



# Romeo & Juliet

# *Romeo and Juliet*

By William Shakespeare  
Directed by Ian Belknap

Know-the-Show  
Audience Guide  
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The  
SHAKESPEARE  
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New Jersey



Artwork by  
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# The Life Of William Shakespeare



National Portrait Gallery, London

William Shakespeare, widely recognized as the greatest English dramatist, was born on April 23, 1564. He was the third of eight children born to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England. Shakespeare's father was a prominent local merchant, and Shakespeare's childhood, though little is known about it for certain, appears to have been quite normal. In fact, it seems that the young Shakespeare was allowed considerable leisure

time because his writing contains extensive knowledge of hunting and hawking. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. She was eight years his senior, and the match was considered unconventional.

It is believed that Shakespeare left Stratford-upon-Avon and went to London around 1588. By 1592, he was a successful actor and playwright. He wrote approximately 38 plays, two epic poems, and over 150 sonnets. His work was immensely popular, appealing to members of all social spheres, including Queen Elizabeth I and King

James I. While the plays were well-liked, Shakespeare's work was not considered by his educated contemporaries to be exceptional. By 1608, Shakespeare's involvement with theatre began to dwindle, and he spent more time at his country home in Stratford. He died in 1616.

Most of Shakespeare's plays found their first major publication in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, when two of his fellow actors put the plays together in the First Folio. Other early printings of Shakespeare's plays were called quartos, a printer's term referring to the format in which the publication was laid out. These quartos and the First Folio texts are the sources of all modern printings of Shakespeare's plays.



The Shakespeare Family  
Coat of Arms





# Romeo and Juliet

## An Introduction

*Romeo and Juliet* contains all the elements of a great modern movie: suspense, action, romance, comedy and dysfunctional families! Written sometime around 1595, it tells the story of two young lovers separated by their quarreling families in a world where peril and passion abound. The play opens abruptly with a street fight, and shortly afterwards finds a young couple falling desperately in love. This leads to a secret marriage, which is spoiled by another street fight and eventually the demise of two young men. Ultimately, the play ends in the disturbing double suicide of its teenage protagonists. The action of the play all takes place over the brief course of a few days.

Like many of today's television and film writers, Shakespeare wrote for the masses and for all social levels. His job was to write plays that people would pay to see. This is how he made his living, fed his children, and contributed to society. One of Shakespeare's greatest assets was his power to observe. Unlike many other successful writers of the period, he did not write only from his own life, but also from the vast world he saw around him. In *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, he wrote about the exuberant, transformative energy of young love from both a male and female perspective – one based probably on his own remembrance of first love and one based on observation.

Unlike other plays of the period that were popular with the mass audience, Shakespeare's work was of a superior artistic level. Many consider him the greatest poet and dramatist that ever lived. A strong example of his skill in *Romeo and Juliet* is found in his isolation of the ill-fated lovers from the other characters. He achieves this through

the use of light and dark images. Predominantly, we see Romeo and Juliet together only at night. The other characters in the play are seen almost exclusively in the daylight. The use of night imagery places us in the private world of the young lovers, far from the public scrutiny of society and social responsibility. The only time Romeo and Juliet are seen together in the daylight is when they are secretly married; a hopeful attempt to have their love recognized by the very society that is forcing them apart. Even then, the scene takes place in the dim light of a medieval church. Night also invokes images of both romantic love and death. These themes of love and death are intertwined until they are, in the end, indistinguishable.

### WRITTEN IN THE STARS

Though Romeo and Juliet are the most famous “star-crossed” characters in Shakespeare, references to astrology abound in the Bard's plays.

When the Duke of Suffolk is about to be murdered aboard a ship in *Henry VI, Part II*, he says that “a cunning man did calculate my birth / And told me that by water I should die.”

Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* puts faith in the stars, as she considers the fidelity of her love, when she states, “...truer stars did govern Proteus' birth.”

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Benedict, having difficulty writing a love poem, finds comfort in his knowledge that he “was not born under a rhyming planet.”

Cassius reminds Brutus, pondering the rise of Julius Caesar, that the fault “is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings.”



Young love is a central theme of the play. Romeo is at most eighteen years old, and Juliet is not quite fourteen. Their lack of experience allows them to love each other without reservation or pre-judgment. They approach love and sexuality with purity and innocence. Romeo instantly forgets his obsessive infatuation for a girl named Rosaline when he first sees Juliet. Juliet prepares to marry Romeo the same night she meets him. Their love is romantic and idealistic.

Their “dreamy” relationship is grounded by the Nurse and Mercutio, who share their more worldly knowledge of love and sexuality with the young lovers. Shakespeare uses these secondary characters to counter-balance the sexual and romantic inexperience of the protagonists.

Shakespeare does not bring the fateful lovers together until the end of Act I. This allows the audience to see how their union matures and deepens them as individuals. A love-sick Romeo enters at the beginning of the play pining for Rosaline, yet Shakespeare leads us to believe that his love for her is no more than the love of “being in love.” The poetry that he uses to speak of her is generic and simple, easily transferred to another young woman. Juliet is vibrant and girlish, obeying her parents without question. Despite this, even early in the play, she shows signs of the maturing woman within her. She challenges her parents and is later forced to make difficult decisions on her own. Love awakens character traits in these adolescents that are only suggested in earlier scenes. These traits become more fully realized as the play unfolds.

The full title of *Romeo and Juliet* is *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, but many critics argue that it is not truly a tragedy, at least by Aristotle’s standards, because its characters do

not fall from greatness due to a “tragic flaw.” *Romeo and Juliet* can be simultaneously perceived as innocent victims of their own passions, their parents’ feud, the violent society around them, and fate. References to omens and astrology abound, and a sense of doom hangs over the play from the Chorus’s opening lines of the Prologue.

Whether a true tragedy or not, *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most popular of Shakespeare’s plays. It has been interpreted, adapted and presented in a thousands of ways. From the classic Renaissance setting to World War II Europe, from tropical islands to the gang-ridden streets of New York, this classic tale has entertained and moved audiences for over four hundred years.

### THE BEST OF THE BARD

The following phrases and sayings have their origin in *Romeo and Juliet*:

*“A pair of star-crossed lovers”*

*“Sad hours seem long.”*

*“You kiss by the book.”*

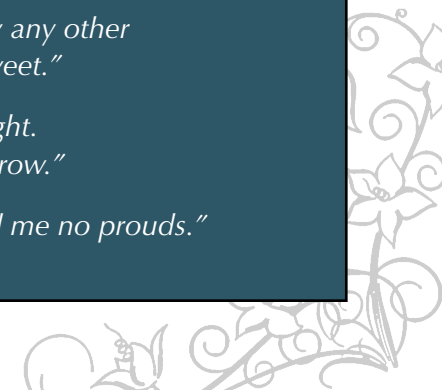
*“O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?”*

*“What’s in a name?”*

*“That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”*

*“Good night, good night.  
Parting is such sweet sorrow.”*

*“Thank me no thankings, nor proud me no prouds.”*





# Romeo and Juliet

## A Short Synopsis

**Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to spoil the plot, consider skipping this section.**

Shakespeare begins the play with a brawl between the members of the Capulet and Montague households, who have been feuding since time immemorial. The Prince breaks up the fight; incensed by the continual strife. He threatens the Capulets and Montagues with death if they or their men disturb the peace of Verona's streets again. We are then introduced to young Romeo, the teenage son and heir of the Montagues, bemoaning his unrequited love for a young woman named Rosaline.

Paris, a wealthy young nobleman, presses Lord Capulet for an answer to his request to marry Capulet's only daughter, Juliet. Capulet invites Paris to a party that he is throwing that evening to allow the nobleman to meet and court his daughter. Romeo inadvertently discovers that Rosaline is included on the Capulet guest list, and with the encouragement of his cousin Benvolio, agrees to crash the party in order to see her. In the Capulet household, we meet Juliet and her Nurse. Lady Capulet tells Juliet that Paris wishes to marry her. Juliet's Nurse is far more excited than Juliet, who responds to Paris' intentions with indifference.

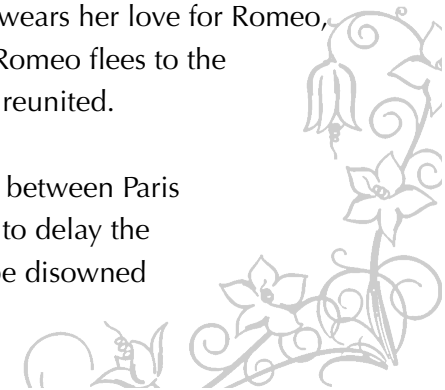
Romeo and his entourage arrive at the Capulet party masked in order to conceal their identity. As the guests dance, Romeo sees Juliet and falls in love at first sight. Tybalt, nephew to Lady Capulet, recognizes Romeo and storms forward to confront him. Lord Capulet, furious that Tybalt

would create a scene at this festive occasion, berates him. When Romeo introduces himself to Juliet, she is immediately attracted to him as well. Only after their "love at first sight" encounter do each of them realize they have fallen in love with their "enemy." Later that night, Romeo risks his life to climb back into the Capulets' garden and see Juliet at her window. The young lovers profess their undying love for one another and their desire for immediate marriage. Juliet sends Romeo away and awaits confirmation of the marriage arrangements the following day.

Early the following morning, Romeo informs Friar Laurence that he is no longer in love with Rosaline. His love is now set on Juliet. Friar Laurence chides Romeo for his fickle passions. Romeo insists that he and Juliet must be married immediately. Though reluctant at first, Friar Laurence begins to see the marriage as a means by which the long-standing feud between the two powerful families might be ended, and agrees to marry them.

Leaving their wedding ceremony, Romeo encounters Tybalt on the street, but refuses to accept his challenge for a duel, trying to maintain peace with the family of his secret bride. Mercutio, disgusted by Romeo's passivity, fights Tybalt. Attempting to break up the fight, Romeo comes between the two, and Mercutio is fatally wounded. Tybalt escapes as Mercutio dies. Enraged by his friend's death, Romeo kills Tybalt. The Prince enters, finds the dead young men, and banishes Romeo from Verona. Despite the violent bloodshed, Juliet swears her love for Romeo, and they spend one last night together before Romeo flees to the neighboring town of Mantua until they can be reunited.

Meanwhile, Capulet arranges a hasty marriage between Paris and Juliet in three days. Juliet begs her parents to delay the arrangement. Capulet tells Juliet that she will be disowned





if she does not do as he wishes. Under the guise of seeking absolution, she goes to Friar Laurence to seek his advice. The Friar devises a plan to prevent Juliet's marriage to Paris. She is to go home and pretend to agree to the marriage. On the night before the wedding, she is to take a drug that will make her appear dead the next morning. The Friar will inform Romeo of this plan. Romeo will then rescue her from the family crypt, and Friar Laurence will help them escape. Juliet returns home, takes the potion and falls into a deep sleep.

The Nurse discovers Juliet "dead" when she goes to wake her for the wedding, and Friar Laurence quickly begins the arrangements for Juliet's funeral. Unaware of Friar Laurence's plan, Benvolio rushes to Mantua and informs Romeo of Juliet's death. Romeo sends Benvolio away and goes to buy poison from an apothecary so that he may kill himself and lie with Juliet forever in her tomb. Friar Laurence discovers that his secret letter to Romeo was not delivered and races off to Juliet's tomb in hopes of preventing a disaster.

Romeo enters the Capulet tomb and, seeing Juliet's "dead" body, kills himself with poison. Juliet awakens to find Romeo dead as the Friar enters too late to save him. Friar Laurence attempts to remove Juliet from the tomb, but she refuses to leave Romeo. Once alone, she kills herself with Romeo's dagger. The Prince and the parents of both households enter. They discover the truth of their children's demise in Romeo's suicide note. Out of grief, Montague and Capulet make their peace with one another.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME

"Volio" is a Latin root word meaning a person's "will" or personality. The prefix "ben-" means "good" or "well." This leads us to believe that Shakespeare may have intended us to see Benvolio as a good-natured, good-willed person; a peace keeper.

"Romeo" comes from the same Italian root that we see in "roam." Literally translated, Romeo is a wanderer or pilgrim.

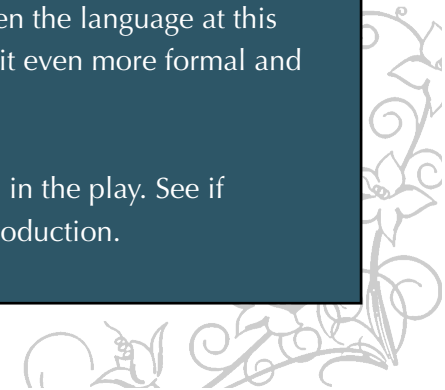
Though not derived from the same root word, we hear the word "jewel" in Juliet's name. She is the jewel of her family, and later the jewel of Romeo's love. He, in fact, compares her to "a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear."

"Mercutio" is named for his mercurial nature — the changeable temperament and quick mood swings we see in him throughout the play.

## THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

The lines that Romeo and Juliet speak to one another upon their first meeting form a sonnet, a 14-line poem with a specific, fixed rhyme scheme. The Elizabethan audience would have quickly heard this distinctive rhyme pattern. Why do you think Shakespeare chose to heighten the language at this particular moment in the play, making it even more formal and musical?

There are two other sonnets embedded in the play. See if you can hear them as you watch the production.





# Who's Who in the Play

## THE HOUSE OF MONTAGUE:

**ROMEO** – the only son and heir of the Montague family; Romeo falls head over heels in love with Juliet after a brief but intense infatuation with Rosaline. Despite the seemingly insurmountable barrier between the two young lovers, Romeo's romantic, passionate, and idealistic nature make him determined to woo and wed Juliet Capulet.

**LORD MONTAGUE** – Romeo's father and head of the Montague family. At the beginning of the play, he is concerned about Romeo's melancholic behavior.

**LADY MONTAGUE** – Romeo's mother; She dies of grief after her son is exiled. (Note: Lady Montague does not appear in this production.)

**BENVOLIO** – a cousin and friend of Romeo's; Benvolio often acts as mediator, trying to defuse his friends' tempers; he attempts to get Romeo's mind off Rosaline.

## THE HOUSE OF CAPULET:

**JULIET** – the thirteen-year-old Juliet is the daughter of Lord and Lady Capulet. Juliet seems dutifully resigned to an arranged marriage until she sees Romeo and falls in love at first sight.

**LORD CAPULET** – the head of the powerful Capulet family, and Juliet's father. He arranges what he thinks to be a good marriage between her and Paris. He becomes enraged when Juliet defies him.

**LADY CAPULET** – Juliet's mother. Like Juliet, Lady Capulet married young, but she lacks sympathy for her daughter when Juliet refuses to wed Paris.

**TYBALT** – Juliet's cousin, and a Capulet. He is aggressive and eager to protect the honor of his house against the Montagues. Tybalt's fight with Mercutio is a turning point in the play.

**NURSE** – the nurse has cared for Juliet her whole life, from wet-nurse to personal servant. While her earthiness provides comic relief, she is also Juliet's loyal confidante.

**PETER** – an illiterate servant of the Capulets who invites guests to the Capulets' feast and, like the Nurse, provides comic relief.

## THE CITIZENS OF VERONA:

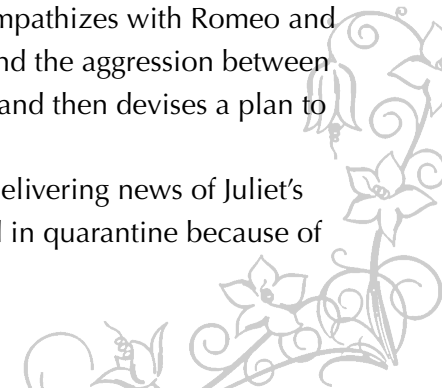
**MERCUTIO** – a close friend of Romeo's, and a relative of the Prince, Mercutio is a great wit. He teases Romeo and others, but is also hot-headed and eager for a fight, which leads to trouble with Tybalt.

**PRINCE ESCALUS** – the Prince of Verona. He is tasked with keeping the peace, and therefore appears after fights and public disturbances to deliver justice.

**PARIS** – Juliet's handsome, wealthy suitor. Despite Juliet's extreme youth, Lord Capulet encourages Paris to woo his daughter, and later pledges her hand in marriage to Paris. Juliet's subsequent predicament precipitates the great tragedy of the play.

**FRIAR LAURENCE** – a Franciscan friar who sympathizes with Romeo and Juliet and sees their marriage as a way to end the aggression between their two families. He secretly weds them, and then devises a plan to reunite them after Romeo's exile.

**FRIAR JOHN** – a Franciscan friar tasked with delivering news of Juliet's false death to the exiled Romeo. He is held in quarantine because of the plague and never reaches Romeo.







# Sources & History

The plot of *Romeo and Juliet* is derived primarily from several tales preserved in collections of Renaissance Italian stories. The tradition of the young Veronese lovers was a popular one in Italy, and it spawned a number of poems, short stories, ballads and plays. While the tradition held that the historical Romeo and Juliet lived in Verona around 1300, their story is very close to even older stories from classical Greece and Rome, particularly the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe. Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* (1554) included a Romeo and Juliet story which was translated by William Painter in his collection *The Palace of Pleasure*. Arthur Brooke also translated the tale into English in the form of a long narrative poem entitled *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*. It was this poem in particular that served as the basis from which Shakespeare created one of the most famous plays in history.

## ELIZABETHAN PARTY CRASHERS

It was a fairly common practice of Shakespeare's time for small groups of people to attend major social events and parties uninvited. These "crashers" most often wore masks to hide their true identities, even if the party they were attending was not a masquerade.

Interestingly, Brooke's version of the story was a cautionary tale, alerting young people to the consequences of disobeying their parents and elders. Shakespeare refocuses the story and makes the two lovers the victims of society and circumstances. In his

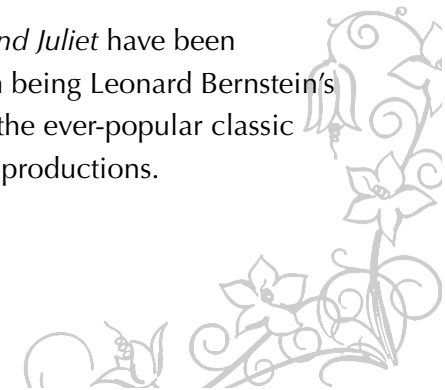
version, it is the parents who must take responsibility for the fate of their children.

Luigi da Porta was the first to insist that the lovers were actual historical figures; a conviction that still persists to this day, albeit with little real evidence. Visitors to contemporary Verona can see the Capulets' house and stand on the "actual" balcony where these lovers are believed to have first confessed their love.

Though the first fully documented performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in England does not appear until 1662, we know the play was very popular in Shakespeare's time. The 1597 First Quarto, the earliest printing of the play, stated it "hath been often (with great applause) plaid publicly."

There have also been many modern adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1935, Sir Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud revived a popular production of the play. In 1947, Peter Brook directed his production in Stratford; and Franco Zeffirelli brought his new version to London in 1960. Zeffirelli also directed a film version in 1968 that is now considered a classic, and is shown in classrooms throughout the country. In 1996, audiences were introduced to Baz Luhrman's vision of these feuding families in a film starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. In 2000, Jet Li and Aaliyah starred in a flashy, fast-paced reinvention of the classic in *Romeo Must Die*.

Over 30 modern operatic versions of *Romeo and Juliet* have been produced, the most famous musical adaptation being Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*. Other modern adaptations of the ever-popular classic love story have included ballets and television productions.





# Commentary & Criticism

**DEFINING R&J:** “There has been a recent fashion in the theatre to define a certain kind of play as ‘black comedy.’ I would define *Romeo and Juliet* as a ‘golden tragedy.’”

-Dame Peggy Ashcroft

**WHERE IS THE “WHY?”:** “One of the most quoted lines in the play is also the most misunderstood in all Shakespeare. ‘Wherefore art thou Romeo?’ is often assumed to mean ‘Where are you, Romeo?’ since Juliet usually utters these lines while leaning over the famous balcony, as if looking for her lover. Actually, what Juliet says is ‘Why are you Romeo?’, that is, ‘Why must you be Romeo, a Montague, the enemy of my family?’”

Norrie Epstein, *The Friendly Shakespeare*

**NO SPEED LIMIT:** “*Romeo and Juliet* is a drama in which speed is the medium of fate, though at first it appears that fate is only a function of speed. In the close, the awesome silent tableau prompts the audience to the recognition that the unique quality of this tragic experience is created by the impetuous rashness of youth. The myth is essentially dramatic.”

Brian Gibbons, *The Arden Shakespeare: Romeo & Juliet*

**WE KISS IN A SHADOW:** “Night is the interior world of *Romeo and Juliet*, a middle world of transformation and dream sharply contrasted to the harsh daylight world of law, civil war, and banishment... This is

all the more striking when we recall that *Romeo and Juliet* was performed in full daylight, in the middle of the afternoon. The sense of foreboding night and pervasive blackness is conjured up entirely by and through language.”

Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*

**TENDER LOVE IN A VIOLENT WORLD:** “*Romeo and Juliet* is a picture of love and its pitiable fate, in a world whose atmosphere is too sharp for this, the tenderest blossom of human life.”

August Schlegel

**THE BAWDY BARD:** “Directors and teachers do *Romeo and Juliet* a disservice by making the play too ethereal and refined. Mercutio is one of Shakespeare’s most obscene characters, and Juliet one of his most passionate. Make sure your edition is fully annotated, with all the bawdy puns explained. Double entendres allowed Shakespeare to be sexual and romantic at once.”

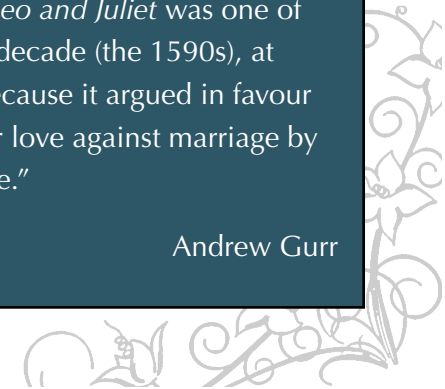
Norrie Epstein

*The Friendly Shakespeare*

## CRITIC’S CORNER

“[*Romeo and Juliet*] offered a completely novel experience, one disturbingly capable of challenging traditional authority. *Romeo and Juliet* was one of the hits of the decade (the 1590s), at least in part because it argued in favour of marrying for love against marriage by parental choice.”

Andrew Gurr





# Theatre in Shakespeare's Day

## SEEING A PLAY VS. HEARING A PLAY

Modern audiences go to the theater to see a play; but Shakespeare's audiences would go to the theatre to *hear* a play. Because the audiences were predominantly illiterate, they were much more attuned to the spoken language of the play, the inflections of the actors' voices, and rhythms of the poetry. This is not to say that Shakespeare's plays lacked visual interest, just that the visual elements were not nearly as important as the language.

We see this is, in some ways, true today, at least in the words we use to describe attending the theatre. People who attend the theater are most often referred to as an "audience" sharing the root of *audio* or sound in the name. Conversely, people who attend movies are often referred to as "movie-goers;" sports enthusiasts are often referred to as "spectators."



Second Globe Theatre, detail from Hollar's *View of London*, 1647.

## WHAT DO I WEAR?

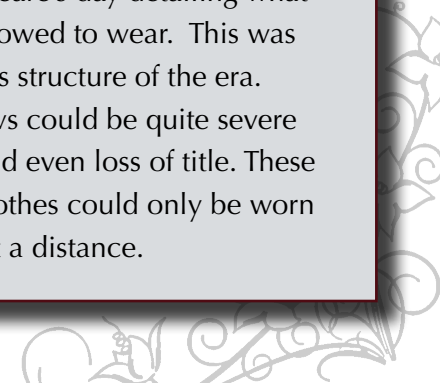
People often ask if shows at The Shakespeare Theatre will be performed in "traditional dress" or "like real Shakespeare." This comes up even more often with the history plays.



Will Kempe in *The Nine Wonders*, ca. 1600.

It is interesting to note that, though often sumptuous and expensive, the costumes used in Shakespeare's plays were rarely correct to the period of the play. Most often, actors were dressed in their finest attire (or clothes donated by wealthy patrons), and then these clothes were adorned with capes or crowns or other items denoting the character's status. The shows in Shakespeare's day were simply put up too quickly to create elaborate period-accurate costumes for the full company, nor did they have the money to do so. Therefore, despite popular assumption, a more accurate "traditional dress" approach to Shakespeare plays would be to dress actors in their finest contemporary clothing adorned with capes and crowns to denote status.

There were also very strict laws in Shakespeare's day detailing what clothes, styles, and colors citizens were allowed to wear. This was a deliberate maneuver to reinforce the class structure of the era. Penalties for violating these Sumptuary Laws could be quite severe — loss of property, imprisonment, fines, and even loss of title. These Sumptuary Laws meant that fashionable clothes could only be worn by the wealthy and were often only seen at a distance.



# Past Productions

**1994:** *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Jimmy Bohr. RIGHT: Romeo (David Allen Case) and Mercutio (Sean Michael Dougherty) with the Nurse (Lola Pashalinski). FAR RIGHT: David Allen Case and Arija Bareikis in the title roles.



**2008:** A very modern *Romeo and Juliet* directed by David Kennedy. LEFT: Rebecca Brooksher and Jordan Coughtry in the title roles. BELOW: Mercutio (Shawn Fagan) with Romeo (Jordan Coughtry).



**2019 TOUR:** The Shakespeare LIVE touring production of *Romeo and Juliet* directed and choreographed by Doug West. LEFT: Tybalt (Christian Frost) faces down Benvolio (Juliet Perrell) as the Prince (Landon Hawkins) looks on. BELOW: Isaac Hickox-Young and Billie Wyatt in the title roles.



**1999:** *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Bonnie J. Monte. Mercutio (Paul Molnar) takes on Tybalt (Hayden Adams) as Benvolio (Curtis Mark Williams) and Romeo (Mark Alhadeff) look on. Fight direction by Rick Sordelet.

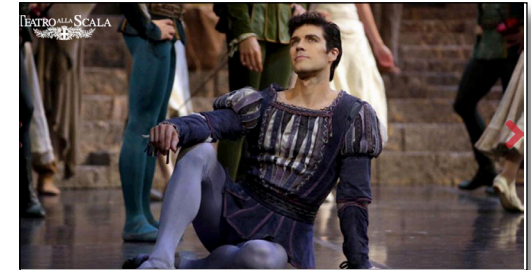




# Explore Online

Photos and video clips from the LaScala Ballet production of *Romeo and Juliet*, 2014 are featured on this web page.

<https://palaceoperaandballet.com.au/production/romeo-and-juliet>



“The Teen-Age Lovers of Verona” is a documentary introducing Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting to the world ahead of the release of Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vt0jW\\_1yayo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vt0jW_1yayo)



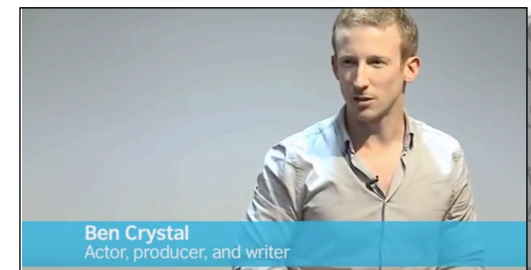
The stars of Franco Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* are reunited on stage for the first time since 1968 as part of the 2018 BFI and British Council’s Shakespeare on Film.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yb3pC9PGq10>

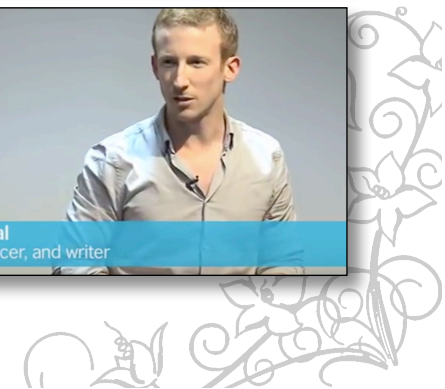


Ben Crystal discusses the Bright and Beautiful of William Shakespeare and demonstrates how the verse would have sounded in Shakespeare’s day.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2QYGEwM1Sk>



**Ben Crystal**  
Actor, producer, and writer





# Sources & Further Reading

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THE MIRACLE OF LANGUAGE by Richard Lederer

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