

Baz Luhrmann's 'Romeo and Juliet' Essay Sample



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The story of Romeo and Juliet originated as a play, written by William Shakespeare in Elizabethan England. A reasonably well-known movie director, Baz Luhrmann decided to take on the challenge of making a contemporary version of the play and to try and answer the question, "if Shakespeare were alive today, how would he make a movie?"

Luhrmann's aim throughout the whole project was the work with the original script, which was written in difficult Elizabethan English, and find a visual means of bringing some of the more obscure references to life. He realised that contemporary audiences do not rely on spoken word alone but on the directness of film to show what is being described.

The team that Luhrmann worked with also realised the importance of the setting they chose to help to break down the barrier of an obscure language and take a modern approach to making the love story accessible to all. The original version is set in Verona, a town in Italy. It is a world of violence and religion. It is also a place where women are less powerful and more protected than men. However, the filmmakers needed to create an imaginary world. This meant that they needed a location that was not immediately recognisable but would be believable as a generic twentieth century cityscape. Their first choice was Miami, USA.

As it turned out, the team were unable to film in Miami and the actual movie was shot in Mexico. In fact, Mexico proved to be the perfect location for this film. Everything that occurred in Elizabethan England goes on in Mexico today in varying degrees. It has mysticism. Like Verona, it is an incredibly hot city, which can be used to highlight the strength of emotions, from love

and passion to violence and hatred. The Latino, hot-blooded men also resemble those in the original text. Mexico to many people is a land far away and is unrecognisable although it is extremely busy, as is Verona. This helps to signify twentieth century life. The contemporary audience are also able to relate to the high-rise buildings, street gangs and crime.

One in Mexico it was decided to film the opening scene in a petrol station, but why? In the original Shakespearean text the play opens in Verona town square with the two rival families quarrelling. The service station was chosen because it is a public place, it provides a sense of danger with the risk of fuel causing a fire and it was highly likely that wealthy youngsters cruising the streets in modern, extravagant cars looking for women and a fight would meet here.

It was also vital that Luhrmann and his crew chose the correct actors to play in the film. Although in the beginning Leonardo Di Caprio was uncommitted to the film, a series of workshops proved he was the right man for the job. It is true that well known actors can bring a sense of baggage to new movies from their previous work but it must also be said that it provides a sense of familiarity and comfort with the audience and if they have enjoyed previous work in the actor's repertoire then they will be more likely to go and see the movie. At first, the team were unsure that Claire Danes was the right actress to play Juliet because she was so unknown but again, the workshops proved she was the perfect on-screen lover for Di Caprio.

The opening sequence is a montage of nearly one hundred shots used to illustrate the prologue and is played out in a rapid flow of images. It provides

a wonderful illustration of Luhrmann's method and the importance of the location he chose for the film.

The film opens with a news anchorwoman reading the prologue from the play. It is read in one go and there is at this point nothing offered to the viewer to make it clearer. It is almost as though Luhrmann wants to set up a traditional presentation of the words so that when his vision appears it is even more explosive.

It took over one hundred and seventy and over a week to create the opening fight scene which enjoyed a screen time of a mere five minutes. The editor has the power to squeeze new meaning from individual moments through subtle changes in the arrangement of images and sounds. Each shot is very different. The actors would recite their lines over and over again until the director chooses which frames he wants: from extreme close-up to wide shots, the camera can move or remain static. Each frame can have a different meaning. A close up can be more dramatic than a wide shot; looking up at someone might be scarier than looking down on him or her. The editor had the task of choosing the correct shots for

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this incredibly energetic scene. She had to decide whether it was better to see someone say the line, or better to see people's reactions to the words. Some lines are more effective with pauses, some without.

The pressure that the filmmakers came under to show that the bullets were hitting objects rather than people is interesting. It suggests that there was a strong desire to ensure that the movie was awarded the lowest age certificate possible. If the film had received a fifteen certificate in the UK, young adolescent and pre-teen girls - one of the biggest constituents of the likely audience - would have been excluded.

Whilst making this film attention to detail was immensely important. Baz Luhrmann was determined to devise a created world in which the language and the more obscure elements of the plot could be 'demystified'. This world was in the end constructed from a collage of modern and traditional images drawn from religion, theatre, folklore, technology and pop culture. In the official notes to the film it is written, "It's a made up world comprised of twentieth century icons and these images are there to clarify what's being said, because once you understand it, the power and the beauty of the language works its magic on you. The idea was to find icons that everybody comprehends." Another example of the detail was the problem of the constant references to 'swords' and 'blades' in the original text and the desire to use guns in the movie to allow the audience to relate to the youth culture. The costume designer overcame this problem by making 'sword' a brand name for the weapons, which then became a useful way of distinguishing between the Capulets and Montagues. The Latino Capulets used guns covered in immense religious iconography while the Anglo Montagues carried much more slick, modern weapons. In this way, simple objects in the film can serve multiple functions.

In this opening scene the actor playing Tybalt Capulet is presented as a “big bad gunslinger” in such a way that the audience immediately recognise what type of character he is. The way in which the actors carried themselves and moved in the film was also worked on tirelessly. The actor playing Tybalt had Flamenco dancing lessons. He is stylised even in his posture and his movements embellish his character. Everything the viewer sees, from the guns to the petrol signs, has close attention to detail to affect the way we interpret the film. The more consistent and detailed it is, the more believable it becomes to the audience. Subconsciously, the audience focuses on the detail of the film, which adds to our enjoyment of the movie.

Detail in the sound is just as crucial as detail of images to help our understanding of the plot. Film soundtracks are immensely complicated: we may only be seeing one image but we could be hearing hundreds of different soundtracks, from dialogue, to wind, to footsteps, to cars, to gunshots, to extra dialogue, and of course music. Every layer of sound adds to the experience of watching the film. In *Romeo and Juliet* some scenes had over three hundred individual sounds all mixed together. The dubbing mixer often had a very complicated job, especially in the gas station scene where even the car engine sounds are “beefed up with wild cat roars”. Even camera movements can be tracked with sound – we hear the whiz of a zoom or a pan (which we wouldn't normally hear) because these accentuate the whole feel of the scene. This is the same for the movement of the jackets, footsteps, spurs on boots and stubbing out of cigars. They are all completely over the top but give a semi humorous appeal, suit the images and enhance the flashy look of the film.

In the credits at the end of the film over three hundred names are listed in the creation of the final product. If this is so, how can it be said to be Baz Luhrmann's film? The auteur theory holds that certain directors make utterly distinctive films. Alfred Hitchcock is a prime example. The planning of each shot is so thorough before the cameras start rolling that the actual filming becomes a rather mechanical process. Like Hitchcock, Baz Luhrmann gets possessory credits making the movie become 'Baz Luhrmann's Romeo and Juliet'. The main reason for this may be having already made a hit film, his name is considered sufficiently helpful as a marketing tool for the next film he is associated with.

To what extent do you agree with the statement about Baz Luhrmann's 'Romeo and Juliet', that, 'if you enjoy the service station scene at the beginning, you will enjoy the rest of the film'?

Although visually the gas station scene may appear as a 'heap of fireworks', great care and attention has been spent on creating the perfect final product during the planning, filming and editing. Although many people who have seen the film would agree that the people who do not enjoy the opening sequences would not enjoy the rest of the film, the majority of viewers have said that they feel there is something for everyone within the movie. For example, people who enjoy action scenes and shootouts will be immensely impressed with the gas station scene; others who are more interested in the love and romantic message will enjoy the way in which Luhrmann has dealt with the most famous piece of English literature, the balcony scene with Romeo and Juliet. There is a complete contrast between this scene and the

gas station scene as the water in the pool provides a sensual, passionate comfort level for the audience.

Overall, the movie does open with an extremely energetic scene, which sets the tone for the rest of the play, but there really is something in this version for everybody.