

DIRECTOR'S NOTES >> LAURA GORDON

Most everyone knows this play. We've either seen it on stage, on the screen, or have read it. *Romeo and Juliet* is an enduring classic containing some of the most gorgeous and well-known poetry written in the English language. It's a high stakes love story fueled by the exuberance of youth and the thrill of first love, full of risk and danger, as two young people try to navigate their emotions and the ancient grudge that exists between their families. And, spoiler alert, Shakespeare even tells us in the sixth line of the play that this "pair of star-crossed lovers" will take their life. And yet we watch it again, almost willing it to have a different outcome this time.

I think one of the reasons this play has continued to resonate so fully with audiences is because of the extraordinary potential that exists in these two young people: the potential of their love, certainly, but also the potential of the lives they could lead. The potential that their relationship might actually heal the feud between their families. Shakespeare has us revel in the joy of this young love. We invest in the hope, and we mourn the loss of it.

And as we "hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature," I don't think we can help but see reflected the deeply divided time in which we're living: how ancient grudges stand in the way of finding common ground, how senseless shootings and an opioid crisis have left too many parents outliving their children. Whether a young person tragically takes their own life or has it taken from them, we grieve not only their death, but also the loss of all that glorious potential.

DRAMATURG'S NOTES >> ARIANE HELOU

A young nobleman of Verona falls in love and secretly promises to marry his beloved against the objections of their parents. We saw this intrigue last season in the comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*; in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare reimagines the premise as a tragedy.

The first printed edition of *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) introduces itself as "An Excellent conceited Tragedie...As it hath been often (with great applause) plaide publicklye." This is hardly false advertising: the play has been a hit with audiences since its debut. A second quarto edition, substantially fuller, followed in 1599 and is the basis for the version most widely read and performed today.

There are many reasons for *Romeo and Juliet's* immense and lasting popularity. The plot centers on a rapid romance between young people rebelling against parental authority; the action is propelled by dance, music, and several fight sequences. These are woven together by Shakespeare's rich poetry and inventive prose, which takes flight in sonnets, in Juliet's soaring imagination, and in the comedic arias of Mercutio and the Nurse.

Romeo and Juliet has a reputation as a great love story. But what does "love" mean in this play? Familial love resonates in the relationships between children and their parents or surrogate parents (Friar Lawrence, the Nurse), and between cousins (Juliet and Tybalt, Romeo and Benvolio). Love manifests itself in the loyal, potent friendship of Romeo and Mercutio. Love moves swiftly as Romeo avows his passion for Juliet moments after he has been sighing for the unseen Rosaline. Juliet pursues Romeo to satisfy her own desires, but also to resist surrendering to her parents' designs. (It is perhaps no accident that Juliet's name derives etymologically from Julius, as in Caesar; she is ambitious to shape her own destiny.) Romeo and Juliet are in love with each other, but they are also in love with love, heady and headlong.

Love's twin—hate—also propels the drama. The mutual passion of Romeo and Juliet explodes against the background of a violent feud that disrupts the peace of an entire city. *Romeo and Juliet* is also a story of a civic body in distress on the verge of self-destruction. If the deaths of the young lovers do "bury their parents' strife," they entomb along with it the lives and hopes of a generation of Veronese youth.