

## FOLLOWING THE FILMS

MARGARET  
RONAN

### ROMEO AND JULIET

(Paramount)

There's certainly nothing new about *Romeo and Juliet*. They have been the world's most famous teenagers for centuries. The first version of their story turned up in 400 B.C. in the *Ephesiaca* by Xenophon of Ephesus. Later, when Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* in the 16th century, he borrowed the plot of his play from an English poem of the same name — which had in turn borrowed its theme from a French translation of an Italian story. But if Shakespeare didn't actually invent his "star-crossed lovers," he did give them immortality — an immortality movie-makers have been trying to capture since 1908 when the first silent film version of *Romeo and Juliet* appeared.

With the exception of *West Side Story*, these film versions have been just photographed "classics" — costume epics in which actors happened to spout Shakespeare's lines. Most of them had the form but not the spirit of the play. Perhaps one reason for this sad lack of vitality had to do with age. As Shakespeare saw it, Juliet was not quite 14, and Romeo was perhaps 16. But until now, film versions have always featured stars who were pushing 30 or even 40. A typical example was MGM's 1936 spectacle, starring 37-year-old Norma Shearer as Juliet and 43-year-old Leslie Howard as Romeo.

Director Franco Zeffirelli hasn't made this mistake. In this exciting and beautiful new film version, Juliet is played by 15-year-old Olivia

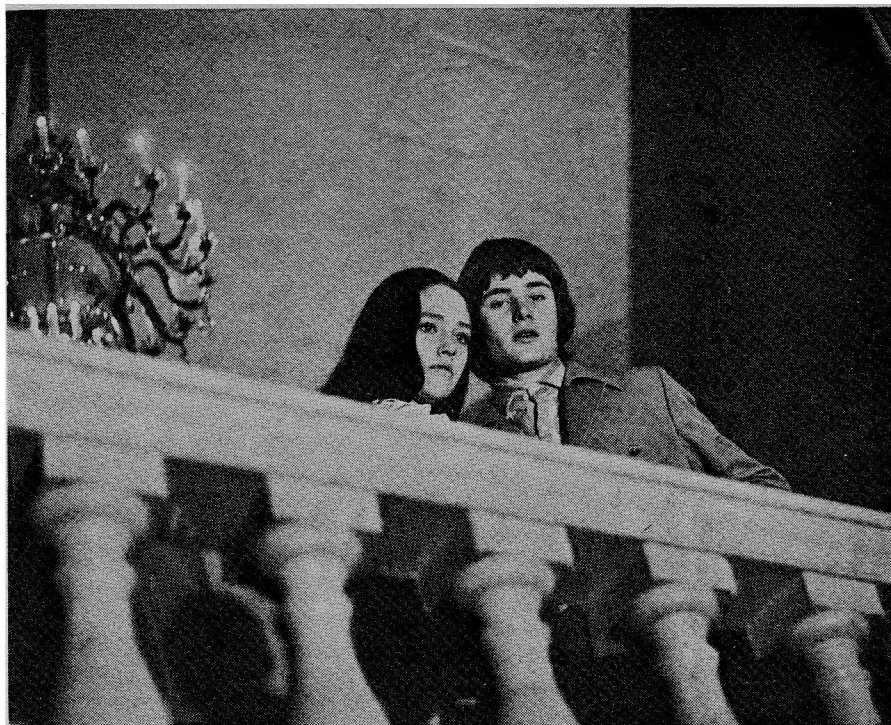


Photo by William Johnson

Balcony Scene: "Romeo" and "Juliet" now 18 and 16, pose behind balustrade during visit to U.S. They won roles in competition with 300 young actors.

Hussey and Romeo by 17-year-old Leonard Whiting. The presence of these honest-to-goodness teenagers breathes new life and zest into the old story. Their youth makes the wasteful irony of their death even more tragic.

With young people in young roles, Shakespeare's play zooms into focus and becomes as timely as today. It is not only a story of love and death, but also a comment on the generation gap. Romeo and Juliet are caught in the crossfire of a senseless feud being carried on by their families, the Montagues and the Capulets. The young people cannot communicate with their elders, who are locked in a struggle for power and prestige. Juliet is doomed by the resentment of her mother (Natasha Parry) and by her father's insensitivity. Romeo's parents are almost invisible in their indifference. Even Friar Laurence (Milo O'Shea) and Juliet's Nurse (Pat Heywood) — the only adults who try to help the lovers — bring disaster.

Thanks to Zeffirelli's deft direction, vitality brightens every frame of this excellent film. We see a lively 15th-century Verona of white sun-splashed streets, where the gang rumbles of the young Montagues and Capulets

scatter the market stalls and send peaceful citizens scurrying for cover. Perhaps not everyone will approve of the few liberties Zeffirelli has taken with the original Shakespeare, but those I spotted seemed more helpful than harmful. Count Paris has been eliminated from the tomb scene, sparing Romeo a senseless and repulsive murder, and keeping the focus on the lovers where it belongs. Tybalt (Michael York) is still fiery and overbearing, but Mercutio (John McEnery) is no longer the irresistible daredevil that actors love to play. He has been turned into a hysterical show-off, and that makes sense. His rantings and posturings drive him to the death that he seems to be actually seeking as he taunts Tybalt into fighting a duel with him.

A few of the play's lines have been rearranged, but not jarringly so. The over-all effect does justice to Shakespeare's poetry and to his intent. He was writing about young people defeated by the arrogance of their elders, and this film version's vibrant young stars come across as such flesh-and-blood beings that we care about their anguish and senseless deaths. This *Romeo and Juliet* grooves as Shakespeare meant it to, and as it rarely has in our time.