

An analysis of baz luhrmann's interpretation of 'romeo and juliet'

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In Baz Luhrmann's 'Romeo and Juliet', he reestablishes the well known Italian tragedy, in the modern day setting of 'Verona Beach', to the despair of some critics, and to the delight of others.

While some called it the best film of the century, others loathed it, claiming Luhrmann's construction was 'too modern', changing the storyline completely. In my opinion, Luhrmann was successful in creating a film, which is familiar and modern, helping audiences make sense of the story, while staying true to the play's original meaning. The film allows Luhrmann to show the world the possibilities of cinema, using an array of cinematic techniques to bring new meaning to the play. Nothing in the film is by chance. From wide-shots to close-ups, the use of well-known operas over pop music-everything has been chosen by the director for a specific purpose.

The Prologue begins with a small television screen in the middle of the screen which immediately focus' ones attention, with a newscaster reading Shakespeare's original Prologue, as though it were a piece of ordinary, everyday news-the audience half-expects her to say 'More on that story later' in the same tone. The News and Media is a theme used several times by Baz Luhrmann in the film as a way of communicating information. After the scene with the television, the audience is catapulted into a completely different world, with loud, operatic music blaring from the speakers. This begins the theme of Damnation and Punishment, concluding with Captain Prince, Chief of Police, declaring 'All are Punished'. The statues of Jesus, between the Capulet and Montague tower blocks, reinforce this, with pictures of the Virgin Mary embroidered onto waist-coats, From this we get the impression, they use religion to justify their feuding.

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The Prologue is continually reinforced, by a deep male voice reading the most important parts, and also with visual aids. The News and Media is a theme used several times by Baz Luhrmann in the film as a way of communicating information-newspapers are shown, with quotes from the Prologue as headlines. Some quotes are projected onto the screen, with white, medieval lettering and a black background, This contrast in colour, from the busy clips of the film to the nearly blank screen, again focus' the audiences attention. Had the Prologue been repeated with clips from the film on screen, the audience would not have been inclined to pay much attention to it. Like this, however, they are forced to take notice of it. This repetition of the Prologue is used by Baz Luhrmann to show the possibilities of film, to show that using film; you can affect the audience in a number of different ways.

Each time you watch the Prologue; something new catches your eye. The director chooses scenes from the rest of the film, to be in the Prologue, and as you watch the film, you recognise them. This creates a feeling of familiarity and often people are slow to criticize something familiar to them. Near the end of the film, Romeo's return to Verona beach triggers an array of police and news helicopters to begin looking for him, and these scenes are used in the Prologue to show the extent that the feud between the two families has affected the people of Verona Beach. This is the introduction of the dramatic, religious music, to the background of helicopter propellers and police sirens. There is a clip of the two families tower blocks, looming over the citizens of Verona, barely metres apart.

They are so important, that they are continually being written about, taking up the front cover of the newspapers, and magazines, such as 'Bullet'. The two families, 'alike in dignity' are shown as Business Moguls, who are slightly Corrupt and Sleazy in their dealings. The Prologue is an instrument to set the scene and introduce the Characters with. They are introduced with a close-up of the characters, and a still, with their name and role in the film. Luhrmann chooses to introduce Ted Montague, Romeo's father, with the scene of him rolling down his window, in much the same way as a Mafia Don would. The way in which Baz Luhrmann introduces the characters resembles a made-for-TV movie, and they all seem to be taking themselves so seriously, it is almost comic, which, I believe, was Luhrmann's intention.

The Capulet's, however, are seen more than the Montague's, and give off more of an impression of sleaze, with the father telling his prospective Son-in-Law, Dave Paris, that he is free to have relations with other women before he marries him to his daughter. Dave Paris is the traditional boy-next-door with white teeth and floppy hair. At the beginning of the film, Baz Luhrmann uses the front cover of magazines to inform us that he is 'Bachelor of the Year'. This immediately tells us who he is, and what part he plays. As the film is in Shakespeare's original script, which some find difficult to comprehend, this method tells us everything we need to know in a matter of seconds. Another group of Characters who seem to take themselves extremely seriously, are the 'Capulet Boys'.

Styled like characters from Spaghetti Westerns, Dressed in black and leather, with metal cowboy boots and goatees, they are oozing so much

menace and machismo it is comic. They are all of Hispanic nationality, probably from Puerto Rico, where there is lots of gang fighting. This seems to ring true with the portrayal of the Capulets in the film, as they always seem to be itching for a fight. Tybalt's machismo is deeply wounded when he sees Romeo, his enemy, at the party thrown by Lord and Lady Capulet. This party allows Luhrmann to use all the resources available to him, conveying the Capulets character in a different way. We can tell that by the tasteless, gaudy decorations that the Capulets are not subtle or understated in any way (Even their family tomb has neon crosses).

Making the party a costume ball also allows for the audience to see more of the characters personalities. For example, Gloria Capulet is dressed head-to-toe in gold, as Cleopatra, whereas her daughter, in stark contrast, is an angel in a simple white dress, pulled tightly across her chest to exaggerate her flat chest, and wings, with no make-up. After the party, Tybalt is itching for a fight, a chance to reestablish himself after nursing his wounded ego, and he travels to Verona Beach, where the Montague Boys are. Mercutio, Romeos best friend, is with Benvolio, Romeos cousin, shooting at fish. To some, this may show the instability of his mind. The Montague's are rather unkempt, with Hawaiian style shirts slipped casually over their gun holsters.

The Montague's, while being prepared for fighting, are not as aching for it as the Capulet's are. The music that begins playing once the Capulets turn up in their silver convertible is typical of a spaghetti western. They approach the Montague's, and Mercutio mocks them in a round about way, by making witty comments about them. While Mercutio seems to be in high spirits, you

can see fear in Benvolio's face, not necessarily of the situation but of the repercussions. The movement of the camera, going from Benvolio's terrified face, to Mercutio's mocking one, plus the music, all adds up to a sense of tension. The tension builds, but instead of the expected climax, there is none.

Romeo enters instead, and the music takes on a gentler tone, but it still contains a degree of tension, which then builds up. It gets to the point when Tybalt and Romeo are almost at the point of a duel, but Romeo refuses. Instead of turning on him with his gun, Tybalt begins beating him. We see Tybalt kicking Romeo, who is on the ground. They appear painful, because there are shots of Mercutio and Benvolio's faces, twisting into grimaces every time we hear the sound of a kick. The kicks are made to have an exceptionally loud sound to them, so they appear powerful, and painful, but the audience never sees Tybalt's foot make contact with Romeo's stomach.

Mercutio fights in the place of his companion, and gets stabbed. He is the only one who knows this, and not wishing to tell anybody, shrugs off their concerns, but he makes a pun, commenting on that if they call for him tomorrow, he shall be a 'grave man'. As he turns, the weather does the same. The Blue Verona skies turn grey, in a representation of the instability and unpredictability of both the weather and status of Verona, and of Mercutio himself. He turns back to the assembly, condemning them- 'A Plague on both your houses'.

This change in weather could also show the enormity of The Montague vs. Capulet Feud-Their hatred is so powerful it controls the weather. Verona

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Beach is styled like Los Angeles, or Rio de Janeiro. While at first glance it may seem slick and attractive, upon further inspection, the Beach is dirty and full of rubbish. Luhrmann could be telling us that while the situation may seem glamorous, it is, in actual fact, as tawdry as the Capulets party di½cor.

In the scenes of Mercutio's death, he is lying on the sand in front of the derelict stage, strategically placed to remind us that this is Baz Luhrmann's film interpretations of Shakespeare's play. It may be derelict to show us that theatre is dead, and film is a better way of communicating ideas. This scene is juxtaposed with a scene of the new bride, Juliet, waiting for her husband to come and consummate their relationship. She is sitting quietly and angelically. This would be a difficult thing to do on stage because of the nature of stage production, but Baz Luhrmann does this in his film to show the naivety of Juliet by interjecting a shot of her waiting impatiently between the scenes of conflict between the two most important men in her life (bar her father). In this scene she compares Romeo to an angel, but the following scenes show he is anything but.

He is driving in a rage, following Tybalt, consumed with grief. His face is covered in blood and tears, and is contorted in such a way that he appears demonic. Romeo shoots Tybalt, and as the shot is sounded, there is a sudden image of Juliet turning, as though she heard it. Romeo kills Tybalt under a newly built statue of Jesus. This furthers the notion of damnation first introduced by the Prologue, with the use of religious imagery, statues and images on guns and waistcoats, and the loud music. Key member of the

Montague entourage, Cross-Dresser and Best friend to Romeo, Mercutio is an entertaining, witty character.

I believe that Baz Luhrmann chose a black man in particular to play Mercutio, considering most of the characters in the original play were European, is because it is more amusing to have a black man as a drag-queen, since black Africans are, generally, less tolerant of gay men than white Europeans. With Mercutio being a cross-dresser, this allows for a wider range of costumes, music and other aspects, allowing Luhrmann to use the full potential awarded to him as director, for example, at the Capulets party, he does a musical number in a glitzy silver costume and wig, with dancers. Dressing him in bright colours contrasts with his skin, and makes him more noticeable, if he, like the rest of the Montague, entourage, was a white man dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, he would not stand out. Juliet's nurse, Nurse, is also a comic character. She is a large, Hispanic woman, whom appears to be interested in sleaze and innuendo. She encourages the love affair between Romeo and Juliet, but when her parents tell her of their plans for her to marry Dave Paris, the nurse tells her to do as they say, ignoring her marriage vows to Romeo.

The nurse is seen by some as more of a mother to Juliet than her own mother. Mrs. Capulet is a trophy wife, with bleach blonde hair and a Texan accent who smokes, drinks and pops pills. Once again we see that the glamour of Verona Beach and the people in it is not as attractive as it first appears. The scene in which we see Mrs.

Capulet taking pills and drinking scotch, it is sped up to make it seem comic. Mrs. Capulet is such a stereo-typical trophy wife, she is not to be taken seriously. Juliet, in contrast to her mother, is very plain. Even the gun, Juliet threatens to kill herself with is plain black, while Tybalt's has an image of the Virgin Mary. All these gives give an impression of purity and innocence.

Romeo is played by the Hollywood heartthrob of the time, Leonardo Di'Caprio. He, too has floppy hair, but is not as clean cut as Dave Paris. He, like the rest of the Montague's, appears in an open Hawaiian shirt, and even when he appears in a suit, the neck is open and he looks slightly disheveled. Romeo has been made to look like the romantic rogue, and quite rebellious. If he had been a more clean-cut character, turned to killing by grief, it may have made more of an impact on the audience.

However, had Baz Luhrmann followed this route, Romeo may not have been believable. Neither of the title characters are seen in the film until after the Prologue.