

Romeo in Romeo and Juliet

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David TENNANT played Romeo in Michael Boyd's production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in the summer season of 2000, and later at the Barbican Theatre. His other roles in that season were Antipholus of Syracuse, and Jack Absolute in *The Rivals*. Earlier roles for the RSC were Touchstone, Jack Lane in *The Herbal Bed*, and Hamilton in *The General from America*. His other stage work includes a wide range of classical and modern roles at the Manchester Royal Exchange (where he played Edgar in *King Lear*), the Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh, and in London, at the Donmar, the Almeida and the National Theatre. He has worked extensively on radio and television and among his films are *LA Without a Map* and *The Last September*. His essay on his performance of Touchstone in the RSC's 1996 production of *As You Like It* was published in *Players of Shakespeare 4*.

The thing about *Romeo and Juliet* is that everyone seems to think they know what it's about. You don't have to talk about it for long before people start saying things like 'the greatest love story ever told' and spouting famous lines. ('Wherefore art thou Romeo' has to be one of the most overused and most misunderstood quotations in the English-speaking world.) When I found out that I was going to be playing Romeo for the Royal Shakespeare Company I was at first thrilled, then nervous, and then rather snowed under with unsolicited opinion: 'O, it's a wonderful part'; 'terribly difficult'; 'such beautiful poetry'; 'O, he's so wet'; 'he's so wonderfully romantic'; 'Why on earth do you want to play Romeo? Mercutio is the only part to play'; 'of course Romeo is always upstaged by Juliet'; 'it's the best of Shakespeare'; 'it's absolutely Shakespeare's worst play'—and so on, and on, until it soon became evident that to attempt such a part in such a play might be at best ill-advised and at worst total and utter madness. It was certainly clear that I couldn't hope to please all of the people all of the time and that even pleasing *some* of the people *some* of the time was going to be pretty tricky. [114]

However, I had always wanted to play Romeo. I thought it was a great part full of very recognizable emotions and motivations, with a vibrant youthful energy and a sense of poetry with which anyone who has ever been a self-dramatizing adolescent can identify. It is suffused with the robust certainty and cynicism of youth, but crowned with a winning and rather beautiful open-heartedness.

And it's a great story brilliantly told, full of passion, wit, politics, intrigue, life and death, and topped off with lashings of sex and violence.

And we had a great director at the helm in the shape of Michael Boyd, whose work I had been thrilled by for years at the Tron Theatre in Glasgow and more recently at the RSC itself. His productions had always seemed to me to have the power to make the theatre a truly magical place where things happen that could only happen in a theatre, so that theatre isn't the poor relation of the feature-film but a genuine living art form specific to itself and nothing else. I'd always been desperately keen to work with Michael and to do it with this play was a dream come true.

And Juliet was to be played by Alexandra Gilbreath whom I had met several times and knew would be great to work with, as well as having seen her be very brilliant as Roxanne in *Cyrano de Bergerac* and as Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. So the whole package was shaping up rather irresistibly.

And I was running out of time. There is no explicit reference in the text to how old Romeo is, but he is, undeniably, a *young* man. I didn't have very many years left. I'd always said to myself that it was a part I would have to do before my thirtieth birthday or not at all. Actors older than that have played the part, of course, and I don't doubt that they've done it very well, but I wanted to set myself a deadline. (There are, after all, few more tragic sights than a balding, middle-aged actor, corsetting in his paunch

and inelegantly bounding across the stage as an ageing juvenile!) So, at twenty-eight (I would be twenty-nine before the show opened) it was now or never.

And I suppose that playing Romeo had always represented to me the first rung on a ladder that every great classical actor had climbed before ascending to Hamlet, Iago, Macbeth, and so on, finally culminating in a great, definitive King Lear before toppling over and retiring to an old actors' home and telling ribald anecdotes into a great, plummy old age. Not that I am, for a second, categorizing myself as a 'great classical actor', or even aspiring to such a term, but the opportunity to follow [115] a path through these famous parts in the wake of actors like Irving, Olivier, Gielgud and others seemed thrilling, and something that, ever since drama school, I'd dreamed of doing. This is the sort of egocentric thought-process that is not entirely helpful to an actor when it comes to actually approaching a role, and I'm not particularly proud to admit to it now, but I can't deny that it was a part (only a relatively small part, but an important one nevertheless) of what made me say yes to the RSC and to begin to find my own way through the sea of received notions of what the part meant to everyone who was so keen to give me their opinion.

As the play was to be part of the RSC's 2000 season, I would be involved in more than one production, so I was duly signed up to play Jack Absolute in Sheridan's *The Rivals* and Antipholus of Syracuse in *The Comedy of Errors*, as well as Romeo. *Romeo and Juliet* wouldn't even start rehearsals until the other two plays were up and running, which meant that I was thrown into the first rehearsal day on *Romeo* only a day or two after my second opening night of the season. This meant that I had had little time to brood over the script before we started. I had been reading the play, of course, and I had made a few observations and suggestions for myself, but I came to the initial read-through relatively open-minded as to how I was going to approach the play and the part. On the first day Michael Boyd spoke about his own initial impressions and ideas. He talked about the enormous amount of baggage this play seems to bring with it, and his desire that we should shed it

all as soon as possible. He said that he'd been surprised, when rereading the play, how unsentimental and muscular it was, and he noted how full of sexual innuendo and darkness it was too. He was interested to find that it was a play about generation, and that the story of the parents was not to be forgotten in the story about their children. He talked about how he wanted to approach the play simply and truthfully, and he introduced us to the set design that he had been working on with designer Tom Piper.

It was a non-specific design, basically two curving walls, facing each other, that could represent different things throughout the evening—whether they were the orchard walls that Romeo climbs, the wall under Juliet's balcony, or, more symbolically, simply a representation of the two families, ever present and immovably solid. Costumes were to be vaguely Elizabethan, without any attempt to be pedantically specific. Statements about generations could be made through the costumes, so [116] that the old world-order of the ageing Prince Escalus would be represented in full doublet and hose, while I, along with Benvolio, Mercutio and the other young men, would look more modern, using shapes and fabrics from contemporary designers. Anachronisms were not to be shied away from if they helped to tell the story.

So, with the world of the production taking shape, I had to start figuring out who Romeo is and how he fits into this society. He's the heir to the Montague fortune—a not-inconsiderable position either socially or politically—but he seems altogether without interest in the family's conflict and much more concerned with his own inner turmoil:

O me, what fray was here?
Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all.
Here [*i. e., in my heart*] 's much to do with hate,
but more with love.

(1.1.173- 5)

Before his first entrance we learn that Romeo has been seen wandering gloomily through the woods at dawn and holing himself up in his room. He's become distant from his parents—unlike the Capulets, the parent/ child dynamic in the Montague household is barely touched on in the play. There doesn't appear to be any antagonism

between Romeo and his parents, just a lack of any communication at all, despite Mr and Mrs Montague's obvious concern for their son. It suggests to me that Romeo finds his 'family' elsewhere. Certainly the parental *confidant* in his life seems to have become the friar (but we learn more of that later on) and it is Benvolio who is employed to find out what's wrong.

Central to this first Romeo scene is his relationship with Benvolio. Anthony Howell (playing Benvolio) and I were keen that the two should enjoy a familiar, relaxed relationship. We have just been shown that Benvolio has a trusting relationship with Romeo's parents and, since Benvolio's parents are never referred to, we began to assume that they had been brought up together, so that, although only cousins, they would interact like brothers. (And as Anthony and I were playing identical twins in *The Comedy of Errors*, it seemed churlish not to make the most of any 'familial' similarities.) Having someone who knows Romeo so well helps, I think, to mitigate the worst of his excesses. It struck me that Romeo's first entrance doesn't necessarily help to endear him to an audience, but Benvolio's presence provides an affectionate cynicism which allows the audience, and perhaps even Romeo himself, to see the extremity of his self-indulgence. [117]

When we first see him, Romeo is in the throes of a huge and unrequited crush on a character we never even get to meet; not the 'Juliet' at the play's title has led us to expect him to be pining for, but some girl called Rosaline, who appears to have taken a vow of celibacy rather than reciprocate his advances. Michael encouraged me to think of Rosaline as novice nun—the ultimate sexual lost cause for Romeo to be mooning over. And this, it seems to me, is part of it: Rosaline's very remoteness and inaccessibility are part of her appeal to the self-aware, emotionally immature and indulgent Romeo. A reciprocated love (such as he later joys with Juliet) would not grant him the opportunity to bemoan his own lot, in that peculiarly adolescent way:

She hath forsworn to love; and in that vow
Do I live dead that live to tell it now.
(1.1.223—4)

It certainly allows him to cock a superior snook at Benvolio—a kind of 'you who have never loved couldn't hope to empathize with the transcendental pain that I am feeling to a degree that no other human being alive or dead could ever equal'. I'm not suggesting that Romeo is lying to himself, or anyone else, about how he's feeling, but I wanted to suggest that some part of him is enjoying his own drama. (That also allows you somewhere to go later when he experiences a very visceral passion and a very real drama which he can have neither time nor inclination to enjoy or indulge in.) It was a difficult balance to strike: on the one hand I didn't want to patronize the character by portraying someone who doesn't know himself—though in a way he doesn't (yet)—but at the same time I wanted to tell the story of a disaffected youth at odds with his predicament, his environment, and himself and full of the 'nobody understands-me' ire of adolescence. In discussion with Tom Piper, the designer, it was decided that he would dress himself in black—a self-conscious Hamlet, in mourning for his life. He is therefore in a state of flux, full of unfulfilled passion and directionless purpose—ripe for a journey and looking for exactly the sort of experience that he is about to stumble upon. 'The readiness is all'—and without it there could be no inevitability about what happens and no journey for the character.

So if Benvolio is the familiar harbour where Romeo begins his journey, and Juliet is the northern star which guides him forward, Mercutio is the storm that tries to blow him off course and, in our production at least, goes all out to sink him. [118]

Mercutio is a close friend of Romeo and Benvolio, but whilst he is undeniably fun to be around and the life and soul of the party, he is a 'high maintenance' personality, and when we first meet him the strain in his relationship with Romeo is beginning to tell. It certainly seems from the text of the play that Mercutio doesn't entirely applaud Romeo's interest in girls. He bombards Romeo with criticism and lewd innuendo about his mooning after Rosaline. Adrian Schiller (playing Mercutio) felt sure that this endless vitriol must be based on something more than locker-room horseplay and that the character's fury must stem from a feeling, however subconscious, of sexual jealousy and betrayal. We had no trouble finding this in the

playing of the scenes. The further Romeo moves away from his 'childhood' friends into the grown-up world of heterosexual desire, the more Mercutio rages and the less Romeo is affected by him. Whether Mercutio himself is aware of his crush on Romeo, we chose to play that Benvolio and Romeo *are*, so that when Mercutio pushed me over and mounted me during the climax of his Queen Mab speech—

This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,
That presses them and learns them first to
bear,
Making them women of good carriage.
This is she—

(1.4.92-5)

Romeo's interruption ('Peace, peace, Mercutio! / Thou talkest of nothing') is a rejection of his cynicism and innuendo as well as a rejection of his advances. Romeo has already set off in a direction that can't include his friend if he is going to demand his complete attention.

The playing of this unspoken sexual tension helped us to unlock some of the more opaque dialogue elsewhere in the play. The scene (2.4) between the three lads in the midday heat—the morning after the party following which Romeo has (Mercutio presumes) spent the night with Rosaline—contains one of those Shakespearian interchanges that can make actors despair: an exchange of pun-laden witticism crammed full of Elizabethan references that make the pages of the play-text groan with footnotes. The challenge is always to make a modern audience who, on the whole, enjoy a relatively slim appreciation of the finer points of sixteenth-century *double entendre*, feel that they can follow your argument. When Romeo and Mercutio set off on their battle of wits (a battle, incidentally, that they both seem to enjoy and revel in—an interesting [119] clue to why they have found each other as friends and something that Adrian and I were keen to show, for there is little to mourn in the break-down of a friendship if you have no idea why they were friends in the first place, and Shakespeare's economy of storytelling offers these clues sparingly enough), it's difficult to follow the thread of what they are saying even on the printed page, let alone in the heat of performance. We found, however, that if we played the subtext of their relationship it not only let the

characters say what they were thinking about each other without *actually* saying it, it also lent the exchange a dynamism and clarity that transcended the problems of Elizabethan pun-age. So when Romeo says 'Pink for flower' (2.4.57) he is calling Mercutio—and probably for the first time, since he has the security of his new life with Juliet now and doesn't need to humour Mercutio any more—a homosexual. Mercutio chooses not to take the bait ('Right', 2.4.58), but before long they are into a debate about 'geese', and again Romeo is quite bold with Mercutio:

ROMEO: Thou wast never with me for anything
when they wast not there for the goose
[i.e. my 'goose'].

MERCUTIO: I will bite thee by the ear for that
jest.

ROMEO: Nay, good goose, bite not *[i.e. get off
me, I've had enough]*.

Nothing is explicitly stated, but Romeo is cutting Mercutio off, and while it is Mercutio who ultimately wins the race of wits it is Romeo who is leaving him behind. I didn't want this to seem vindictive as Romeo is undoubtedly deeply fond of Mercutio—he has to be for the later scenes to work—but it is simply inevitable and necessary that he pushes Mercutio away. The choice our production took was that Mercutio's rage at his rejection and eventual death at the hands of his beloved transformed itself into a vengeance that would extend beyond the grave. When Mercutio is taken off stage to die shouting 'a plague a' both your houses' (3.1.106), he is fully intending to be the author of that plague and will (in our production) reappear later in the play, first handing over the poison that will kill Romeo and then, as Friar John, regretfully informing Friar Lawrence that he couldn't deliver his letter. This notion that the fates were a real and motivated influence on events in the world of the play had resonances throughout the production. In the purely pragmatic sense this device of Mercutio as an evil avenging angel neatly justified one of Shakespeare's less integrated plot twists. [120]

(the play is no longer a tragedy about a dodgy postal service), but the broader implication of a divinity that shapes our ends was something that I found particularly interesting in terms of Romeo himself and his entire world view.



David Tennant (left) as Romeo with Adrian Schiller (centre) as Mercutio and Anthony Howell as Benvolio, Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 2: 'Nay, good goose, bite not.'

It struck me very early on that Romeo had a fairly well-developed sense of the world of fate and destiny. He talks of his dreams and makes numerous references to the stars and what lies in them. It seemed to make sense that someone trapped in a world of very real physical conflict that he wants no part of, should yearn to exist in a world outside himself, and should be searching for something new to believe in. This became a very important touchstone for me as I tried to draw this character and it provided the backbone of my understanding of his emotional responses. The first explicit reference I found was his justification for not going to the Capulet ball by saying 'I dreamt a dream tonight' (1.4.50)—a protest soon demolished and sneered at by the decidedly earthbound Mercutio, but something which nonetheless is a very real fear for Romeo. After the others exit at the end of the scene he is left to mull over his trepidation: [121]

I fear, too early. For my mind misgives
Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars,
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
With this night's revels and expire the term
Of a despised life, closed in my breast,
By some vile forfeit of untimely death.
(1.4.106-11)

It's an unspecific, yet creeping, panic that threatens to overwhelm him. I played this speech with my eyes glued to a particular space in the auditorium, as if these malignant stars that shaped his end had a physical location. It was a spot my eyes would return to later. This wasn't superstition

on Romeo's part but a very palpable dread and one that would continue to haunt him. I began to wonder what this dream he had had could be, and the answer came from an idea of Michael Boyd's to have Romeo speak the Prologue.

Two households, both alike in dignity
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene . . .
(Prologue, 1-2)

is one of those bits of Shakespeare that the audience can practically chant along with you. It is usually spoken at the very top of the play (as written), often by the actor playing Escalus. Michael's idea was to have the Prologue spoken midway through the first scene, so that it would cut through the street-fight and suspend the action; and he also wanted it to be spoken by Romeo. This wouldn't be the same Romeo that we would meet for the first time a few minutes later, however; this would be Romeo after his death, a spectre who could speak the Prologue with all the despair, resignation and even bitterness, of hindsight. As the action on stage was suspended, I could even address some of it to other characters in the play, so the lines

And the continuance of the parent s' rage,
Which, but their children's end, naught could
remove
(lines 10-11)

could be said directly to my father, who was even then in the midst of a sword fight with Capulet. It was a bold choice which, you could say, takes the idea of the Prologue as an alienation device to its logical conclusion. It helped, I think, to confound audience expectation early on—something that we'd always been keen to do. It also helped me to answer my own question. This became Romeo's dream, this vision [122] of himself walking through an all-too-familiar battlefield as a ghost of himself telling a story that would only make partial sense, but warned of a tragedy that would take his life. Indeed, as his story unfolded it would seem that this portent of doom was only becoming ever more inescapable.

So it is a Romeo full of angst, anxiety and little joy that first claps eyes on Juliet. It is probably in these first couple of scenes between Romeo and Juliet that the actors feel the greatest pressure of expectation and history. It is very difficult not to try

to play the whole thing at once as you struggle to tell the audience that you *are* ‘the greatest lovers of all time’. The solution, of course, is not to think about all that and just play the scenes as they come off the page, but that is easier said than done, particularly in that first scene between the pair which lasts all of eighteen lines, the first fourteen of which famously arrange themselves into a sonnet—ending in the couple’s first kiss.

You have a lot of ground to cover in this short scene. By the time they part at the end of it the pair have to have turned their respective lives around to follow each other to the end of time, irrespective of consequences. When Alex Gilbreath and I came to the scene for the first time we tried to tell the story of this huge, life-changing moment with every word. We tried to imbue the scene with every delicate romantic thought we could muster until every word dripped with unspoken meaning—with the result that the scene was absurdly slow and entirely turgid.

We were duly sent off to have a session with Cicely Berry, the RSC’s resident verse-speaking guru. Although officially retired, Cis is still very involved with the Company and at hand to help actors through some of the trickier sections of the plays she knows so well. She got us to look at the scene afresh and examine exactly what Shakespeare is doing in the language. So we started again, stripping the whole thing down and dumping the baggage: after all, these two people may be the most famous couple in the English-speaking world, but at this point *they have never met before*.

Their conversation (1.5.93-106) begins with what is, to my mind, a rather brilliant chat-up line from Romeo:

If I profane with my unworthing hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this.
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

[123] I’m quite sure that he’s used this line before. It seems far too polished and well constructed to be an extempore remark and it is right up his particular alley of pure obsession. He casts himself as a pilgrim and the object of his love as the holiest of saints. Even if he has tried this line before, however, he has never had the response that he now enjoys:

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this.
For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss.

And this is where it all starts changing for Romeo. Not only has he been entranced by the physical shape of Juliet from across a crowded dance-floor; now he has met his match intellectually. They are sparring with their wits now. He takes her argument and uses it against her:

Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

But, again, she is too quick for him:

Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

Continuing the idea, Romeo appeals to her—as it were ‘in character’—and warns her that she is responsible for his immortal soul:

O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do!
They pray: grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

And Juliet, ever his equal, manages to give in, knowing full well where all this is leading, without losing any of her own dignity:

Saints do not move, though grant for prayers’ sake.

And so, on the last line of the sonnet, Romeo and Juliet kiss and their destiny is sealed:

Then move not while my prayer’s effect I take.

We found that if we played the scene as a battle of wits, then the rest of the work was done for us. The innuendo is all in the text, and what can be sexier than two people who are attracted to each other trying to outdo each other—push each other away and at the same time reel each other in? The scene became much quicker and more urgent, with barely a pause for breath until after that first kiss. I realize that it can seem terribly mundane to say that the lesson we learned was simply to play the text, [124] but often it proves more difficult than one would imagine, especially when the familiarity of the text you have to work with transcends its meaning.

There is a point immediately after this scene where Romeo discovers Juliet’s identity and it seems that their relationship is finished before it can even begin. I wanted to tell the story of Romeo settling in to the doomed inevitability of it all. He is, after all, the misunderstood poet who can never be

happy, and to be in love with the daughter of his father's mortal foe is almost too perfect. If Rosaline, the novice nun, was a bad choice of girlfriend, then Juliet is even more of a disaster. When he wanders into the orchard below Juliet's window, he has no reason to believe that this is anything other than another Rosaline situation where he can protest his unrequited love to an unforgiving world.

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

(II.ii.2)

This is another line that seems beyond reinterpretation, but I tried to play the very real danger of the situation. If Romeo is caught in this orchard, under this window, he will be killed without question, something that Michael was always reminding us of and which would help to power the scene that followed. It is only Romeo's free-wheeling imagination that pulls him back towards the dream of Juliet. The speech which follows is a glorious marriage of the poetic and the earthly—as, indeed, is Romeo and Juliet's entire relationship. He compares Juliet to the sun, and then she is the moon's maid, wearing green livery (a reference to virginity) which he urges her to cast off, and his final thought is 'That I might touch that cheek' (2.2.25).

She is still a heavenly body to him, but there is a genuine sense of his sexual desire too. He is marrying the idolization of his heart's desire (which we have seen with Rosaline) with very real sexual urges: already their relationship is more real and mature, but it is all still part of Romeo's fancy until he hears Juliet say

O Romeo, Romeo!—wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name.
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

(II.ii.33-6)

And it is only here that Romeo's journey really begins. For the first time his love is reciprocated, for the first time he has found his soul-mate, [125] and from that moment his destiny is set in stone. From that moment he is, as he will later realize, playing straight into the arms of the fates he was so keen to avoid.

Act Two, Scene Two, the 'Balcony Scene', is one that Alex and I always enjoyed playing. For a start, it

is the only point in the whole play that Romeo and Juliet actually get to spend any real time together, so everything else that happens springs from this twenty-minute scene. Both the characters speak the most wonderful lines; not only is the text very beautiful, however, it is also very human, and at times, it transpired, very funny. We never set out to 'get laughs' in the balcony scene, but they did happen. All we tried to do was to play the situation and the dialogue as truthfully as we could, and I suppose the act of two people falling in love and getting to know each other is not altogether without its lighter side. Michael certainly guarded against any accusation of sentimentality and kept this scene on a strictly truthful basis by shouting 'Soup!' at us during rehearsal if ever we slipped into the bog of emotional over-indulgence.

There is also a conflict of interest between them in this scene, with Juliet full of the practicalities of the danger Romeo is in and the need for him to get to safety, and Romeo's desire to flout the risks in order to tell her how enchanted he is:

JULIET: If they do see thee, they will murder thee.

ROMEO: Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye
Than twenty of their swords! Look thou but
sweet,

And I am proof against their enmity.

(II.ii.70—3)

This youthful, idealistic, and completely charming Romeo will develop into something else very quickly. In Act Three, Scene Five, after they have spent their first night together and Romeo must leave before they are discovered, the roles have changed. He is the husband now, and has taken on the responsibility he has for both of them. Then it is Juliet who wants to ignore the truth and Romeo who takes control: 'I must be gone and live, or stay and die' (3.5.11).

Both of them, however, are aware of the gravity of their situation from the beginning. When Juliet proposes the idea of marriage (and the initial idea does come from her: Romeo is slower to grasp the necessity of practical action), he doesn't hesitate to agree. They have to legitimize their relationship if it is to have any chance of surviving in this climate.

[126]



David Tennant as Romeo with Alexandra Gilbreath as Juliet, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 3, Scene 5: 'I must be gone and live, or stay and die.'

Again that sense of violence that pervades their lives defines both of their characters in so many ways. Romeo talks to none of his friends about this most important of life-changes—simply because he can't risk it. The only person he can turn to is the friar.

The friar is one of the most important keys to figuring out who Romeo is. It is the friar who is Romeo's closest *confidant*, it is to him that Romeo takes all his problems, and it is in the friar's cell that Romeo hides out after he has killed Tybalt. Des McAleer provided our production with a brilliant, solid, no-nonsense friar who offered a strong counter to any of Romeo's adolescent extremities. We wanted there to be a familiarity between the pair that was to do with mutual affection and respect. We decided that Romeo, forever in the grip of some existential argument with himself, would be regularly at the friar's cell, picking his brains and quizzing him on the nature of his own beliefs. We felt that the friar (not a conventional priest) would enjoy debating the finer points of theology with his young friend and it made great sense to me that Romeo, in search of some world outwith his own, would need the outlet of someone who considered things on the spiritual plane. It is not always [127] an easy relationship, however. The friar doesn't give Romeo an easy time when he reveals that he has fallen in love with Juliet, and it seems clear that

Romeo expects it to be a hard sell as the friar has to force him to get to the point:

Be plain, good son, and homely in thy drift.
Riddling confession finds but riddling shrift.
(II.iii.51-2)

But Romeo needs someone to test him like this and the friar provides that for him. It is also the friar who sees Romeo at his most vulnerable. The scene which closed the first half in our production, Act Three, Scene One, contains a pivotal moment for Romeo. After the unconfined joy of the lightning marriage ceremony, things are beginning to look up for young Montague and for the first time it looks possible that he might just live happily ever after. Running into a vengeful Tybalt in the street is the last thing Romeo had gambled on, and the resulting sword fight which will see Romeo cause Mercutio's death and then kill Tybalt in vengeful rage, destroys any sensation of the hope that Romeo was beginning to feel.

It is a brilliantly written scene, one which we found came to life fairly easily, since each of the characters is so strongly motivated in opposing directions and the stakes are so high: for Tybalt, his own pride and need for revenge; for Mercutio, the need to protect the honour of his friend; and for Romeo, the future of his wife and the safety of both his friend and his new cousin-in-law. Romeo is paralysed by his need to maintain the secrecy of his brand new wife, and it is this paralysis that leads to his ill-advised attempt to stop the fight between Tybalt and Mercutio. The extraordinary stage fight between Adrian Schiller and Keith Dunphy (playing Tybalt), put together by fight-director Terry King, made this very easy to play. The more dangerous the battle looks, the more impotent and terrified Romeo becomes, making his eventual intervention all the more desperate.

These feelings of impotence and fear make Romeo's sense of inequity—and, more importantly, guilt—at Mercutio's death all the sharper. Adrian's Mercutio showed no forgiveness at his death—he would, after all, be back in the second half to kill me off—and so I was left on stage full of remorse, anger and a sense of bewilderment at what had just occurred. Again Romeo sees it all written in the all-seeing, ever-malicious stars: [128]

This day's black fate on more days doth depend.
This but begins the woe others must end.
(III.i.119-20)

It was important to me that when Tybalt reappeared Romeo dispatched him quickly, violently, and with as little sense of honour as possible. We know that Romeo is not, by nature, violent and there is nothing in the text to suggest that he is a particularly good swordsman (Mercutio suggests earlier in the scene that he is no match for Tybalt), so if we are to believe that he could kill Tybalt it has to be a sudden, reckless act done in the blind heat of a moment's pure rage. He is in a miasma of confusion, injustice and terrible, terrible guilt and the presence of Tybalt alive and well with the sight of Mercutio's blood still vivid in Romeo's mind pushes him into a stupor of fury and violence. It is several lines later, with Tybalt dead at his feet and Benvolio pleading with him to make a run for it, before the true gravity of what he has done awakens Romeo out of his reverie of vengeance. With 'O, I am fortune's fool' (3.1.136) Romeo sees his life unravelling before his very eyes. Suddenly he has single-handedly killed his future, his hope, and another human being. One of his closest friends is dead and he has become a murderer. His chances of living happily ever after have evaporated terrifyingly quickly.

The scene in the friar's cell (3.3) where Romeo learns that he is to be banished from Verona, sees him at his most helpless. Romeo has no one to blame but himself for the death of Tybalt, and consequently the death of his marriage to Tybalt's cousin, and it is the friar who gets the full front of Romeo's rage of helplessness. I didn't want to hold back on this. I felt that Romeo would react like a cornered animal, lashing out at the friar and blaming him for his predicament. Unreasonable and childish though that may be, this is, it seems to me, often how we treat those closest to us. Shakespeare certainly gives Romeo (ever the poet) a rash of words to express himself with. The word *banished* chimes through this scene (and the previous one) like a death-knell and every time it came up I would try to use it to punish the friar, to hurt someone else as I had been hurt. It is Romeo's crisis point, and it is the friar who lifts him out of it. The friar is Romeo's base point, to which he will always come home. They are much more in tune than Romeo

and his parents are; indeed father and son is the dynamic of their relationship. It is important that Romeo has an unquestioning trust of the friar—as [129] children often do of their parents—to allow the events at the end of the play to unfold as they do.

When Romeo reappears after being banished to Mantua (and being off stage for the whole of Act Four), I felt he should have matured and moved on. No longer dressed all in black, he's been away from the continual threats and challenges of Veronese life and although he's being denied his Juliet, he seems calm. He's had some time in isolation to think things through and plan the life that he and Juliet may lead together. It is as if he has finally managed to escape the fingers of the fates. Certainly the dream he talks of at the start of Act Five, Scene One is of an optimistic nature (albeit with a morbid flavour) and it seems that he can finally see light at the end of the tunnel. This calmness and state of readiness perhaps explains his reaction to the news that Juliet is dead: 'Is it e'en so? Then I defy you, stars!' (5.1.24). He refuses to be beaten by his own destiny and there are no tears or protestations of grief. In that instant I wanted him to see everything that must happen very clearly. His language is certainly full of practicality and he sees a clear sequence of events. The thought of dying alongside Juliet becomes inevitable and absolutely necessary and no side-issue—emotional or otherwise—must get in the way. He becomes filled with such full-fronted motivation that from that moment until he sees Juliet's body, he slips into another reality altogether. Michael described it as if he were full of 'toxic energy' and this is the energy that kills Paris and threatens to do away with Balthasar. It is only when he has lifted Juliet out of the grave and is cradling her in his arms that he can breathe again and begin to understand where circumstances have brought him.

I find Romeo's final speech fascinating. There is relatively little self-indulgence or grief. Instead I found there to be a strong sense of someone who has come home. The only thing that seems to damage his resolve to die is Juliet's lack of decay:

Ah, dear Juliet,
Why art thou yet so fair? Shall I believe
That insubstantial death is amorous,

And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?
For fear of that I still will stay with thee
And never from this palace of dim night
Depart again.

(5.3.101-08)

[129] And then the idea of dying becomes a release:

Here, here [*repeating the word seem s to underline his resolve*] will I remain
With worms that are thy chambermaids. O
here [*again*]
Will I set up my everlasting rest
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh.

(5.3.108-12)

So finally he has beaten the fates that have been pushing him around and forcing this misplaced poet to live in a world that he doesn't fit into, and in death he can finally escape and be with the woman who understood him. In our production Michael had Alex and me walking through the people round the tomb after our death and then walking off the stage and out through the audience so that, indeed,

through death, Romeo and Juliet had somehow escaped. The real tragedy is left for those who have to rebuild this ruined society. One suspects that their problems are bigger than a couple of gold statues can mend.

Romeo and Juliet is a much-produced play full of lines more famous than any of the actors who could hope to play them. One could never hope to be definitive in it, but I'm glad to have had the chance to give it a crack and I look forward to seeing it performed again and again in years to come, so that I can see the way it should have been done. And it goes without saying that I shall greatly enjoy terrorizing young actors by telling them how very, very tricky it is!

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