled the eye, and soldiers appeared in shining armor, their swords and shields gleaming. All the parts were played by men, since women were forbidden by law to act on the stage; young boys, about 12 years old, played the female roles.

Because there was so little scenery, actors relied on words, costumes, and special effects to create a scene. People loved noise and spectacle, and the plays had lots of action and violence. The noise of thunder and lightning was created by rolling a cannonball across a wooden floor. Loud trumpets and drums gave the impression of a battle. Ghosts and other spirits could be raised from below the stage through trap doors. The most spectacular effect, however, was when an actor was lowered from the "heavens" onto the stage by a small crane. This machinery was housed in the "hut" which capped the stage; and to hide its creaking, there was often thunder, fanfares, or music, which made the entrance even more dramatic.

It was not always easy to concentrate on the play, as playgoers were not always well behaved. They might throw apples or oranges at each other or at the actors on the stage. Some talked loudly through the play or called for more ale and other refreshments, and most people thought it quite normal to make remarks about the actors while the play was in progress. Scuffles frequently broke out between groups of rowdy playgoers. Small wonder then that getting the attention of the audience and keeping them silent was challenging—far more so than it is today, when such behavior is no longer acceptable. ★

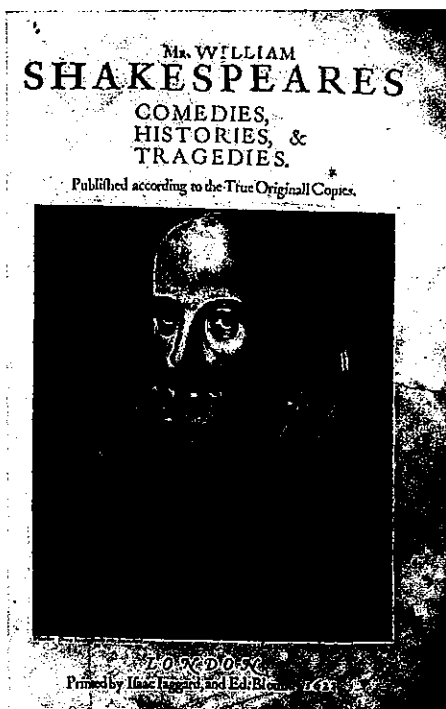
The Globe and Society

Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, in its shape and design, functioned as a metaphor—a map, if you will, of the Elizabethan concepts of society, civilization, and the universe. The name of the theatre itself—the Globe—suggested that the events which were portrayed on its stage were symbolic of events which happened in the world. The building's shape, an octagon, suggested the round shape of the world itself—a roundness which had only been discovered one hundred years before.

Inside the theatre, the stage represented the stage on which world events are enacted. The trap doors in the stage floor could open for demons rising from Hell—or descending thereto. The two massive columns which held up the stage roof were known as the Pillars of Hercules. High above, the stage ceiling was painted with the stars of the Zodiac—the heavens. And tucked under that ceiling was a small balcony where the theatre's musicians played "the Music of the Spheres."

The audience surrounding the stage was likewise arranged to reflect society. Standing around the stage itself, in the area known as the Pit, were the groundlings—those of the lowest classes who paid the least for admittance. Three surrounding levels of balconies arose above them, with correspondingly rising admission prices—so that Elizabethan society, from top to bottom, was clearly divided and arranged for all to see.

Thus an audience member at the Globe could not help but feel his place in the world order, and as he watched the play he could not help but see the action on the stage as emblematic of life in the world at large. For example, in *King Lear*, when Lear enters at the end of the play carrying the body of his dead daughter, we see not only a sad image of a bereft father, we see an archetypal image of tragedy itself. As you watch *Romeo and Juliet*, look for those moments which link the world of the play to the world at large—not only Shakespeare's world, but the world we live in today. ★



Questions for Discussion

Love is seen in many forms in this play. How is Romeo's love for Rosaline different from his love for Juliet? Compare and contrast the views of love stated by the Nurse and Lady Capulet. How does Capulet's love for his daughter relate to his anger when she refuses to marry Paris? If Romeo and Juliet were to live, do you think their love would last? Why or why not? How true is love at first sight?

What is fate? What other concepts might you use instead of fate to describe such forces? What is the role of fate in this play? Do you believe in fate? Why or why not?

Compare and contrast the roles of the Nurse and Mercutio and their relative relationships to Juliet and Romeo. What does each contribute to the play?

How does the play reflect or contradict contemporary attitudes and experiences concerning parent-child relationships? urban violence? love and marriage? religion? street gangs? teen suicide?

After the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt, the Prince states, "Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill." Consider the Prince's actions after the play's initial brawl, and again after the above-mentioned deaths. Do the Prince's acts of mercy lead to further deaths? Discuss this idea in relation to today's controversy regarding the death penalty.

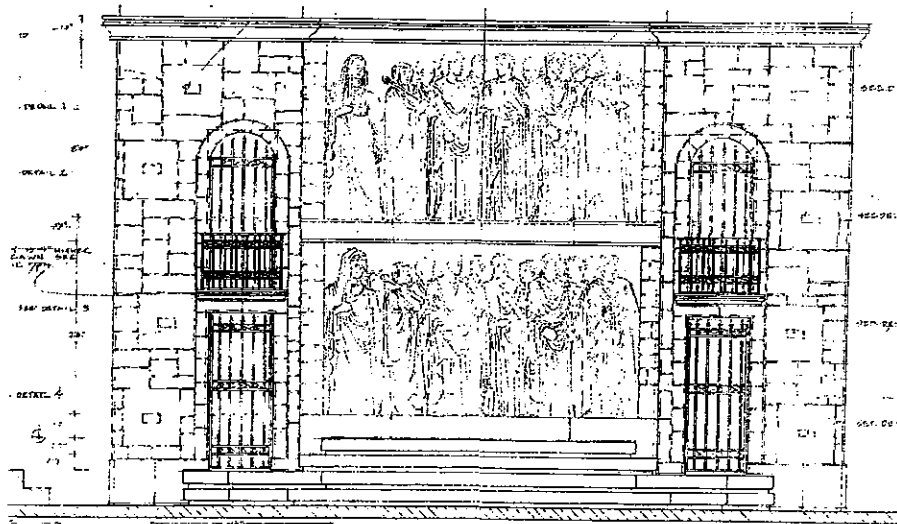
Why do you suppose Shakespeare gives no reason for the quarrel between the Capulets and the Montagues? Discuss this situation in relation to long-raging feuds between nations and cultures today.

What is the traditional theatrical meaning of the word *tragedy*? What has the word come to mean in our world today? What does it mean to you? Consider the events of the play in light of the mass media's frequent use of the word *tragedy*.

Considering the risks, would you become involved in a relationship with someone whom the rest of your community would reject? Why or why not?



Preliminary costume renderings for the IRT production by designer Linda Pisano for (above, left to right) Romeo, Juliet, and Mercutio.
(below) Scenic elevation by designer Robert M. Koharchik.



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