

FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO THE MODERN WORLD: COMPARISON OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *ROMEO AND JULIET* (1597) AND BAZ LUHRMANN'S *ROMEO AND JULIET* (1996)

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Abstract:

William Shakespeare is regarded as one of the most influential playwrights and writers. Even though his work dates to the Renaissance, specifically the 16th century, it still resonates with us today. One of his seminal works is *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), a tragic tale of two lovers sealed by feuding families. Set in Verona, Italy, the story has won millions of fans and inspired many artists to adapt it for film, theatre, and books. In the adaptations, the main point of the story remains the same, but the themes and execution differ significantly, especially visually. In this article, I will discuss the 1996 film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Baz Luhrmann.¹ I consider this adaptation to be the most modernized. While Shakespeare was aimed at a Renaissance audience, Luhrmann tried to make it primarily for today's teenagers. What exactly are the main differences between the two works?

Keywords:

#RomeoAndJuliet, WilliamShakespeare, BazLuhrmann, Renaissance, ModernWorld

Romeo and Juliet were written by William Shakespeare between 1591 and 1595. Shakespeare was inspired by a tragic story from the 13th century involving two lovers from merchant and feuding families, he also drew on ancient Greece but placed the story in Verona, where two powerful families, the Montagues, and the Capulets, ruled.² The two families disliked each other and were arch enemies for centuries, and the big twist

Throughout the story, there is a strong emphasis on the emotions of the main characters themselves, and there is also a philosophical reflection on conflict, fate, and

came when Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet fell in love. Shakespeare's precise and arresting use of language, including poetic metaphors, adds depth to the story and makes it more than just an ordinary novel: "*I flew over these walls on the wings of love. No stone wall can keep love out. Whatever a man in love can do, love will make him attempt to do it. Therefore, your relatives can't stop me.*"³

death. At the same time, William Shakespeare consistently explores the consequences of love between the young lovers, pointing out that hatred and societal

pressures lead to immense tragedy. The plot has several key moments, one of which is when Romeo secretly goes to a ball hosted by the Capulets, where he falls in love with Juliet Capulet, this is followed by a declaration of love on the balcony and a sudden wedding. The most famous part is when Romeo returns to Verona from exile because he thinks that Juliet, who ingested a potion to prevent her marriage to the rich Paris and looked dead for several hours, is dead. Romeo ingests the lethal potion and dies beside Juliet, who meanwhile wakes up to see Romeo dead and stabs herself with a dagger.⁴ Their deaths subsequently reconcile their families. Shakespeare uses the idea and free will to show how Romeo and Juliet make choices but are also caught in the grip of forces beyond their control. Setting the story in a Renaissance period and highlighting typical era characteristics and customs, gives the storytelling even more depth. In 1996, director Baz Luhrmann came

Some scenes are so slightly altered to fit the execution of the film, for example, the wedding of Romeo and Juliet. Luhrmann also uses cinematic aesthetics to develop the plot quickly, creating a dynamic and visually engaging experience for the audience. It should be noted that the contrast between the archaic language of the Renaissance and the modern setting of the American 1990s provides an interesting spectacle, showing that a classical text that has been with us for over 300 years is still capable of conveying a message and to evoke considerable emotion.⁵ Baz's approach to the film gives the whole story new

up with a film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. He cast the then twenty-year-old Leonardo DiCaprio and seventeen-year-old Claire Danes in the lead roles; the film is a shortened and modernized version of the original story. Despite the significant modernisation, it retains the original Shakespearean dialogue but is set in the fictional town of 'Verona Beach', located in America. The former feuding clans are represented in the film as warring business and mafia empires, and the names of the secondary characters have also been partially changed. It is also interesting that if Luhrmann had not preserved the original dialogue, it would hardly have occurred to anyone that this was a film inspired by a Renaissance. Verona Beach is a modern city where there is corruption, lots of gangs, expensive cars, neon lights, and skyscrapers, even the Capulets' home is a luxury mansion.

dimension: the great linguistic vocabulary of Shakespeare colliding with the visually rich and energetic presentation of a work that is one of the most influential in the history of world drama. While in the book *Romeo and Juliet* are described as respectable individuals and romantics of the Renaissance period, their love is portrayed poetically, tenderly, and idealistically. The characters undergo a slow process of bonding despite the obstacles. In Luhrmann's movie, the situation is markedly different. The director has portrayed both as passionate and spirited teenagers of the modern age who have met their fateful love. Romeo

is a rebel with a rambunctious streak, at the same time more explosive and rawer. But in both versions, he is also very sensitive and romantic. Juliet, on the other hand, is an inexperienced and vulnerable girl who is also full of hope. Shakespeare, on the other hand, describes her as a gentle and determined young lady who is very mature. The differences in appearance are minimal, with both versions portraying them as attractive and young individuals. It must be added that their style of dress has, of course changed. In Shakespeare's book, they wear typical Renaissance costumes of the upper classes, whereas in Luhrmann's film, they wear modern clothes.

Romeo has a rebellious style with a timeless cut, often wearing relaxed and distinctive clothing, including a Hawaiian shirt, which represents his free-spiritedness. Juliet uses subtle makeup and wears a white dress; this enhances her natural beauty and innocence. As for the Capulets and Montagues themselves, there are also major changes here; in the original work, both families Shakespeare's Verona is a typical Renaissance town, brimming with romance and mystery. It is full of churches, streets, and palaces. It also offers many spacious gardens and beautiful balconies, where Romeo and Juliet's romantic encounters usually take place. Luhrmann's fictional American town, Verona Beach, on the other hand, is very modern and chaotic. It represents the contemporary world where corruption, media,

are aristocratic and have high status and influence. The conflict between them has been going on for centuries. The film, on the other hand, presents them as antagonistic and powerful corporate families who control businesses and are also connected to the mafia. The visual difference is also evident in the two families, with the Capulet family surrounded by dark, extravagant, and ornate motifs; their members often wear black and red, symbolizing their power, danger, and mystery.

The Montagues are dressed more casually and in bright, colourful colours, suggesting their more relaxed, rebellious attitude. Luhrmann has also changed some of the names; Romeo's parents and Juliet's parents have been given first names, Prince Escalus has become Captain Prince, and Friar Lawrence has become Father Lawrence.⁶ These creative decisions in slightly altering the characters reflect Luhrmann's desire to preserve the core of Shakespeare's character designs while reviving them and making them accessible to new audiences.

mafia, and violence reign supreme. It has many busy streets, neon lights and skyscrapers.

It is a hostile city full of turmoil where the love between Romeo and Juliet has no chance of survival. What makes it even more interesting is how even so, the director has managed to portray the conflict between the Capulet and Montague families as part of the problem of power, crime, and the underbelly of society, because

in *Romeo and Juliet* it is portrayed primarily as a personal issue that is more likely to be related only to the pride of aristocratic families. Even so, the film and the book begin with the same prologue, which shows exactly why Shakespeare's work is timeless and can be worked with constantly. In the film, this prologue is read by a TV news anchor, which shows how brilliantly Luhrmann has set it in modern times. *"Two households, both alike in dignity. In fair Verona, where we lay our scene, from ancient grudge break to new mutiny, where civil blood makes civil hands unclean. From forth the fatal loins of these two foes, a pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life."*⁷ There is also a strong reference to religion in the film, with crosses, neon statues of Jesus, rosaries, and altars, all referring to fate, sin, and redemption.

Luhrmann thus points to an ironic subtext, for Romeo and Juliet's love develops against a background of faith. Religious objects symbolise their desire for purification and salvation, but ultimately elude them. Set in a violent and chaotic environment, the spiritual symbolism also highlights the conflict between love and today's world, which is divided by hate. There is also an important difference in the objects, in the original story there are traditional weapons, swords and daggers. Luhrmann has replaced these weapons with pistols, which he still calls "Sword" or "Dagger"; this leaves the reference to Shakespeare's language but creates a contrast between the brutality and speed of modern violence compared to

the slow and ceremonial duels of the Renaissance. The change of setting, symbols and objects combine to create a new visual language that Luhrmann wanted to use to convey the timelessness of the story.

The modern objects combined with the original ones remind us that even in today's world, the story of Romeo and Juliet has its resonance. Although the director moved the story to the present day, he kept the key symbols and invited the audience to reflect on how themes such as love, hate and fate appear in all times and cultures.

Shakespeare created his work primarily through language and relied heavily on the imagination of the audience. Luhrmann, on the other hand, tried to use every possible means to deliver a great visual experience that evokes deep emotions in the audience, but at the same time retains the main point of the legendary story. Both versions give us the same message, even though they are separated by more than 300 years. This confirms that the story of Romeo and Juliet is truly timeless and still has much to convey to us today. In my opinion, especially that hatred and violence in the world or between families can have tragic consequences for individuals and for the wider society. Shakespeare's legendary work has garnered many film adaptations, but Luhrmann's is truly exceptional.

As a great lover of Shakespeare's work and a fan of the Renaissance period, I was not offended by this modernisation, I can say that it may have even evoked far more emotion in me than the original work, the actors managed to inhabit their roles perceptively and the director of the film achieved what he wanted. In fact, Baz Luhrmann was able to reach out to today's generation of teenagers with a great modernization of the story, so that they could empathize and understand the story better.

*“It only makes sense that this timeless story about teenagers should be aimed at contemporary teenagers, though, and Luhrmann's music-video version succeeds, where so many sluggishly reverent period pieces have failed, in Making Shakespeare Sexy Again, an accomplishment due more to its captivating lead actors than its frantic editing or flashy mise-en-scene.”*⁸

Luhrmann's film shows that Shakespeare's work can be adapted to any era, and the issues Shakespeare highlighted at the time still resonate with us today, even though both stories tell the same basic plot, each version reflecting the unique cultural and temporal context of its time. Romeo and Juliet remain a legendary tale of the tension between love and hate, fate and choice, passion, and reason, capturing the essence of love's resilience and vulnerability in a harsh world of conflict and social strife.

William Shakespeare and Baz Luhrmann present us with the same story, set in diametrically opposed times, but resonating in its essence across time and cultures. Both versions continue to inspire us to reflect on serious social issues, making Romeo and Juliet as moving as it was three centuries ago.

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