

Appropriating shakespeare's romeo and juliet

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In the 1997 film, *Romeo + Juliet*, Baz Luhrmann has attempted to take the original play by William Shakespeare, and create an appropriation of it for today. He takes what we value about the text: the themes, evocative language and poetry, the timeless storyline and humor, and places it in a context which is accessible and appealing to the audience of today. For this appropriation to be successful, the constant aim was putting things in terms we (especially young people) can identify with, in things appropriate to today. Through the use of the film medium, Baz Luhrmann gained access to varied editing styles, different casting, costume and set design, soundtrack, and camera techniques, which all helped in presenting the story with an updated view, while still retaining its cultural significance. Just as going to see a play was popular culture in Shakespearean times, seeing a film at the cinema is a very popular form of entertainment today. Luhrmann most likely chose this new medium because of its ability to reach the widest range of audiences – whether they be the “aristocrats and academics” (today’s film critics) or the “slaves and peasants” (teenagers!) By using film he’s making it accessible and appealing to as many as possible, but without altering the most important aspect of the play: the Shakespearean language. Also, through film it’s easier to bring new meanings to the story, to add music, motifs, and special effects that are strangers to a stage, and to make ambiguous aspects of the language clearer, more obvious and easier to understand through visual interpretations. One example of the updating of the play is the fast-paced editing of the film. From the very beginning we are launched into quick shots and freezes of the characters (whose roles are presented upon the screen as if we’re watching the familiar serial/soap

genre) – with little time to absorb what is happening. For many, this speedy editing style is appealing and keeps the audiences attention, in an age where short attention spans reign and interests dwindle at a terrifying rate. Luhrmann has addressed this issue and made the story appropriate for the needs of today – attention grabbing, racy, and through culling of the text, no more than two hours traffic on our screen. The editing style is also used in conjunction with recurring images to make it clear to the audience whether scenes are for action and rivalry or reserved for the lovers. For example, the quick, angry, violent petrol station scene (with the sign “ Add more fuel to your fire”) and underlying connections between heat and rage. This contrasts strongly to the watery love scenes between Romeo and Juliet, where there are long takes, a slow pace, and water in the form of fish tanks and pools. These techniques make the story very clear, easy to understand and the scenes more distinguishable, and in doing so the film becomes more accessible to a younger audience who may otherwise not understand the complex aspects of Shakespeare. The important choices made in casting the film also decided on the film's success. In choosing Leonardo Dicaprio (a popular teen idol) for the role of Romeo, Luhrmann had already begun capturing the younger audiences by appealing to popular culture. These teenagers may not have even considered seeing a Shakespearean film, but because the director chose Leonardo Dicaprio as opposed to an older, less popular actor, they arrived in their millions. In addition, their image of this actor can be transmitted to his character, so the face of Romeo is instantly linked with the idea of love. The casting of black actors into the film (as Chief of Police, and Mercutio) reflects society's changing values in respect to

equality and acceptance of many cultures, and makes the film more appropriate to modern audiences. The costume design is another aspect that has been updated to be more suitable to today. Romeo arrives at the party as a knight in shining armor, Juliet as an angel; this could be a subtle suggestion of the relationship that will unfold, through the use of these clichéd images. Mercutio arrives dressed as a drag queen, perhaps a comment on today's society and its wider acceptance of homosexuality. The use of settings is a lot more pronounced in the film than it was in the play. For instance, the petrol station is linked with fuel and fire, the shots of urban skyscrapers with a family name on each represent their rivalry in modern terms, and the neglected Verona Beach reflects a run down society. In particular, Luhrmann has used the settings to enhance the mood for the scene, and this is particularly evident in Romeo's banishment to Mantua. The desert-like caravan park is extremely barren and desolate, and reflects Romeo's feelings of emptiness with the prospect of being away from Juliet and his town. These types of settings have been appropriated to once again add to the clarity of the storyline and make it easy to follow by making the tone of the scene obvious. An advantage of using the film medium for an appropriation was having the opportunity for a soundtrack or constant music beneath each scene for extra emphasis. Much like the casting of popular actors, the modern soundtrack released with the film attracted young people to view it, because of familiarity with the modern songs. In addition to these songs, there was also a use of more traditional, classical music, (e. g. the choir's song) to set the quieter serious scenes apart from other scenes with pop music: like one where Everclear sings " I feel just like a local god when

I'm with the boys, we do what we want, yeah we do what we want" fitting perfectly with a scene where Romeo is ' hanging out' with the Montague boys at Verona Beach. These key changes in style of music help distinguish scenes and let the audience know what type of scene it is going to be. Another aspect adding to the success of this appropriation was the use of certain camera techniques. The extreme close-ups gave an extra feeling of closeness to the characters and the circling motion of the camera around them emphasized the theme of this intense love, as if there was nobody else in the world apart from them. These techniques mixed with the fast moving camera in the action shots once again distinguished certain scenes apart from others, and made it a clearly presented and more interesting film with new angles and modern techniques. Finally, the constant references to today helps viewers to really relate to the film. From the beginning with the television report-style narrator, up until the end at the neon-lit church, our senses are drenched with all things modern. Pool halls, urban skylines, drag queen costumes, pop music, and popular actors flash across the screen in a fast-paced truly modern way. Love is explained to us through the use of ecstasy the love drug, family feud is explained by rival company buildings, sword fights are translated to shootouts, and in general the play is put in terms widely understood by the majority of people today – through a film. Using all the techniques opened up by making this play a film, Baz Luhrmann certainly hasn't missed anything in creating his appropriation of Shakespeare's work, and for this reason Romeo + Juliet is truly successful in being accessible and appealing to the young audience of today.