

# Romeos Aplenty, Juliets Galore



## 1. Around the Bases

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THIS COURSE WILL EXPLORE THE MANY WAYS in which Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and in particular its two title characters, have been interpreted, or used as inspiration for new creations. This first class will focus on straight productions rather than adaptations, including the more faithful versions on film, opera, or ballet. The second class will cast its net wider.

At least half this class will be devoted to verse spoken on stage in front of a live audience, since that's where all Shakespeare starts. His theatre had no sets, no lighting, and little background music; it is all in the words. The fact that women's roles were played by young men suggests that performing them, and probably male roles also, had little to do with the modern concept of *inhabiting* the characters, so much as *creating* their emotional world through sound. Adding the resources of a modern theatre—let alone a film studio or opera house—opens new possibilities, but entirely changes the esthetic equation.

### A. Prologue

We compare approaches to the scene-setting sonnet for Chorus that opens the play, and consider its structure and themes.

**Prologue audio:** Brent Carver (Broadway, 2014)

**Renato Castellani film 1954:** John Gielgud

**Baz Luhrmann film 1996:** Edwina Moore and others

**Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) 2018:** Erica Whyman, *director*

### B. Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the conscious manipulation of verbal devices for persuasive effect. So far from Shakespeare writing more spontaneously for his

love scenes, he makes his love-struck characters even *more* conscious of the words they are using, creating a delightful interplay between emotion and wit.

**Stratford Ontario 2018:** First meeting (Antoine Yard, Sarah Farb; Barry Avrich, *director*)

**Audio comparison:** Romeo's entrance in *Il/i* (John Gielgud 1951, Patrick Ryecart 1978, Bally Gill 2018, Orlando Bloom 2014)

**RSC 2018:** Romeo's entrance (Bally Gill)

**Globe 2009:** Romeo's entrance (Adetomiwa Edun)

**Globe 2009:** End of balcony scene (Adetomiwa Edun, Ellie Kendrick; Dominic Dromgoole, *director*)

## C. Film

Film adds many elements not found on the spoken stage: the possibility of spectacle, and the ability to enfold the audience in a new emotional world created by setting, light, and music. But it also risks altering the balance between public and intimate, which is such an important factor in *Romeo and Juliet*.

**George Cukor film 1936:** First meeting (Leslie Howard, Norma Shearer)

**Franco Zeffirelli film 1968:** First meeting (Leonard di Caprio, Clare Danes; music by Nino Rota)

**Zeffirelli film 1968:** End of balcony scene (cast as above)

## D. Youth

Romeo and especially Juliet are younger than the protagonists of any other Shakespeare play; she is supposed to be 14. Postwar film directors have generally cast teenage performers—but this can cause problems in a play that involves sexual situations and allusive language.

**BBC Shakespeare 1978:** “Gallop apace” (Rebecca Saire)

**Globe 2029:** “Gallop apace” (Ellie Kendrick)

**Broadway 2014:** “Gallop apace” (Condola Rashad)

**National Theatre film 2021:** “Gallop apace” (Jessie Buckley)

## E. Music

Opera offers little possibility of casting truly young performers in young roles since the vocal capacity to cut through a romantic orchestra takes years to develop. Ballet is a different matter, as dancers mature young, but also because its performance does not depend upon becoming the character so much as communicating its poetic language.

**Gounod opera 1867:** trailer (Vittorio Grigolo, Diana Damrau; Metropolitan Opera, 2016)

**Gounod opera 1867:** bedroom scene (Angela Gheorghiu, Roberto Alagna; Barbara Willis Sweete film, 2002)

**Gounod opera 1867:** “Je veux vivre” (Angela Gheorghiu, 2002)

**Kenneth MacMillan ballet 1965:** Balcony scene, ending (Rudolf Nureyev, Margot Fonteyn; Royal Ballet, 1966)

## F. Danger

*Romeo and Juliet* is an intimate love story set within a public environment fraught with danger. With what time is left, we see how that danger may be established in ballet and on film.

**MacMillan ballet 1965:** Dance of the Knights (Royal Ballet, 2019)

**MacMillan ballet 1965:** Opening sequence (Royal Ballet, 2019)

**Zeffirelli film 1968:** Opening sequence

See also the course website: [www.brunyate.com/RomeosAplenty](http://www.brunyate.com/RomeosAplenty)

I will always answer mail to [rogerbrunyate@gmail.com](mailto:rogerbrunyate@gmail.com)