

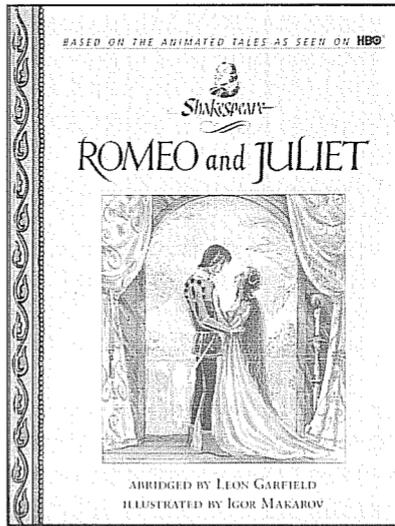
Film reviews / Critiques de films

SHAKESPEARE—THE ANIMATED TALES

Videos: *Romeo and Juliet*. Screenplay: Leon Garfield. Illus. Igor Makarov. Random House Home Video, 1993. Approx. 30 min. \$18.95. ISBN 0-679-83913-5. ***Twelfth Night*.** Screenplay: Leon Garfield. Illus. Ksenia Prytkova. Random House Home Video, 1993. Approx. 30 min. \$18.95. ISBN 0-679-83909-7.

Books: (Sold separately.) *Romeo and Juliet*. Abridgment: Leon Garfield. Illus. Igor Makarov. Alfred A. Knopf, 1993. 48 pp., \$6.99 paper. ISBN 0-679-83874-0. ***Twelfth Night*.** Abridgment: Leon Garfield. Illus. Ksenia Prytkova. Alfred A. Knopf, 1993. 48 pp., \$6.99 paper. ISBN 0-679-83872-4.

Romeo and Juliet and *Twelfth Night* are two of the six Shakespeare “tales” produced in tandem as videos and books just released in Canada; *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *A midsummer night’s dream*, and *The tempest* will be discussed in future issues. Each of the six utilizes a different type of animation. And one might well ask why they are marketed as “tales” since Shakespeare wrote plays and the book versions describe them as stage productions (“The curtain rises on a wild sea ...”). Perhaps the marketer’s aim is to suggest affinities with Charles and Mary Lamb’s well-known *Tales from Shakespeare*: both do alternate narration (called “stage directions” and



italicized in the *Animated tales*) with dialogue (occasionally simplified) and action. And it is important to note at the outset that although both books and videos have been prepared by the same editors and artists (a multinational “venture” produced in Russia, Wales, and England, financed by distributors in UK, USA, and Japan) and are being marketed together, they in fact differ so radically from each other that if used together, students would be confused and distracted. In both cases many of the passages quoted from the original differ between versions, and there are plot materials in each *not* duplicated in the other.

The *Romeo* is by far the more successful of the two productions under consideration here and both (or either) video and book versions are highly recommended for youngsters mature enough to deal with the deaths of the protagonists. The characters in the video are fully-animated line drawings with expressive faces and gestures; the settings and backgrounds are realistic and beautifully executed in pastels. (Canadian audiences, however, might be startled by the Russian artists' rendering of Juliet: she sports impossibly long red hair waving and curling down to her knees.) This book (unlike the *Twelfth Night*) is illustrated by scenes from the video.

The alternate versions of the opening scene will illustrate the type of variations between video and book versions of all the plays and why they should be used independently of each other. The book begins with the following "stage direction" (which is not illustrated in the text):

The curtain rises on old Verona, on a market place covered over with huge umbrella-awnings that shield the busy crowded stalls from the blazing summer's sun. All of a sudden, the umbrellas quake and tumble aside to reveal, like furious insects under a stone, a frantic squabbling of mad colours. Shouts and shrieks fill the air, of fright and outrage! The Montagues and the Capulets—two ancient warring families—are at each others' throats again! Stalls are wrecked, merchandise scattered and screaming children snatched out of the way by their terrified mothers.

The video, by contrast, opens with an aerial view of medieval Verona; as the camera pans down to a square in which animated figures duel with each other, the narrator tells us that "Long ago in old Verona there lived two families, the Montagues and the Capulets, who hated each other worse than death" and then goes on to identify Benvolio and other characters seen for the first time. I suspect, but have not confirmed, that the original version of the video contained the scene described so vividly in the book, but that it was cut from the version available here, perhaps to reduce playing time. (The play, by the way, runs just under 25 minutes, not 30; it is followed by 6 minutes of credits and advertisements for the entire six plays.) But whatever the reason for the alternate treatments, it must be emphasized that both treatments can be used as effective introductions to the plays so long as they are not compared: the books' narrative "stage directions" are often not based on Shakespeare, but then the same is true of most theatrical and cinematic productions these days. And they do force the reader to create the scene in his or her mind's eye (which is what we want the printed word to accomplish). The videos, by contrast, are more drastically abridged than the books but may be more accessible to the TV generation.

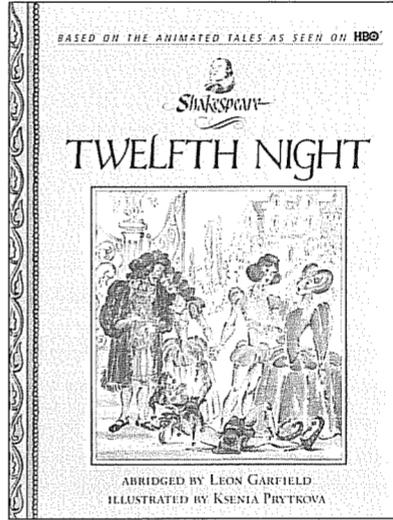
Summaries of the contents of both versions of the two plays and of significant changes from Shakespeare's originals should be of use to educators. In both, all the scenes are, of course, abridged, but—with the exceptions noted below—the most memorable lines and poetry are retained. In both versions of *Romeo*, the opening sequences quoted above are substituted (wisely for an audience unfamiliar with the story) for Shakespeare's prologue (which tells us that only the deaths of the star-crossed lovers will reconcile their families). But, absurdly,

both versions have one of the fighters speak Mercutio's famous "A plague on both your houses!": if he is fighting for one of them, why curse them both? (The line is later repeated in Mercutio's death scene.) The street fight (and the four later deaths) are all bloodless and not particularly violent. Romeo's unrequited love for Rosalind is retained in both versions, but all references to Paris are dropped. (The only time we hear of Paris is when Capulet—here unexpectedly—demands that Juliet marry him.) The book (but not the video) includes Romeo's very important premonition of "some consequence yet hanging in the stars [that] shall bitterly begin his fearful date with this night's revels" at the Capulet ball. The book presents Romeo seeing and approaching Juliet as in Shakespeare, but the video curiously revises the sequence: Romeo is frozen at the sight of Juliet until Benvolio and Mercutio literally push him into Juliet's arms (a most unlikely undertaking for them). Both versions retain the lines they speak as they kiss, fall in love, and belatedly discover each other's identity.

The balcony scene (Shakespeare's II,2) in both follows Shakespeare, retaining most of the best poetry but omitting Romeo's opening speech ("What light through yonder window breaks?"). In the video Romeo visits Friar Laurence who agrees to the marriage to reconcile their families as in Shakespeare's; the scene is totally missing from the book. The wedding scene (II,5) and the street scene (III,1), in which Tybalt slays Mercutio, followed by Romeo's killing Tybalt, both follow Shakespeare, the video more closely and effectively than the book.

Shakespeare dealt with sex only in poetic and allusive terms, and the book follows him in this: we only see the lovers parting after their wedding night. The video—perhaps because its producers feel audiences expect it—takes us into the bedroom for the consummation, but the scene (to use the old-fashioned term) *is* tastefully presented. We see only their naked backs as they sit on the bed staring lovingly at each other; then tiny, fully-clothed figures float from their bodies and meet a minuscule Cupid outside Juliet's window who shoots them with his bow and arrow. (Would this be a good place to introduce students to symbolism?) The video scene then shifts to Juliet's balcony for their parting *aubade*.

Both versions of the *tale* then move rapidly to the conclusion. Capulet insists Juliet marry Paris; in the video Juliet rushes to the Friar, receives the sleeping potion, and awakens in the tomb. The book is slightly less hurried: as in



Shakespeare, Juliet asks advice from her nurse, is told to marry Paris because “Romeo’s a dishclout to him” (38), and bitterly (but silently) denounces her before going to the Friar. The book also presents an abridgment of the Apothecary scene (V, 1) where Romeo philosophizes as he purchases poison for his suicide. The deaths follow Shakespeare, except that since Paris is not in these versions, Romeo need not kill him. Only in the book do we find the Friar speaking one of Shakespeare’s most important thematic lines: he tells Juliet that “A greater power than we can contradict has thwarted our intents” as Juliet weeps over the dead Romeo. Immediately after Juliet dies, the full cast enters the tomb (What in the world was everybody in Verona—including two mortal enemies—doing in the cemetery that night?) and speak Shakespeare’s final lines. But, alas, unwilling to believe that Shakespeare knew what he was doing, both versions “improve” upon him. The book ends with a large picture of the lovers holding hands framed by two candles; the final “stage direction” tells us that “The curtain falls, not on the darkness of the lovers’ tomb, but on the brightness of it” (48). The video shows the two side by side in death but then has their bodies ascend into the sky and become two bright stars in the night sky. (But one is much larger than the other.)

If there are weaknesses in the *Animated Romeo and Juliet*, they are minor and they would not interfere with a young person’s response to either the video or the book. The video of *Twelfth Night*, is no such matter; however, the book version is superb: it follows the original more closely than does the *Romeo* and is as ideal an introduction to a complexly plotted play as one could wish. All the elements of Shakespeare’s original are included albeit with some minor shifts in placement. The only change from the original is probably due to an attempt to coordinate the book with the video: here the initial “stage directions” tell us that “The curtain rises on a wild sea upon which a fragile vessel is being tossed to and fro ... tiny figures fling themselves over the sides and strike out desperately for land” (8); Shakespeare, of course, does not stage the shipwreck but lets us learn about it when we meet all the survivors except Sebastian in his I, 2. Otherwise, the book presents all the plots and subplots of the original: the Orsino/Olivia/Viola love triangle, the duping and comic imprisonment of Malvolio by Sir Toby and his friends (and here their treatment of him is much less brutal and excessive than in Shakespeare), the relationship between Sebastian and Angelo, and even Feste’s best songs. Perhaps most important, this text presents enough of the dialogue and explanatory “stage directions” for easy following of the complexly interrelated plots. The only omission is the reduction of one of Shakespeare’s most famous speeches to its single opening line—“If music be the food of love, play on, give me excess of it”—which makes absolutely no sense unless Orsino goes on to tell us why he wants “excess.”

The video is no such matter, and one wonders what age group it was designed for. This opens with the shipwreck. The scene itself would not scare a three-year-old: the “actors” in this production are all very unrealistic animated dolls. Viola

and Sebastian are on deck clutching each other in fear as the ship splits between them. The sequence, however, has a gratuitous shocker (not in the book) about which educators should be forewarned: the camera moves slowly to the prow of the sinking ship which is decorated with the only realistic prop in the play—a carved female figure with large, naked breasts topped with obviously erect nipples. (And we see the figurehead a second time a few minutes later as we meet the survivors on shore. There are also two instances of visual comic sexual jokes, but these are minor given the overall context of horseplay: Malvolio, while courting Olivia in response to the forged letter, stretches an elasticized ribbon (which is decorating the front of his Elizabethan hose in the fig leaf position) far out on the line “Some are born great”; the remainder of the speech (about others achieving greatness, others having it cast upon them) is missing. Lastly, in the final scene we have a statue of cupid wearing a fig leaf.

The video otherwise presents a satisfactory and coherent abridgement of the overall play but with one major and crucial omission: the Malvolio story. Here he does not fantasize about becoming Count Malvolio by marrying Olivia *before* he reads the forged letter (as he does in Shakespeare and the book); he thus lacks the hubris that makes his fall deserved and aesthetically satisfactory. Even more obviously missing, however, is his imprisonment in the dark, the torments he endures from Sir Toby and Feste, and his appearance in the final scene vowing revenge “on the whole pack of you.” All these elements are in the book; in the video Maria throws something like a pillowcase over his head after his attempt to woo Olivia and we never see or hear of him again.

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Anne of Green Gables

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