



PROJECT MUSE®

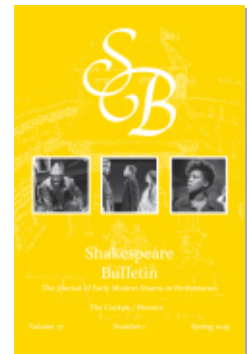
Romeo and Juliet by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (review)

Elizabeth E. Tavares

Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 37, Number 1, Spring 2019, pp. 141-145 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2019.0013>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/725947>

the through-line of the tragedy of Ophelia's situation: manipulated by her father and his employers; spurned by her lover; said lover eventually murdering said father. Duffin demonstrated an astonishing commitment to the role—even in the display of full-frontal nudity in Act Four. Yet this moment treaded a very fine line between bravery and gratuitousness, given that the display of nudity has so often been used as a short-hand embodiment of Ophelia's madness in recent productions. One wonders, in any case, when she will get her own turn at Hamlet.

Ophelia's nudity was symptomatic of the ways in which the gender politics of this production aligned with recent worrying trends in productions of *Hamlet*. During the nunnery scene, Hamlet pushed Ophelia backwards onto a large table, peeling her legs apart as he knelt between them. There has been a tendency in recent *Hamlets* to illustrate Hamlet's behavior towards Ophelia through physical and sexual assault, even though there is no textual basis for this, and performing this scene in this manner felt similarly invasive and unnecessary here. The casting of Negga, a female Ethiopian-Irish actor, in the central masculine role of the Western canon, was a significant one, and thus to see tropes of masculinist violence reprised uncritically here was especially disappointing. In the wake of the #WakingTheFeminists movement that has dominated discussions of Irish theater in recent years, not to mention the #MeToo era, it is ever more important that theaters recognize and address the impact of these reproductions of sexual violence. Despite this, Farber's production at the Gate was symptomatic of how recent Irish Shakespeares have sought to experiment with staging traditions and conventions in both Irish theater and Shakespeare performance, for which it must be commended.



Romeo and Juliet

Presented by the **Oregon Shakespeare Festival** at the **Allen Elizabethan Theatre**, Ashland, Oregon. June 5–October 12, 2018. Directed by Dámaso Rodríguez. Scenic design by Efren Delgadillo, Jr. Costume design by Leah Piehl. Lighting design by Tom Ontiveros. Wig design by Cherelle D. Guyton. Music composed by Rodolfo Ortega. Dramaturgy by Tiffany Ana López. Movement and intimacy direction by Sarah Lozoff. Fight direction by U. Jonathan Toppo. With William Thomas Hodgson (Romeo), Emily Ota (Juliet), Sara Bruner (Mercutio), Derek Garza (Tybalt), Robin Goodrin Nordli (Nurse), Greg Watanabe (Capulet), Amy Newman (Lady Capulet), Richard Elmore (Montague), Monique Holt (Lady Montague/Apothecary), Michael J. Hume (Friar Laurence), Christiana Clark (Prince Escalus), Armando Mc-

Clain (Paris), Julian Remulla (Benvolio), Brent Hinkley (Peter/Friar John), Lauren Modica (Gregory), and others.

ELIZABETH E. TAVARES, *Pacific University*

A set of mobile stranding mirrors whirled and rotated between the acts of Dámaso Rodríguez's *Romeo and Juliet*, which played in the outdoor venue at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Moved by the performers, they contributed to the fluidity of the continuous action (overlapping entrances with exits) which operated without pauses or black-outs. Painted grey to match the theatre facade on the one side while on the other were antique mirrors with ornate frames, the mirrors helped to delineate public and private spaces: marking the private dovetailed sonnet Romeo and Juliet shared while the ongoing masque was visible in the spaces between; highlighting Tybalt's misplaced vengeance when he alerted Lord Capulet to the party crashers; and concretizing the garden wall—the oft-forgot additional obstacle both separating and protecting the eponyms' first declarations of love. Such moments were indicative of the rest of the production, juxtaposing period concepts and period text with minimalist design to inform contemporary concerns.

For example, the rich diversity of the ensemble made the tragedy of the play more poignant than in my own previous experience. The world of this production offered a very full vision of community identity, such as ability and cultural diversity, including at least five women of color and two actors who were differently abled. As Gregory, Lauren Modica, a little person, was fully incorporated into complex and fully choreographed fight scenes (true too of her work in the festival's recently completed *Henriad*, reviewed in *SB* 36.2 and 36.4). Meanwhile, Monique Holt signed all her lines in American Sign Language as Lady Capulet and the Apothecary. As in other ASL-sensitive performances, this can run the risk of siloing off certain characters. Pleasingly, the production thoroughly integrated the ASL-speaker by having all of the characters occasionally sign their dialogue whether or not Holt was onstage. Those occasions were usually moments of frustration, inarticulation, or when a character desired to express the breadth of an emotion. Mercutio and the Prince were both played by women as women, while other characters were played by women as men. The presence of so many different kinds of body in different kinds of role allowed the play to speak to a wide range of human experience.

In all other aspects of concept and design, this production refreshingly eschewed the premise that relatability can only be cultivated one-



Ensemble in *Romeo and Juliet*, dir. Dámaso Rodríguez. Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2018. Photo by Jenny Graham, courtesy of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

dimensionally; which is to say, by seeing characters that look like oneself. The presentation of the ensemble primed the audience for this particular horizon of expectation: the performance opened with the entire cast entering the faux-Elizabethan outdoor playhouse wearing matched white, floor-length hooded cloaks. They each took a line of the prologue rather than invent a figure for its delivery, and then took seats on makeshift benches ringing the stage. At each speaker's first entrance (that is, when they first spoke), they cast off their cloak rather than coming from off-stage. It is a technique Rodríguez has used before, as in the opening gambit of street carolers communing over a garbage fire to begin Artists Repertory Theatre's hit production *A Civil War Christmas* back in 2016. Making explicit that the actors are drawn from a world outside that of the play—contemporary US society—invited audiences to participate in the imaginative construction of the performance experience.

In keeping with this overarching aesthetic principle were the hip and coherent choices in material design. Leah Piehl's costume design was, frankly, delicious, offering a range of Italian Renaissance colors, patterns, and fabrics. All body types received detailed attention aimed at reflecting cuts currently tending on major runways. This meant that the shoes—opting for a chic ankle-cut boot rather than the stereotypical calf-height of Robin Hood and pirate period dramas—were both on-trend and on-period. In so doing, the syncretism of the costuming mirrored a crucial

sea-change marked by the play, reflecting as it does sixteenth-century England's preoccupations with the merits of Humanist individualism in the wake of long-term communally-anchored identity.

In contrast to these period-sensitive yet individually flattering costume choices were the lighting elements incorporated into the set design by Efrén Delgadillo, Jr. and Tom Ontiveros. Like something out of a Dan Flavin art installation, the torches and candelabra used to mark space were made of a translucent plastic. Two windows parallel to the musicians' loft were tastefully backlit with coordinating colors to mark in whose home, Montague or Capulet, the scene was taking place. They provided visual contrast to the sumptuousness of the costumes, asking playgoers to focus on the bodies in performance rather than their accoutrements. For example, the bed in which Romeo and Juliet exchange lines of *carpe diem* was not dripping with gauzy lace, but rather its four posts were made of fluorescent tubes of light, giving the scene an intimacy not available under a traditional spotlight. It also provided that moment with a sense of gender-neutrality, as if a bed they both truly shared rather than Romeo's incursion into Juliet's childhood room.

I was lucky to see the production in early September: a number of performances had been cancelled due to the smoke coming from the nearly sixty fires blazing in northern California and Oregon. It was a rare case to see the sensitively lit production under a moonless night, allowing Juliet to speak directly to the open air as she plans to cut Romeo out in little stars. Alongside this environmental literalism was another lighting choice at which I audibly gasped when revealed: a backlit scrim on which was projected a close-up of the moon's surface was revealed above the balcony for that infamous scene. The exaggerated moon here, with no actual moon to compete with, showcased the same verticality of performance the Rose had been newly available to offer at first performances of this particular play. With three levels of activity available and Friar Laurence ascending on a grassy path by way of a large tomb trap, the scale of the experience of these actors seemed to stretch well outside this western wooden O.

The thoughtful coherence of the production's design was matched by a detailed attention to the script. To my ears, no moments of text, no matter how difficult, were thrown away. For example, at Mercutio's death, Romeo genuinely didn't think his friend had been seriously injured when he said "the hurt cannot be much" (3.1.94). This is in stark contrast to a dense performance history of that line being used to comfort Mercutio on death's door rather than to cultivate Romeo's naivety and general sense of shock. Likewise, dramaturge Tiffany Ana López opted for the 1599

quarto version of Juliet's balcony speech, preferring "that which we call by any other word" rather than "name," commonly used in films, from the 1597 quarto (2.2.44). This seemed to align with a core question of the production suggested by the pre-show preface, in which playgoers were asked to consider how communication, or lack thereof, plays a role in the lovers' fate.

While certainly this textual choice and the inclusion of ASL resonated with that concern, little of the rest of the production was similarly invested in developing audiences' empathy with those society casts as outsiders. There were so many other rich choices that pulled me in different interpretive directions. The oft-cut scene of banter in which Mercutio and the boys are looking for Romeo, while he chooses to hide from them in order to pursue Juliet, posed questions of male camaraderie and ties beyond kinship. Once Mercutio was slain, Romeo wore his friend's black cape for the rest of play, allowing the prop to accrue new meaning as well as mark the play's tonal transition into tragedy. While both decisions were thoughtful and fully considered, these emphases were not backed up by anything elsewhere in the production that would support an interpretation invested in male bonding. Rather than a mark of incoherence, however, this disconnect between design and script reinforced (perhaps unintentionally) the central concern of the production: two communities, both rich and fully realized, refusing to communicate and so utterly failing those who would be their future.



The Duchess of Malfi

Presented by **The Royal Shakespeare Company** at the **Swan Theatre**, Stratford-upon-Avon. March 1–August 3, 2018. Directed by Maria Aberg. Designed by Naomi Dawson. Lighting design by Natasha Chivers. Music composed by Orlando Gough and directed by David Ridley. Sound design by Claire Windsor. With Joan Iyiola (*The Duchess of Malfi*), Alexander Cobb (*Ferdinand*), Chris New (*The Cardinal*), Nicolas Tennant (*Bosola*), Paul Woodson (*Antonio*), Greg Barnett (*Delio*), Amanda Hadingue (*Cariola*), Aretha Ayeh (*Julia*), Will Brown (*Roderigo/Executioner*), Ashley Gayle (*Silvio*), Richard Hurst (*Grisolan/Executioner*), Jeff Alexander (*Doctor*), and others.

MEGHAN C. ANDREWS, *Lycoming College*

John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* is not an inherently happy, crowd-pleasing play. Yet while Maria Aberg's modern-dress production captured