



ROMEO AND JULIET

A STUDY GUIDE FOR CLASSES ATTENDING THE
UMASS THEATER MATINEE

UMASS



theater

Romeo and Juliet: The Design Concept Behind the Production

By Lauryn Sasso, Outreach Assistant

The process of bringing a play from the text on the page to what audiences see on the stage is complex, and one of the most important elements of this process is the creation of the design concept. This term refers to the overall plan created by the director in collaboration with the dramaturg and the scenic, costume, sound, and lighting designers; this group is called the design team. Each member of the design team contributes to discussions about the play's themes and messages; out of these discussions come ideas as to what the world of the play looks, sounds, and feels like. Generally, the ideas generated by these collaborative discussions are developed along a central theme that is selected from one of the themes of the play that everyone on the design team finds important; this central theme in turn influences the way that the production is designed, becoming its design concept. The design concept for UMass' production of Romeo and Juliet was inspired by the type of games described below.

Role-playing games (RPGs) have been around for several decades, dating back to before personal computers were a common fixture in almost every home. One of the first, and most enduringly popular, was Dungeons and Dragons. Groups of "gamers" would gather to play this game, taking on the personas of wizards, warriors, and mythical creatures; character progress was charted with pen and paper. When the format was adapted to the computer medium, beginning in 1975, the

possibilities for visually creating entire fantasy worlds were endless, and the games became more elaborate and involved. RPGs generally involve a quest, and take place across several locations; characters have to fight enemies and complete challenges in order to score points and advance to the next part of the game.

Most RPGs are set in a fictional high fantasy world. Others feature elements from space opera and pulp science fiction; most merge elements from all these genres. Characters are developed in a variety of ways, with some games allowing players to choose their race, gender, and occupation; other games require that players take on the roles of pre-determined characters. The more intricately plotted games also allow characters to develop "personalities"

in relation to other characters depending on choices that the players make during the game.

Almost every RPG features combat as one of the main challenges to the player. A good portion of these games are spent avoiding, preparing for, or carrying out fights. Combat is carried out in either turn-based or real-time modes. In a turn-based system, only one character may act at a time; all other characters remain still, with a few exceptions that involve the use of special abilities. Another feature of these games is the differences in the portrayals of the male and female characters. While female characters in fighting games (i.e. games that are solely focused on combat encounters, and do not have an involved story line) are notorious for being faster

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A character from *Final Fantasy*, one of the main inspirations behind UMass Amherst's production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Designing costumes for *Romeo and Juliet*

By Bethany Marx, Costume Designer

The costume designs for *Romeo and Juliet* are part of a larger design concept intended to create a parallel between the audience/actor relationship in Shakespeare's time and the audience/actor relationship of today. In Shakespeare's day, plays and other activities such as cock fighting and bear baiting provided entertainment similar to what sporting events, television, and video games offer today.

Director Jeannie-Marie Brown chose to use video games such as *Final Fantasy*, *Path of Radiance* and *Tales of Legendia* (all games with high tech, artistic character renderings and complex fantastical worlds), to create our concept of *Romeo and Juliet* because they require their audiences to be engaged in the action. The violent, warfare-based plots of many of these games also reflect the feuding world in which *Romeo and Juliet* find themselves in love.

I used research from the games mentioned above and many others to create clothing and weapons that inspire a world which reminds us of these games, but which is also a completely new place and time, a new game, in which the events of the play's story can take place. My goal was to create a world clearly not our own, without being

so far removed from what we know that we cannot relate to what we see. I wanted something visually stimulating and beautiful, though inherently dangerous. No character is shown without a weapon or the protection of a guard, not even a servant. It was also necessary, in my mind, that the differentiation between families be an artifice.

When one looks at the stage, there is no apparent difference between the members of one family and the other except the facial tattoos, which like a label on a piece of brand name clothing, are applied after birth and create a superficial illusion of quality. The feud is only in their minds, just as the tattoos are only ink under the skin. There is no difference between one and the other that has not been created by the families themselves.

Design Concept, continued

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than males but less powerful, women in most RPGs regularly have the potential to become just as capable at offense as their counterparts; limitations regarding a character's performance are usually determined by their class/profession and race, not their gender.

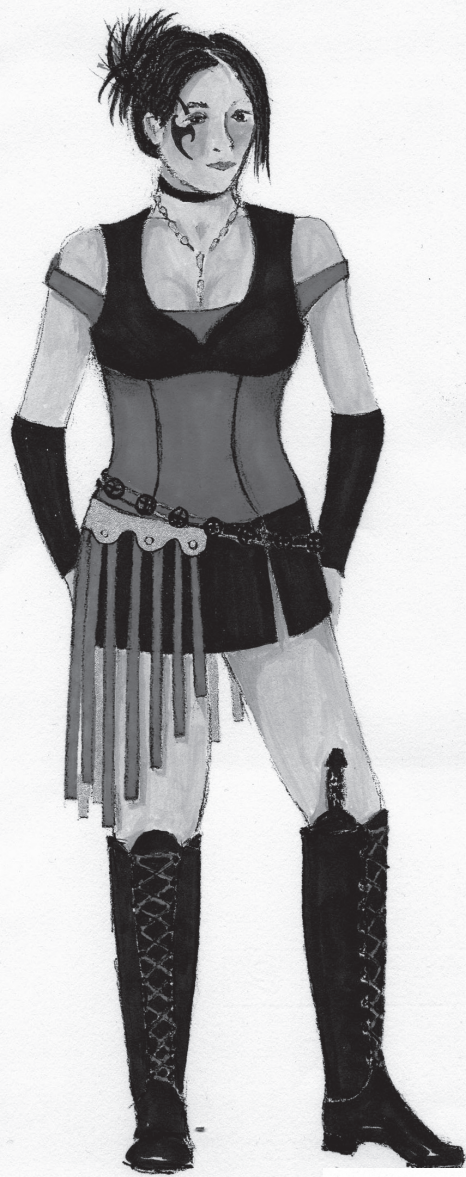
Much of the design concept for *Romeo and Juliet* has been influenced by several of these games, including *Final Fantasy*, *Path of Radiance*, and *Tales of Legendia*. Echoes of the fantastical worlds found in such games can be seen in everything from the costume and scenic designs to the fighting style adopted by the characters in the play. While the text remains the classic words of Shakespeare, the production team has used the idea of an RPG inspired world to help make the story more accessible to a 21st century audience.

Some information in this paragraph taken from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer_role-playing_game



A drawing of Bethany Marx's design for Juliet's costume

More costume renderings by costume designer Bethany Marx: (clockwise from top left) Tybalt, Lady Capulet and Friar Lawrence.



ROMEO AND JULIET



TYBALT



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LADY CAPULET



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FRIAR LAWRENCE

Class Exercise

Create your own images of the main characters in *Romeo and Juliet* by drawing or collaging.

How are you signifying which family they belong to? How about their social standing; what about the costumes helps define their status? What other character traits are you providing clues to with your costume choice?

Star-crossed lovers:

Sources for the Romeo and Juliet story

By Maryanne Olson, Production Dramaturg

Did you know that Shakespeare drew his story from a variety of sources, and his play has inspired countless remakes and updates? This concept appealed to us as artists because we were curious to see which elements have stayed intact, and which have faded away throughout the various adaptations. Here is a history of *Romeo and Juliet* from ancient Greece to contemporary times.

1st Century A.D. – Ovid includes the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in his book *Metamorphoses*, but the story of Pyramus and Thisbe is even older than this since Ovid took it from the ancient Greeks who took it from Middle Eastern folklore.

Ovid's *Pyramus and Thisbe* is about two over-protected Babylonian teens who fall in love through a hole in the garden wall that separates their neighboring yards. They agree to meet in secret one night. Thisbe, the girl, is frightened by a lioness and hides, dropping her veil as she runs. Pyramus, who arrives later, finds the veil and, believing that Thisbe is dead, kills himself. Thisbe returns and discovers Pyramus and in turn kills herself. This myth provides the blueprint for all versions of Romeo and Juliet since and was even “performed” as a play within a play in Shakespeare's comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

5th Century A.D. – Greek novelist Xenophon writes *Ephesiaca*. In it, a wife is separated from her husband. To avoid marrying another man, she takes a sleeping potion. She wakes up in a tomb and has many further adventures, including being captured by pirates. This appears to be the first recorded evidence of the action that Juliet later takes.

1476 – Masuccio of Salerno writes *Il Novellino*. In it, Mariotto and Giannozza, two Italian citizens, fall in love and are secretly married. Mariotto is exiled and Giannozza takes a sleeping potion so that she can avoid the man she is supposed to marry and join Mariotto. Mariotto believes her dead, returns home, and is killed. Giannozza finds him dead and instantly dies herself.

1530 – Luigi da Porta publishes his *Historia Novellamente Ritrovata di due Nobili Amanti*. His is basically the same as Masuccio's story, but he is the first to set the play in Verona

with feuding families, the Montecchi and Cappelletti. He actually took these names from real historic families, which caused the rumor to be spread that the tragic tale was a true story. His story is the closest structurally to Shakespeare's play.

1562 – Arthur Brooke publishes *Tragedie of Romeus & Juliet*. This is considered the main source for Shakespeare's play. Scholars often consider Brooke's poem dull and emotionless and many believe that Shakespeare was able to revitalize the characters with his beautiful language and the addition of themes like lightness and dark and the role of fate in people's lives.

1830 – Bellini's famed opera *I Capuletti I Montecchi* (*The Capulets and the Montagues*) opens in Venice.

1938 – Sergei Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet* opens in Czechoslovakia.

1957 – *West Side Story*, a musical about rival gangs set in 1950s New York that is based on Romeo and Juliet premieres on Broadway. It is followed by a film version in 1961 that wins seven Academy Awards including Best Picture. This is probably the most famous adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* post-Shakespeare.

1968 – Franco Zeffereilli's acclaimed version of *Romeo and Juliet* premieres.

1996 – Premiere of Baz Luhrmann's modern film version of *Romeo + Juliet*, set in Verona Beach. Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes play the title characters.

1998 – *Shakespeare in Love*, a movie based (very) loosely on Shakespeare's life and the writing of *Romeo and Juliet*, opens and goes on to win several Academy Awards.

Exercise

Imagine that you're the director. How would you mount a production of *Romeo and Juliet*?

Would you play it straight in historical dress? Go futuristic? Add dance? Create a design concept and explain why you think it's appropriate to this production.

Cutting the text of *Romeo and Juliet*

In this day and age, it's rare for Shakespeare texts to be performed in their entirety. Usually the director and dramaturg, an artist who is trained to provide research and script analysis support to the director, work together to "cut" the script (literally take lines, or passages out of the play). This process can involve anything from eliminating entire characters and scenes to merely removing a few extraneous lines from the text.

For this production, we've cut about 30% of the piece (roughly 1000 lines out of 3000). We started with the idea: how do we tell the primary story of Romeo and Juliet's relationship and its influence on Verona society, with the least amount of words? Sometimes this has meant just cutting lines out of some of the longer speeches. Other times we've taken out entire scenes. We've tried not to lose any the major characters, but we've focused attention primarily on the younger characters and their relationships with each other. We've cut allusions to Renaissance culture that could confuse the audience and tried to keep only those moments that are essential in telling the story and understanding the relationship between Romeo and Juliet. The one exception to this is Mercutio's Queen Mab speech, which nobody had the heart to meddle with (it's just so great!)

Class Exercise

Most of the time nowadays, Shakespeare's plays are cut in some fashion by the groups who mount productions of them. Some cut a lot, some cut a little. Some cut whole characters, other eliminate subplots.

As you read *Romeo and Juliet*, think about the following questions. What parts of the play would you cut? Which parts do you think you can't do without? At what point does cutting the text alter the basic essence of the play and are you no longer performing *Romeo and Juliet*, but some adaptation thereof?

The role of the audience

In some ways, going to a theater performance feels like going to a movie. After all, you, the audience member, sit in a darkened theater and watch as a group of actors bring written words to life.

However, in a movie, everyone involved in the production finished their work months ago. For better or for worse, no matter how many times you watch it, the film will always be the same.

In contrast, theater is rarely ever the same. Any number of things, good and bad, can make a work change from night to night: The actor's understanding of his or her role deepens and changes; a light or sound cue might come in at the wrong time; something that happened offstage might affect the way two actors relate

to each other.

One of the biggest variables is the audience. A bad audience can throw actors off, whereas an engaged and respectful audience can boost the actors' energy and raise the level of the play.

There are a few things you can do to make a performance better for you and for the actors.

1. Open your mind. Having new experiences is part of broadening your horizons, so sit back and let the story and the experience unfold — and enjoy it!

2. Please react — respectfully. Actors love an audience that is attentive and reacting to what happens onstage. Laugh when something funny happens, cry when something touches you, and clap if you're impressed. But

if you are annoyed with a character or you think an actor's performance is terrible, please do not yell. You could wreck an actor's concentration and ruin the show.

3. Cell phones and pagers must be turned off during a show. Nothing is worse for actors and audiences than to hear that annoying beeping during a moving scene.

4. Even if you think it's the worst thing you've ever seen, keep in mind that the people onstage poured their heart and soul into this production, and that there are others in the audience who disagree with you. Please remain respectful. Do not talk, try not to fidget, and unless it's a medical emergency, do not leave your seat.

—Anna-Maria Goossens

The Elizabethan Stage and Spectacle

By Maryanne Olson, Production Dramaturg

We all know that the common Elizabethan citizen didn't have television, movies, or radios to entertain them, but despite what 17th century Puritans would have wished, Elizabethan audiences certainly didn't want to sit around at home and pray. On the contrary, Renaissance audiences spent their days roving the city from one entertainment spectacle to another.

Here are some typical entertainment options for Renaissance audiences:

- Lazar-houses – homes where lepers were kept virtually on display for commoners to view
- Public executions – it may seem gross to us today, but during the Renaissance, people loved going to see hangings and beheadings
- Bear-baiting contests - exactly what it sounds like: bears were tied to a stake and teased by dogs. Audiences would cheer this on until either the bear or dog was killed.
- Exhibitions of the “exotic” including “wonder-cabinets” (rooms owned by wealthy Londoners which contained curiosities from around the world) and visits by people from far-away lands (for example, two Eskimos who were brought to London from Nova Scotia and could be seen ice-fishing on the Thames).
- Playhouses (Theaters)

Theaters, or “Playhouses” as they were commonly



The original Globe Theater where Shakespeare performed and presented his work no longer exists, but a replica built in England some years back serves as the site of Shakespeare and other productions today.

referred to in Elizabethan England, were far from the lofty places of academic esteem that they're often considered today. They were the chief form of entertainment and spectacle for Elizabethan audiences. They drew from all the other forms of entertainment existing in the city, most notably by drawing on the violence that fascinated audiences enough to draw them to public executions. Theaters also examined the unknown, using foreign locales as settings or introducing foreign characters, which appealed to both the growing cosmopolitanism of Londoners, and also their fear and fascination with the unknown.

The following quote by a contemporary Renaissance scholar gives us some sense of how theater was viewed in Shakespeare's time.

“we need to recognize that the drama we regard as one of the supreme literary achievements of the English language was viewed quite differently by the period in question – as a troublesome and potentially subversive social phenomenon that threatened religious and civic hierarchies and yet, despite considerable antagonism, could neither be outlawed nor put down.”

Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*, vii.

Playhouses were not generally accepted by the city authorities, or by Puritans who were gaining power in London, so playhouses were (particularly during Shakespeare's time) located in the city “liberties.” The “liberties” were the more “suburban” areas of London, that lay outside of the city walls. These were tough places (not the suburbs we think of today) populated by cutthroats, pickpockets and prostitutes. Despite the danger of going outside the walls of the city, people of all classes flocked to the playhouses, which demonstrates the power of its appeal.

Playhouses became a place where people could mingle across social class and take in a day of entertainment. Audiences were often rowdy and were well-aware of the control they had over theater companies. Playhouses tried to provide their audiences with a new play every day, which meant there were a lot of plays being written at this time. If a play didn't appeal to audiences, it was forgotten. Playwrights often disliked the power their audiences had over their career and would write extensive speeches into the action of their plays that insulted the uncouth

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Theater in the Renaissance

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behavior of their audiences. Shakespeare was one of the few playwrights who did not insult his audiences in his work.

The following quote from a civic decree of the time reflects the behavior that was common in a Renaissance theater.

Item: That no tobacco be taken in the Hall nor anywhere else publicly, and that neither at their standing in the streets, nor before the comedy begin, not all the time there, any rude or immodest exclamations be made, nor any humming, hawking, whistling, hissing or laughing be used, or any stamping or knocking, nor any such other uncivil or unscholarlike or boyish demeanour, upon any occasion; nor that any clapping of hands be had until the Plaudite at the end of the Comedy, except his Majesty, the Queen, or others of the best quality here, do apparently begin the same.

Even within the playhouses, the love for spectacle continued and not just on the stage. There are numerous accounts of cutpurses being apprehended and tied to the stage so that audience members could look at them and wonder at their crimes. Also, many prostitutes used the playhouses as their chief source of income, and mingled with the other patrons to get new clients. Young noblemen (often referred to as “gallants” but also insultingly referred to as “gulls”) took their days off from law school to attend plays to be seen by the public. They were often the most ridiculed by playwrights writing specifically about London.

Theater today is very different from in the Renaissance. Now, it's expected that audiences will show

up and sit quietly in their seats to enjoy the show. There's less interaction between the audiences and the performers than there was in Shakespeare's day. Those of us behind UMass's production of *Romeo and Juliet* wondered what the contemporary equivalence to Renaissance theater might be.

We started researching contemporary forms of entertainment, and it didn't take long before we were drawn to the growing world of video games, particularly role-playing games like the *Final Fantasy* series. Like Shakespeare's theater was in his day, video games aren't appreciated as the art form they are. Academics and artists look askance at the idea that video games are shaping our culture. At the same time, media stories abound with the effects of violent video games on today's youth, or the rise in degree programs geared towards creating video games, or the numbers of households that now own some form of gaming console. Clearly, video games are having a profound impact on our society, just as theater did during the Renaissance.

We were further drawn by the sheer artistry of some of these games. Composers spend their entire careers creating the perfect soundscape for these games. The visual effects of these games are breathtaking.

But most inspirational to our creative process was the interactive quality of video games that lies at the heart of live performance but is so often neglected in professional theater today. With video games, you never know if you're playing the game, or if the game is playing you. We wanted to connect to audiences like Shakespeare did, and we felt inspired by video games as a form of modern entertainment. Gamer and role playing game today... audience and play in Shakespeare's England... one does not exist without the other and we hope to capture this interactive quality in our production.

This Study Guide was prepared by members of the UMass Amherst Department of Theater.

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For more information about the department and this production, visit www.umass.edu/theater