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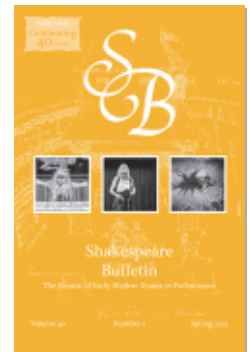
Romeo and Juliet (review)

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*Romeo and Juliet*

Presented by **The National Theatre**, London, in partnership with **Sky Arts** (UK) and **PBS** (US). 23 April 2021. Adapted by Emily Burns. Directed by Simon Godwin and produced by David Sabel. Photography directed by Tim Sidell. Movement directed by Jonathan Goddard and fights choreographed by Kate Waters. Design by Soutra Gilmour, with wigs, hair, and make-up by Giuseppe Cannas. Music by Michael Bruce. With Fisayo Akinade (Mercutio), Jessie Buckley (Juliet), Ella Dacres (Peta), Deborah Findlay (Nurse), Tamsin Greig (Lady Capulet), Ellis Howard (Sampson), Lloyd Hutchinson (Lord Capulet), David Judge (Tybalt), Adrian Lester (Prince), Lucian Msamati (Friar Laurence), Alex Mugnaioni (Paris), Josh O'Connor (Romeo), Shubham Saraf (Benvolio), and Colin Tierney (Lord Montague).

ELIZABETH E. TAVARES, *The University of Alabama*

While plague lent itself to a variety of metaphorical uses across early modern English drama, it was rarely employed as an occasion for action or plot. Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* is a notable outlier, focused on the racketeering enabled when disease comes to an urban center. *Romeo and Juliet* is another. The familiar line, "a plague a' both your houses," is incantatory, uttered by Mercutio three times to make sure no one mistakes his meaning: both Capulets and Montagues, both Tybalt and Romeo, are to blame for his death (3.1.101–2). Plague is not only metaphorical, however; Friar John is kept from Mantua just on the chance of carrying "the infectious pestilence," having needed to find a fellow friar from the town in order to gain access. Presuming from their status as Franciscans that they had been "visiting the sick," Mantua "Sealed up the doors [. . .] So fearful were they of infection" (5.2.7–16). This scene, so clearly capturing real fears in an ongoing global pandemic, is cut from The National Theatre's filmed production. That cut captures a trend of the production in that, just at the moment it might acknowledge an exigency of which *Romeo and Juliet* was newly capable given the current socio-political climate, it instead reinforces problematic power structures rather than interrogating them.

Casting is chief among the aspects of this production that contribute to the reinforcement of power structures. The production is diversely cast in respect of race/ethnicity, although no character is cross-gender cast. However, if a company chooses to use what Ayanna Thompson calls “color-conscious casting,” the production must also consider how the alignment of actors’ race and characters’ roles affects the play’s dramaturgy (Thompson 76–81). Are actors of color cast across status groups and genders within the world of the play? In this case, actors of color are in secondary roles only, with the overwhelming emphasis in both marketing and screen time being on the two white leads, and other characters played by white celebrities (such as Tamsin Greig’s Lady Capulet) having their roles substantially enhanced. Outside the world of the play, this typically equates to a difference in pay as compared to their white counterparts. Such inconsistency in representing and therefore compensating communities of color is, of course, not a problem unique to The National Theatre.

A particularly telling example of the production’s privileging of white experiences is Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech, thoughtfully and complexly rendered by Fisayo Akinade. During the approximately minute-long performance of this speech, the camera focuses on Romeo (Josh O’Connor) alone in a close-up for ten seconds, Mercutio (the only speaker) for about fifteen seconds, and the trio including Benvolio for thirty-three seconds. When all three are captured by the camera’s lens, its gaze is positioned at an angle from behind Mercutio’s right shoulder. This angle is enough to capture his delivery in slight profile while emphasizing the majority of Romeo’s face and so prioritizing his reactions. The resulting effect is that nearly three quarters of the screen time for Mercutio’s bravura set-piece are spent capturing not his delivery but a silent Romeo’s reaction to it. This choice centers the white actor’s reception of the speech rather than the deliverer, and at the expense of the screen time of the two actors of color in the scene. Even when actors of color *are* given additional screen time, however, it emphasizes the exclusion of the characters they are playing. When the Nurse tells Juliet she should go to the friar’s cell to be married, for instance, Peta (Ella Dacres as a re-gendered Peter) is shown to overhear from the other side of the door, chuckling with pleasure for Juliet despite not being allowed in on the secret. With no warrant from the text, this moment of overhearing and resultant depiction of exclusion is unique to the production.

When examined as part of a larger pattern, the repeated marginalization of actors of color through casting, screen time, and blocking makes these choices start to seem systemic. That they take on an intersectional valence is additionally worrying. For example, it is a feature of Shake-

speare's plot that Peter is illiterate so that Romeo, in reading his to-do list to him, learns of the Capulets' party at which he will meet Juliet. In this production, the only woman of color in the cast plays the only illiterate character in the play—a character nearly cut altogether but for this one scene of performing illiteracy. In another example, Juliet's parents are collapsed into the role of her mother, giving the part more lines and rendering the character more complex in having to negotiate for her daughter's marriage and deliver one of the crueller censures in the canon. Had Lord Capulet been cut altogether, this rich innovation would have lent motive and psychological realism to her rejection of Juliet. This alteration includes the amplification of Lady Capulet's sexual interest in Paris, rationalizing her rushed desire to marry her daughter off in order to have access to Paris. The opportunities this consolidation offers are squandered, however, when unexpectedly Lord Capulet does end up appearing late and speaking only lines of consolation to Juliet. For all intents and purposes the figure serves as a new addition to the play rather than as an alteration to the play's Capulet, as he speaks no lines assigned to the character in the play-text. For example, "Peace, you mumbling fool!" the line which Lord Capulet directs at the Nurse in the text, is given instead to Lady Capulet, who directs it at her husband while he cowers to protect his daughter. This is the opposite of the Shakespeare text, where father violently threatens daughter. The production goes to substantial lengths in not only cutting but reassigning text specifically to vilify Lady Capulet, with one implication being that the only unambiguous consolers in the production are men.

A similar choice left unmined is a kiss shared between Mercutio and Benvolio, lightly foreshadowed in two earlier scenes. The camera cuts from the candle-lit wedding of Romeo and Juliet, concluding with a kiss, to a kiss shared by Mercutio and Benvolio, sitting on the floor of a rehearsal room behind risers. The juxtaposition of these scenes encourages audiences to carry the affirmation from one set of star-crossed lovers to another, equating heterosexual with homosexual love in a fleeting moment of queer affirmation, but also problematically linking forbidden heterosexual with homosexual love without acknowledging the disparate power dynamics. These same two actors of color become the only instigators of street violence when white Romeo refuses the knife fight, and the resulting stabbing of two young Black men in this production (Mercutio and Tybalt) are the only violent deaths marked with struggle and blood. By contrast, Romeo dies bloodlessly from poison; no blood is shown when Juliet takes her life; and the death of Paris is obscured by darkness

with no blood visible except for the little on Romeo's hands—blood that quickly disappears despite his hands remaining in the shot for the rest of the scene. After a summer of heated protests in Wisconsin and across the world contesting unchecked, racialized police brutality, the production was first screened in the US in the same week in which police officer Derek Chauvin was convicted of the murder of George Floyd. This was an unfortunate happenstance of scheduling, PBS undoubtedly taking advantage of the occasion of Shakespeare's birthday for marketing purposes. That the only two violent deaths shown in the production are those of young men of color, blamed for the instigation laid in their hands, looks less like an accident or outlier and more of a piece with the production's larger inattention to its own racial biases.

The production is not entirely unaware of the slippage between the worlds in and out of the play. According to the promotional synopsis, the design is intended to convey the rehearsal fishbowl taking place "in a shuttered theatre." That slippage cues viewers to a similar slippage between the world of the play, of the lovers in Verona, and the world of the theater, of the actors in twenty-first-century plague-hit London. While it begins in a cavernous, industrial rehearsal room, the set does not stay there. There is no consistency to which parts of the performance take place against representations of the fictional world of *Romeo and Juliet*, such as the masquerade (with added dancers and choreography) or Juliet's balcony (replete with fabricated moon), and which do not, such as the risers behind which Mercutio and Benvolio shared a kiss. If the rehearsal is indeed taking place in a theater shuttered due to COVID-19, then the decision to use faux-Carnival masks that cover only the top part of the face seems to miss the obvious opportunity to do something more timely. Few audiences in the last four hundred years have had so much occasion as we do during the present pandemic to contemplate not only the transgression but potential health risk of removing a mask to accept a kiss from a stranger: "Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged!" (1.5.109).

More unsettling from my perspective is that the production team does not appear to have registered the magnitude of the threat that being in community posed, given the lack of social distancing, limited mask wearing, and exposed noses captured in the accompanying "making-of" special, which was presumably filmed in December 2020 when the UK was under Tier 3 and then Tier 4 restrictions. While it is likely that the National adhered to the specific guidelines issued for the screen industry, it is nevertheless disconcerting for me as a viewer to see that the production chose to bring a large on-site team together during a time of severe

public health concern, rising cases, and government advice to work from home when at all possible. Even if safety measures were in place, the film's producers asked its diverse cast and crew to take enormous risks to make art during a moment when, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, plague is not metaphorical. My goal has not been to criticize a production by speculating on the play I wish I had seen. Rather, I would argue that this production achieves what it set out to do: pandering to marginalized communities on a multi-national scale in a bid for new future subscribers during a moment when streaming theater had been normalized, if only for a time. In its filmed format, its decentering of communities of color in text and staging, and its disregard for a global public health risk, the National's *Romeo and Juliet* successfully captures its historical moment in amber: not wisely, but too well.

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Merry Wives

Presented by **The Public Theater** at the **Delacorte Theater**, New York City, NY. 6 July–18 September 2021. Directed by Saheem Ali. Adapted by Jocelyn Bioh. Costume design by Dede Ayite. Scenic design by Beowulf Boritt. Lighting Design by Jiyoun Chang. Sound design by Kai Harada and Palmer Hefferan. Original music by Michael Thurber. Original drum compositions Farai Malianga. Fight direction by Rocío Mendez. Choreography by Darrell Grand Moultrie. Hair, wigs, and makeup design by Cookie Jordan. Production stage manager Narda E. Alcorn. Stage Manager Benjamin E. C. Pfister. Sound system design by Jessie Paz. With Abena (Anne Page), Gbenga Akinagbe (Mister Nduka Ford), Pascale Armand (Madam Ekua Page), MaYaa Boateng (Fenton/Simple), Phillip James Brannon (Pastor Evans), Joshua Echebiri (Slender/Pistol), Angela Grovey (Mama Quickly), Jacob Ming-Trent (Falstaff), Susan Kelechi Watson (Madam Nkechi Ford), Julian Rozzell, Jr. (Shallow), Kyle Scatliffe (Mister Kwame Page), David Ryan Smith (Doctor Caius), and others.

ALI MADANI, *Brown University*

“The Public Theater,” promotional material announced, “is theater of, by, and for all people.” On public transit to the Delacorte Theater I encountered a man walking the subway A-train selling tasers and stun-