

Romeo in Boxer Shorts

William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet. Directed by Baz Luhrmann, with Leonardo DiCaprio, Claire Danes, Brian Dennehy, John Leguizamo, Pete Postlethwaite, Paul Sorvino and Diane Venora. Screenplay by Craig Pearce and Baz Luhrmann. Twentieth Century Fox, 1996.

The opening image is a television set with "snow" on the screen. Then a newscast starts; the anchorwoman looks at the camera and says, "Two households both alike in dignity/In fair Verona where we lay our scene..." The graphic behind her is a broken ring with the tabloid-style title "Star-cross'd lovers" below it. From there we are hurled into a dizzying montage of news footage and newspaper headlines reporting civil mutiny and ancient grudges. Welcome to Verona Beach and Baz Luhrmann's '90s take on a classic, *William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet*.

Verona Beach is an overcrowded urban sprawl played in exterior shots by Mexico City. Dominating the skyline are the rival Montague and Capulet office towers. Set against these, ironically, are a huge statue of Christ (being repaired) in the city square and on the top of "St. Peter's church" a stylized Virgin Mary. Circling above it all in his helicopter, Captain Prince (Vondie Curtis-Hall), keeps watch over a violent world where everyone is armed.

The appearance of the TV set is also a clue to Luhrmann's technique. He's transferred the frenetic editing and visual style of modern video to the big screen, and the effect is overwhelming. In his production notes for the film, Luhrmann called Shakespeare "a rambunctious, sexy, violent, entertaining storyteller" and he has developed an equivalent cinematic language. The break-neck opening sequence, the fight between the boys of the two families at a gas station, sets an exhilarating pace for the headlong rush to tragedy. And there have probably never been so many crosses, candles and religious statues on-screen since the days of Josef von Sternberg. It's MTV meets operatic Hispanic Catholicism. Luhrmann has said, "Truly great stories communicate to every kind of person. They were popular entertainments first, so it's like claiming these works back for the audience for which they were written."

Guns with "brand" names like Sword and Rapier and Hawaiian shirts replace daggers and tights, but the language is still Shakespeare, although cut. The Montagues (Brian Dennehy and Christina Pickles) are "Anglo" Americans whose boys have punk hair cuts, while Capulet (Paul Sorvino) is Hispanic and, to judge from his wonderfully vulgar party, nouveau-riche. Tybalt (John Leguizamo) remains the dangerous psychopath found in just about any age. Juliet's other suitor here is Dave Paris, the Governor's son (Paul Rudd, previously seen as the '90s Mr. Knightley in *Clueless*), whose photograph appears on the cover of "Timely." The background is wittily filled with Shakespearean references. (The more Shakespeare you know, the smarter you'll feel.) Romeo and Benvolio shoot pool in the former "Globe Theatre." Billboards advertise Prospero's Furniture: "Such stuff as dreams are made of." The Montague hang-out, the Sycamore Grove beach has a bar, Rosecranzsky's, and a store, The Merchant of Verona Beach. Despite their apparent worldliness (Romeo smokes, writes poetry and drops acid just before the Capulet party, while Juliet carries a gun), the lovers played by Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes have an innocence that is heartbreaking. If each age reinvents the lovers to embody the values of its young

people, then we are clearly on very different terrain from Franco Zeffirelli's lush Renaissance version of 1968. The impulse of these lovers is not toward sex — they are far less sexualized than Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting — but toward some impossibly pure state that is achievable only in death. They are continually in or near or falling into water, suggestive of a primal innocence not of this world and safe from adult intrusion. Luhrmann evokes a similarly escapist couple by quoting the climax of the Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde* to accompany his montage of the lovers after Juliet joins Romeo in death.

Reviewers have complained about the treatment of the verse in this film, just as they did in 1968. Admittedly Hussey, Whiting and company now sound like the RSC in comparison to Luhrmann's cast. DiCaprio may handle the language a little better than Danes, but they both rise equally to the intense emotional demands of the roles. His Romeo has charm and wit, while her Juliet has a luminous and intelligent presence. I think it has more to do with the sound of Shakespeare delivered in American voices. So it isn't Stratford and they aren't speaking with rounded tones. It may not be the most "poetic" sounding verse, but for the purposes of the film, it works. Film, as it should be unnecessary to point out by now, is a very different medium from the stage. The visual, for better or worse, takes precedence. And the visual is what this film delivers — in spades.

Not all of it works equally well. In her first appearance, Lady Capulet is treated as a grotesque, at odds with her later appearances as a Southern belle who has obviously made a bad marriage. As the nurse, Miriam Margolyes initially has moments when she seems like some dreadful Hispanic caricature, but she improves. Mantua, oddly enough, is a derelict trailer park to which the "Post-haste Dispatch" delivery man comes too late. But these are flaws that are easy to overlook when so much is right. Parents should be aware that the film, like the play, is violent and be prepared to explain why Mercutio comes to the Capulet ball in drag. Although in the age of Dennis Rodman and RuPaul, this may not be necessary. Strangely enough, the drugs, particularly the "likeness-of-death" potion that Friar Laurence brews, seem even more plausible in a modern setting.

You may not agree with all of Luhrmann's choices, but he has created a dazzling entertainment that in its own wired, '90s way is true to the spirit of the original. Shakespeare would be fascinated.

David Gates is the Marketing Coordinator for Family and Children's Programs at Harbourfront Centre, Toronto.

Munsch's *A Promise Is A Promise* on Stage

A Promise Is a Promise. A Geordie Productions and Barbara Poggemiller adaptation of the book by Robert Munsch and Michael Kusagak. At Toronto's Young People's Theatre, March 1997. Cast: Laura Teasdale, Ron Kennell, Julie Tamiko Manning, Glenn Roy.

At Toronto's Young People's Theatre, the mostly-under-ten audience burst into fits of laughter as Allashua (played by Laura Teasdale) pulled fish from a crack in the