

# Skenè Studies I • 3

Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 1

*Romeo and Juliet*

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi and Emanuel Stelzer



## SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies

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## *Romeo and Juliet* as Mediterranean Political Tragedy, On Stage and Beyond

ERIC NICHOLSON

### Abstract

Most often given the label of ‘love tragedy’ and regarded as a theatrical epitome of the classic *Liebestod* (love-in-death) mythos, *Romeo and Juliet* also can be called a dramatic indictment of internecine fighting and futile civil war. While recognizing the play’s crucial articulation of the poetic words and passionate deeds of love, my essay focuses on its staging of destructive feuds and factional conflicts, especially as they relate to the Italian and Eastern Mediterranean worlds. In making and comparing connections between late medieval/early modern settings and twenty-first-century ones, I cite and briefly assess influential film versions of the play, and then concentrate on recent adaptations staged and/or set in Bosnia/Herzegovina (site of the real-life 1993 “Romeo and Juliet of Sarajevo” tragedy of the Christian Bosko and Muslim Admira), Kosovo, Serbia, Palestinian/Israeli/Arab Jerusalem, Jordanian refugee camps for Syrian refugees, and the multi-ethnic Asian/European districts of Palermo, Sicily. I pose several key questions, among them: how do such productions empower or at least help to sustain victims of ethno-religious discrimination, racialized violence, and civil warfare, by embodying and performing potential reconciliation? How might less evident factors of social pressures, economic competition and political control operate in *Romeo and Juliet*, entangling its tale of “star-crossed lovers” with early capitalist tensions in northern Italian city-states – and in the international trading networks of the Mediterranean, Black and Red Seas – in ways that still resonate through today’s Southern European and Middle Eastern relations? What might be gained, rather than ‘lost’, in translating the play-script into a different language than English, and by using two or more languages in performance, especially when they affirm the diverse cultures of the clashing socio-ethnic groups?

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; *Romeo and Juliet*; Mediterranean; adaptation

## 1. Background

As its relentless uses of antithesis and oxymoron suggest, *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* is a play of uncanny diversity, familiar and different at the same time.<sup>1</sup> Beyond its so-called *Liebestod* paradigm, the script dazzles and provokes audiences through its numerous contrasts, between light and dark imagery, fight scenes vs festive scenes, the verbs and actions of standing vs those of moving, between enactments of pathos vs bathos. Like the society it depicts, the play is itself multifarious, far more imbalanced and chaotic than its formal symmetries seem to suggest (and the notable divergences among its two Quarto texts, and First Folio version, fittingly register and transmit this instability). Its apparent attempts at holding violent opposites together through sonnet and sonnet-like structures also tend to clash with or even collapse on themselves, through the combined weight of ambiguity, hyperbole, and self-parody. As David Schalkwyk has shown (2002, 28-9; 65-6), the sonnet is itself a form of social action, already public before it is made at least doubly so by being deployed in the play's prologue, both a revealing table of contents and a plea for negotiation with its auditors, that foregrounds "Two households" (significantly, *not* yet named) who break to new mutiny in fair Verona "Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean" (Prologue, 4). The *intra moenia* street-scene strife, especially its self-perpetuating, impacted vendetta-for-vendetta,

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank and acknowledge my debt to Preti Taneja, whose talk at the Theater Without Borders conference in Paris, 2015, inspired me to consider recent non-traditional versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, produced and performed in response to actual civil wars. I also owe much to Jill L. Levenson's studies of the stage and film history of *Romeo and Juliet*, including her Oxford University Press edition (2000), and to Stanley Wells' 1996 *Shakespeare Survey* article on "The Challenges of *Romeo and Juliet*", which provides a critical lens for interpreting the political and experimental aspects of the play: as Wells concludes, "perhaps the play's greatest challenge is to our notions of genre. The script can be interpreted in all its richness and diversity only if we abandon the idea that because it is called a tragedy it must centre on the fate of individuals, and accept its emphasis on the multifarious society in which these individuals have their being" (1996, 14).

ancient/new cycle takes precedence over the plot of young death-marked love. Or to put it another way, from the outset the public is constantly conditioning, appropriating, and re-configuring the private in this play. As Robert Henke (2016), Shaul Bassi (2016), and others have explained, the cross-overs and ambiguities are too dense and intrinsic for maintaining a possibly stable binary, or for discerning merely occasional intersections between the interior world of the bedchamber and the exterior world of the piazza.

Still, despite the tenacious reputation of *Romeo and Juliet* as intimate true love story, I would not presume to claim that my reading of the play as a political tragedy is original or innovative. What I aim for here is a directing of attention towards the Mediterranean as well as trans-historical qualities of *Romeo and Juliet's* dramatization of civil conflict and factional violence. By yoking together geographically specific and chronologically wide-ranging aspects of the play's production, reception, and transformations, I seek to offer insights derived through consideration of oblique recycling, adaptations, grafting, abridgments, mash-ups, etc. – in short, 'rhizomatic' appropriations and permutations, to use the model of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) – that aptly express the perennially heterogeneous and protean qualities of the Mediterranean cultural zone. In this vein, I will also trace a pattern of creative parody, sometimes moving towards self-parody, as I appraise politically-oriented and/or popular cultural renditions of *Romeo and Juliet*, both mainstream and not-so-mainstream, produced since the early twentieth century. Thus my essay updates and modulates the 'confrontational model' applied by Barbara Hodgdon to the play's performance history (1989). As I aim to show, useful extension can be made of Hodgdon's 'confrontational' coinage, as a term for productions which reflect a Brechtian, deconstructive, and potentially radical approach to the play-text, and thus challenge audiences to recognize not only their own complicity in the political victimization of the two young lovers as shown in the play, but also their potential to re-write the script of ancient prejudicial grudges. In so doing, today's and tomorrow's public could support and even participate in peaceful, reconciling real-life interaction among violent, traditionally enemy social and ethnic factions.

Critical contrast, therefore, will help to bring out my own

emphasis on things changed to the contrary in both the play itself, and its cultural legacy. My survey starts by briefly looking at the phenomenon of identifying *Romeo and Juliet* as Romantic Tragedy par excellence, imprinted on the popular consciousness by Hollywood and other influencers. For all its coy, witty, and meta-textual irony, the Oscar-winning *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) – with screenplay co-written by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard – exploits the familiar premise of the isolated, listless male author needing a Romantic muse to inspire his writing. The feud in Verona is acknowledged and briefly performed, and matters of power, class, and financial ambition are highlighted in the film's main plot, but in the end, it is Love with a capital 'L' that makes all the difference. Thus the film affirms *Romeo and Juliet's* iconic status as “the preeminent document of love in the west” (Callaghan in Shakespeare 2003, 1), even as it comically critiques and exploits the Elizabethan prohibition against women performing on public stages: Gwyneth Paltrow plays the young stage-struck heiress Viola DeLesseps, who invents the persona of Thomas Kent, passes as male and gets cast as Romeo, but after a series of complications ends up playing Juliet in the imagined premiere of the play at London's Curtain Theatre in 1593. The screenplay thus accomplishes an ingenious demonstration of Marjorie Garber's apt reminder that “modern culture's paradigmatic heterosexual love story, *Romeo and Juliet*, is a play written for an all-male cast” (2004, 208). Like several Royal Shakespeare Company stage productions of the preceding fifty years – such as Peter Hall's of 1961, Trevor Nunn's of 1976, and Ron Daniels's of 1980 – the audience of *Shakespeare in Love* is invited to feel some measure of sentimental reassurance, focusing their attention on the two star-crossed lovers and their tale of woe more than on their disturbingly dysfunctional social setting.

Reviewing major releases from the 1950's and early 1960's, one finds that even adaptations of the politicized, confrontational kind have undergone marketing efforts to sentimentalize them. Leonard Bernstein's, Stephen Sondheim's, and Arthur Laurents's *West Side Story*, first produced on Broadway in 1957, updates and transposes the play to contemporary New York, accentuating economic hardship, ethnic tensions, and youth gang violence in the modern American city. The script ends with the Juliet equivalent Maria's



indictment, “We all killed him” (‘him’ being Tony, the Romeo equivalent) and a stage direction for the “*Adults*” to remain “*bowed, alone, useless*” (Laurents 1965, 224). Yet publicity posters for the film version of 1961 proclaim how it won ten Oscars, and highlight the two lovers in isolation. The recent remake (2021), directed by Steven Spielberg and featuring the Colombian-American actress Rachel Zegler as Maria, and exclusively Puerto Rican and Latinx actors and dancers as The Sharks, makes several revisions that strengthen the screenplay’s critique of discrimination and injustice against immigrant minorities. Nonetheless, its main publicity and promotion images focus primarily on the lovers. In the more parodic as well as satirical vein, and exactly contemporary with the late 1950s-early 1960s stage and film versions of the musical, amidst the increasingly tense Cold War, Peter Ustinov’s *Romanoff and Juliet* raised the political stakes of adaptation to the global level. Ustinov also opted for the play’s inherent potential to resolve itself into a romantic comedy, by changing his own Friar Lawrence character into the prime minister of Concordia, the smallest country in Europe, yet the one with the deciding vote in a key United Nations decision. The British-raised Ustinov ridicules ideological excesses and belligerent posturing on both the U.S. and Soviet sides, subordinating the romance between the American Juliet and Russian Romeo figures to an astutely satirical agenda. Once more, however, a major poster shows how the film was released with an appeal to filmgoers’ romantic sensibilities. With or without recourse to a Sputnik or Apollo rocket-ship, how then to escape the gravitational pull of *Romeo and Juliet* as the supreme Tragedy of Doomed Lovers?

Ustinov’s topical, serio-comic critique of Cold War escalation stirring and heating blood towards an actual nuclear war – his film was released only a year before the Cuban missile crisis – was by no means the first pastiche of *Romeo and Juliet* to move along these lines. Almost three centuries earlier, in 1679, Thomas Otway adapted the play as *The History and Fall of Caius Marius, a Tragedy*, with the leading actors of the era Elizabeth Barry and Thomas Betterton in the main roles. Written amidst the Exclusion Crisis that sought to prevent the Catholic James II from succeeding his brother Charles II as king, *Caius Marius* spoke to its contemporary audience’s fear of a

return to civil war, and it did so through appropriation and re-usage of a third of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* text, with occasionally conspicuous modifications. For example, Lavinia (the equivalent character to Juliet) opines to her secret lover, Marius junior, "O Marius, Marius, wherefore art thou Marius?" (Otway 1680, sig. D1v). As Ian Munro observes, the play is not a narrow, Tory-favouring diatribe against Whig party exclusionists; instead, "it uses the idea that 'civil blood makes civil hands unclean' to anatomize a corrupt and chaotic society and counsel reformation and reconciliation" (2016, 58). The case of *Caius Marius* shows that even if at one historical moment the civic dimension is foregrounded and the two lovers are shown to lack any true privacy and freedom, subsequent changes of taste are liable to insist on performances that privilege the emotional over the political. Thus the more politically-minded late seventeenth-early eighteenth-century 'Augustan' period gave way to an era of sentiment, and by the 1730s Otway's play ceded the palm back to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, re-interpreted. For this ever popular tragedy is both a product and producer of the mass media marketplace, where there would be added pressure to maintain the play's crowd-pleasing status, already recognized by William Hazlitt: "Of all Shakspeare's plays, this is perhaps the one that is acted, if not the oftenest, with most pleasure to the spectator" (qtd by Levenson 2008, 70). David Garrick's revised and streamlined text (of 1748), which idealizes the title characters while becoming a vehicle for two stars of the stage, prevailed for more than a century, and its premium on the title characters' romance for even longer: as Jill L. Levenson notes, "productions of *Romeo and Juliet* continued to centre on the lovers and the performers who played them" (2008, 79). This approach dominated prominent versions through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which even after the superseding of pictorial and melodramatic styles by neo-Elizabethan bare stage and original text revivalism tended to elevate the star-crossed lovers to even higher mythic status: according to John Gielgud, director of the long-running 1935 London production starring Laurence Olivier and Peggy Ashcroft, the play's protagonists are "symbolic, immortal types of lovers of all time" (qtd by Levenson 2008, 85).

The hegemony of such sentimentalizing mystification, however, was not absolute. The rise of popular and mass media forms of

mechanical reproduction also encouraged irreverent ‘lowbrow’ send-ups of ‘highbrow’ Shakespearean tropes and credos. In the process, some recovery was occasionally made of the original script’s parodic, anti-authoritarian, and indeed quasi-absurdist energies (as seen in the brilliantly bathetic, gratuitous scene – 4.4.122-66 – with Peter and the unpaid musicians Simon Catling, Hugh Rebec, and James Soundpost, usually cut in modern productions). This effect appears in *Bromo and Juliet*, the 1926 silent feature produced by Hal Roach and directed by Leo McCarey, with a farcical spoof of the balcony scene, and its satire on clichéd romantic pretensions as well as hypocritical Prohibition era repressions. The play’s performance history, then, has witnessed a recurrent divergence between the worlds of idealistic intimate romance, often presented in illusionistic terms, and unstable civil conflict, often rendered with ironic and de-mystifying tones.

There has existed another option, namely to try and have it both ways. As Franco Zeffirelli’s version moved from its 1960 Old Vic venue with Judi Dench and John Stride as the lovers to its commercially and critically successful 1967/68 film release starring the teen-aged Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting in the same roles, it gave prominence to the theme of youthful rebellion against the oppressive older generation, while prompting associations with anti-Vietnam war protests as well as liberated sexual exploration. The publicity poster for this production is also revealing: no prim and proper image this (the Hays Act had been recently repealed). Instead, viewers of a cinematic *Romeo and Juliet* are now promised a bed scene with nudity, juxtaposed to a small (black-and-white) ‘freeze frame’ with swordplay. Times change, as do visual technologies and aesthetic sensibilities, but Baz Luhrmann’s similarly successful adaptation, released almost thirty years after Zeffirelli’s, likewise trades on the clash and even the identification between sex and violence, though in a more deliberately parodic, postmodern way (Holmer 1996; Anderegg 2003). In this regard, both of these well-known films, familiar to secondary school and university students all over the world, are true to the Shakespearean script. So too do their internal contradictions and even confusions – some of them, especially Luhrmann’s, deliberately Launcelot Gobbo-esque – convey a faithfulness to the contrariness, to the tragic/comic

contiguities of the Romeo and Juliet tale, that could readily flip towards happy endings. This is also an all-too-familiar stereotype of traditional Mediterranean or ‘Latino’ life and identity: the extremely thin line between love and hate, between peace and war, comedy and tragedy. Luhrmann’s allusions to 1980s-90s collusion between U.S.-backed Latin American regimes and international drug cartels can also be seen as a way to politicize the play, even as he pushes the pedal on religious and particularly Catholic iconography, which might also gesture towards ‘heavenly world’ transcendence.

To what extent, however, do such ambiguously ‘confrontational’ productions foster complicity with their spectators, especially when these audiences live many thousands of kilometres away from the violence and disruption of actual civil wars? Or is it possible to think and speak of a truly ‘Global Mediterranean’, and if so, what might this ‘Global Mediterranean’ involve? Is it, and will it be, traversed by the same kind of “appropriations, misperceptions, and stereotypes” that marked Elizabethan representations of both the Catholic and Ottoman-dominated Mediterranean world? In the contemporary world, how can acts of trans-Mediterranean/trans-Balkan Shakespearean appropriation pursue an ethics of citation, as Alexa Alice Joubin and Elizabeth Rivlin put it, that promotes “one’s willingness to listen to and be subjected to the demands of others”, and through seeing “the others within [one’s familiar self]” take “the first step toward seeing oneself in others’ eyes”? (Joubin 2019, 27).

By definition, such questions are not essentialist or transversal, but are conditioned by local, topical, economic, and other material circumstances. They apply, for example, to ‘radical’ or ‘confrontational’ Royal Shakespeare Company versions such as the one directed by Michael Bogdanov in 1986, which ended with Romeo and Juliet transformed into their own statues as their families made cynical capitalist profit from their children’s personal desolation and suicide. This was the same production that earned the nickname of ‘Alfa’, through its spectacular use of an actual bright red convertible Alfa Romeo sports car, an overtly cliché signifier of ‘Italian-ness’ for English, Canadian, and American audiences. What is the difference, however, between the mainly symbolic cultural and “performance work”, as Hodgdon puts it (1989, 359), of these

high-budget, English-speaking productions, and the *actual* political work attempted by non-Anglophone, sometimes propagandistic or even self-contradictory, and/or relatively low- or almost no budget ones, in formerly Ottoman Empire possessions like the ex-Yugoslavia, present-day Iraq, Palestine, Syria and Jordan, or in that most centrally and crucially positioned of great Mediterranean port cities/contact zones, the traditionally multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Palermo?

Before addressing and illustrating these questions more directly, it is worth interrogating the ‘Mediterranean qualities’ of *Romeo and Juliet*, that help to specify the play’s status as a political and societal tragedy. Above all, what exactly do we mean by ‘Shakespeare and the Mediterranean’? Fernand Braudel’s Mediterranean gains identity through the region’s shared climate and ecological conditions, but politically it has rarely been unified, governed by one regime. The ancient Roman imperial “Mare Nostrum” was revived as a propaganda vehicle/naval project by Mussolini, but the Fascist dictator was spouting off ineffectual bluster, and chasing a megalomaniac goal destined to inevitable failure. Braudel himself recognized that “the Mediterranean speaks with many voices”, its inter-connected cultures still marked by their almost infinite variety (qtd by Chambers 2008, 1). In consequence, this polyvocal, thoroughly navigated and meticulously charted sea-and-land space remains uncannily elusive, resistant to hegemonic control or stable definition. Its currently twenty sovereign countries and hundreds of ethnicities, cultures, languages, belief systems, cuisines, legal and political systems continue to communicate and compete/interact with each other, in heterogeneous modes whose pedigrees range from Bronze Age/protohistoric to 21<sup>st</sup> century digital. To cite Iain Chambers’ philosophical as well as historical study *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*, “The Mediterranean, as both a concept and a historical and cultural formation, is a ‘reality’ that is imaginatively constructed: the political and poetical articulation of a shifting, desired object and a perpetually repressed realization. Here the dominant language of mimesis gives way to a more ragged narrative that arrives through a rent in Occidental sense to insist on another way of telling, another way of being” (2008, 10). This insistent otherness,

I would add, makes it possible to perceive the Mediterranean as a volatile, perpetually fluctuating Theatre of migration, contention, and subaltern expression.

If the Middle Ages often saw the Mediterranean as a corrupting entity (Horden and Purcell 2000), the early modern period witnessed the Great Sea's frequent mutability. This was an era when identities in the region were in nearly constant flux, as northern Europeans from Bavaria and the Holy Roman Empire up to Holland and the British Isles became interlopers, as David Abulafia puts it, confronting and sometimes clashing not only with the Ottoman Empire but also with groups like the Portuguese Jewish Marranos, who moved with surprising speed to become influential players, and not just refugees in yet another diaspora. The late 16<sup>th</sup> century Mediterranean, as perceived by many in Shakespeare's audience, was a place for friends/enemies to operate, with dynamic uncertainties occurring frequently in scenarios of deception, masking, re-naming or heterotopic layering. The scene of *Romeo and Juliet* is laid in Verona, but in Southwark too, as an English language representation of the Italian/Adriatic world, with violent young hordes who could be operating at once in these and other real-imaginary places, as one's allies or one's foes, subject to the kind of disruptive brawling and ambiguous legality/criminality associated with the lands of the Venetian empire. In her monograph *Illyria in Shakespeare's England*, Lea Jurić explains how late 16<sup>th</sup>-century English and other northern Europeans "inherited the notion of Illyrian criminality centered on the Illyrians' piratical ventures. Illyria's turbulent history, marked among other things by 'barbarian' valor, war-oriented culture, and excessive bodily consumption, and its general lack of civility according to ancient standards, was partially superseded by its heroic contemporary battles and coexistence with the Turks" (2019, 11). Also notorious during Shakespeare's time, and representative of the fascinating as well as volatile Mediterranean world, were the Uskoks, a group who, as Abulafia recounts,

presented themselves as standard-bearers of the Christian crusade against the Turks, working for the good of Christendom and Habsburg Austria. The Uskoks became the Robin Hood figures of Croatian folk epics and, though few in number and reliant on small

ships, they succeeded in boxing Venice into a corner of the Adriatic. (2011, 455-6).

As refugees, or at least former refugees, and migrants from diverse backgrounds, the Uskoks resisted social and political classification. Although they presented themselves as loyal allies in the Venetian Christian campaign against the Turks, they could play a double game between the two principal Mediterranean powerhouses, working the large-scale trans-regional feud to their own advantage. With their threat to Ragusa, or Dubrovnik, the Uskoks' activity recalls the decapitated pirate Ragozine in *Measure for Measure*, in some respects also a Mediterranean play – for 'Mediterranean' can mean Protean, and Tragicomic – since its setting of Vienna also resembles London and perhaps also an Italian city-state – Urbino? Mantua? – with its curiously Italianate characters and masks, substitutions, sudden flips and reversals of scenario, leading towards a closure/happy ending that doesn't fully provide closure or happiness. While the practices of erasure, marginalization, and negative distortion that Jurić identifies in Northern European representations of Illyria (and later 'the Balkans') do pertain here, so too does a positive attraction towards and at least partial identification with the cultural Other.

Thus, rather than being simply cast as an ambivalent, binary-defined site of aesthetic splendour/moral corruption, of cultural attraction/political-religious repulsion – as critical literature on the subject has tended to emphasize – the Italianate Mediterranean world of Elizabethan-Jacobean drama appears in both more precise and complex terms as an often liminal zone of hybrid, multiple, and transformational identities and interactions, where shifting loyalties and violent passions can signify more than mere treachery or a hot dry southern European humoral disposition. They just as importantly reflect a theatricalized sense of transcultural exchange and fluidity. The Anglo-Germanic ethnic stereotyping and even racialization of Italy and Italians as duplicitous hot-bloods is more of a post-seventeenth-century development, that has edited out specific nuances and situational intricacies operative in Shakespeare's lifetime. As Shaul Bassi has elucidated,

the dangerous contiguity between feast and riot, order and chaos,

also points to the political overtones of *Romeo and Juliet*, where the relationship between the private and the public sphere, whose distinction was not fully articulated in the early modern era, is another prominent theme. The civic issues that underlie the society of Capulets and Montagues correspond to larger political questions fiercely debated in Shakespeare's time and place. (2016, 185).

In short, these insights helpfully contextualize the thorough imbrication of love and politics in *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Theatrical Efforts Towards Truth and Reconciliation

I now turn to productions of the confrontational, or to use Christie Carson's term, the 'insurgency' kind which can "democratize audiences" (2008). This approach insists that spectators take on some kind and degree of civic responsibility, moving them towards active intervention in the political feuding – as well as towards the agenda of stopping it, of converting enmity to love – staged in the

<sup>2</sup> Bassi goes on to observe: "the role of civil unrest, the relationship between the spiritual and the secular power, the Catholic doctrine and its opponents, the obedience of children toward parental authority, the different, overlapping jurisdictions (secular law, canon law, individual deliberation) that could enter in some sort of friction regarding marriage: in all of these areas, Italy was a mirror and a political laboratory, one where Niccolò Machiavelli was teaching Europe to consider the state not as an idealized realm of benevolent rule, but as a practical battleground where facing the naked truth was a prerequisite for any efficacious action". Bassi also pertinently identifies Friar Lawrence as a good reader of Machiavelli, who nevertheless embodies, through his overwrought and mistimed actions, the kind of contradictory, politically crippling mix of power and weakness in the early modern Italian church diagnosed by Machiavelli himself. In this same context, it is worth noting how Friar Francis, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, manages to correct Friar Lawrence's reckless mistake-making by prudently conspiring with a civil authority – Leonato, the Governor of Messina – to apply the deception trick of a feigned death towards a public wedding and a comedic happy ending. In this case, Machiavellian *virtù* is efficaciously coordinated with Christian virtue, enabling the triumph of love over misfortune and death through the calculated manipulation of appearances, and the unveiling of "another Hero" who is still her original chaste and virginal self, Diana's knight.



play, rather than passively standing by and watching the repetition of factional violence. This interventionist mode could be seen as taking a prompt from the play-script itself, which so easily can be flipped towards comedy (as in Flaminio Scala's ironically named *Li tragici successi*, "The Tragic Events"),<sup>3</sup> and still bears the traces of its multiple intertexts, including Bandello's version of the tale, wherein, as Robert Henke observes, characters are urged to live like citizens, and Juliet herself is represented as a citizen, aware of marriage's potential to resolve potential conflicts (2016). A purpose here might be to succeed where Lawrence the would-be Machiavellian *mezzano* or love and peace-broker fails, in making the personal political, and the political personal, as revealed in the Friar's well-known couplet: "But this alliance may so happy prove / To turn your households' rancor to pure love" (2.2.91-2). Such active goading of audiences' political consciousness, and sense of civic responsibility, even and indeed especially in the context of personal love affairs and marital unions, has given special urgency and challenge to adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* staged since the 1990s in multi-ethnic and multi-religious contact and conflict zones of the Mediterranean world.

First, however, recognition of the difficulty of this approach needs to be made. In 1994, in response to the real-life story of the "Sarajevo Romeo and Juliet", the Romany Company in exile produced a version, as Anthony Dawson explains, "set in Bosnia, Juliet a Muslim and Romeo a Christian; the bombed out ancient bridge at Mostar was used as a twisted balcony for Juliet, who spoke to Romeo over the gorge. There was no reconciliation at the end, no peace, but only bursts of machine gun fire".<sup>4</sup> This directorial choice emulated a well-documented tragedy. In May, 1993, the young lovers Admir Ismić and Boško Brkić, known as the 'Romeo and Juliet of Sarajevo', were shot dead as they tried to flee the city. Their bodies lay on a bridge for four days. They also became the

3 For an excellent English translation and analysis (by Richard Andrews) of this "commedia dell'arte scenario", published in 1611 but almost certainly performed many years before, see Scala 2008, 106-13.

4 Quoted in the CBC documentary film, directed by John Zaritsky (cited below).

subject of a CBC/PBS documentary film, released in 1994 (directed by John Zaritsky). To mark the twentieth anniversary of the tragic episode, a protest song and video by the rock band Zabranjeno Pusenje was released, and various commemorative events were held, though Admir's parents limited themselves to visiting the lovers' graves and leaving flowers. As reported by RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty, "Zijo Ismic still wrestles with the forces that swept over his daughter, his city, his country. 'War intervened in love – that's the problem', Ismic says. 'In such situations, the laws of love do not exist. Only the laws of war'" (Sandic-Hadzihasonovic 2013, 1).

Not long after the Sarajevo commemorations, the National Theatres of Belgrade, Serbia, and Pristina, Kosovo, collaborated on a bilingual, multi-ethnic *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by the Serbian Miki Manojlović, and the Kosovar playwright Jeton Neziraj, and co-produced by Radionica Integracije of Belgrade and Qendra Multimedia of Pristina, and performed at the National Theatres of both countries, in spring 2015. The Montagues were played by Kosovan Albanians, and the Capulets by Serbs, with the actors speaking their lines in their respective languages, without translated super-titles. There was one significant exception: when talking to Juliet, Albanian-speaking Romeo spoke Serbian, and when talking to Romeo, Serbian-speaking Juliet spoke Albanian. More than my own descriptions and comments, excerpts from interviews with the theatre artists themselves communicate crucial aspects of the production and its repercussions. As Manojlović stated, "there are people in Belgrade who don't speak Albanian but they will understand. It is easy to understand why somebody loves somebody, or someone hates someone". He also affirmed that "we are doing a play and this process together, that is our statement. It is much more profound than saying: 'I think this'. Do something together. If we merely talk about reconciliation it is just words" (Gillet 2015, 2). This declaration of commitment can be understood as a response to the closing speeches of the play itself, when Montague and Capulet shake hands and promise a mutual reconciliation, but through the static mode of gilded commemorative statues, rather than through lively collective action. Clearly the production aimed to privilege meaningful movements, gestures, and non-verbal expression of

feelings, over the play's often rhetorically stylized language. This sense of physical realization, as a key part of an ensemble process that in itself was an act of bridge-building, was acknowledged by the Kosovan Albanian actor Alban Ukaj (Romeo), who was a student in Pristina during the war and experienced the bombings first-hand: the "gap between the two nations is deep", he admitted, adding that "I started to lose faith that this story was ever going to end, so it was important for me that we start something" (Gillet 2015, 1). Sounding a confident note, Neziraj went so far as to predict that "this is going to mark the end of the Serbia-Kosovo conflict, symbolically" (*ibid.*).

As if to mark the spot, yet also to cross out the lingering hostilities from the years of war, and at the same time to foster equations and formulas for peaceful co-existence, Manojlović created a raised mini-stage within the space of the main stage, in the form of a giant letter 'X', which also was designed "to symbolize two streets that are crossed into one space" (Halili 2015, 2). Moreover, when not performing on the giant 'X' during their scripted scenes, the actors would remain visible to the audience, in what Manojlović designated as 'position O', a zone that also sought to encourage and strengthen relationships among the attentive characters themselves, while enhancing audience engagement as well. The breaking of illusionistic conventions carried through the entire performance, as a final bow was avoided, and instead the actors shook hands with audience members and introduced themselves. As Manojlović stated, "it's more important that there is an emotional and rational understanding of what is happening on the stage. I don't want the performance to have any 'gift' [from the audience, in their ritual of applause], because that handshaking is the gift and that is the end for me" (Halili 2015, 4). The production "was allowed to develop and reach fruition at a time when the governments and high-level institutions of Kosovo and Serbia started to encourage inter-ethnic cultural cooperation, and after the show's premieres in the two nations' respective capitals, the local and national media coverage interpreted it as an attempt at reconciliation between the two countries. The director himself, however, more cautiously averred that the "idea of reconciliation is very nice, but I am not able to reconcile politics and interests that are so different. What I can do,

is demonstrate that together, anything is possible” (Halili 2015, 4). In the same interview Manojlović used the metaphor of bridge-building between two feuding families, while another member of the production, Uliks Fehmiu (Friar Lawrence) expressed the will to overcome the stigma of victimization, and to promote healthy organic growth towards understanding and acceptance: “My father [also an actor, who killed himself in 2010 after years of repression] by Slobodan Milošević suffered through this period terribly. Hatred is something that is so dangerous and so contagious. I went through a period of looking at myself and my generation as victims. This seeing yourself as a victim doesn’t move you forward”, adding that “What is happening here shouldn’t be an exception, it should be a normal mainstream thing. This makes sense. You have to believe, at least a bit, that this seed we are planting will continue to grow” (Gillet 2015, 3). Aptly enough, Fehmiu’s metaphor resonates with his character’s homiletic couplets, as Friar Lawrence makes his entrance into the play gathering plants, herbs and flowers: “For naught so vile that on the earth doth live, / But to the earth some special good doth give” (2.2.17-18). If the play ends with an image of an eclipse – “the sun for sorrow will not show his head”, observes the Prince, in a significantly fragmentary sonnet – the 2015 production by the National Theatres of Serbia and Kosovo strove to restore nurturing sunlight to their real-life contexts of conflict and desolation.

My own “sunlight” metaphor, I concede, itself risks being “too sentimental, too twee”, to use Preti Taneja’s description of Neziraj’s own initial doubts about the project, before he eventually agreed to participate, conceding that there “was a temptation to do something big” (Taneja 2016, 44). In fact, for all its high quality acting and production values, and for all its constructively spirited intentions, the Radionica Integracije and Qendra Multimedia *Romeo and Juliet* turned out to be fraught with dissonances and contradictions. For example, even though the production was well-financed, tickets were not made available to the public for performances at the National Theatre of Tirana, and the official publicity for the show started to dodge difficult and painful political questions, falling back on universalist rhetoric about Shakespeare’s play. Alban Ukaj, in particular, felt strong misgivings and eventually withdrew from

the project, disenchanted with its propagandistic advertising, and protesting its “camouflaging things to the extent that the whole problem is relativized for the sake of getting money” (Halili 2018). I refer the reader to Petra Bjelica’s essay in this same volume for an extended and illuminating critique of the production, its apparently disingenuous expression of a redundant kind of self-abjecting, Western-privileging Balkanisation, and its potential misuse of the cultural capital of Shakespeare as a tool of politically duplicitous propaganda. This being noted, in fairness it is worth citing Taneja’s eyewitness report: “At the end, I saw audiences in Pristina and Belgrade stand to cheer; the actors stepped off the stage to shake hands with them. Nothing could mar the moment, not even the message, chalked at the foot of those concrete steps outside the theatre: ‘No Serbian Hoofs on the Kosovan Stage’”, to which she adds, “the play might offer a space for audiences to reflect not only on the ‘ancient grudge’ that continues to grieve communities and keep them divided, but also on the potential for reconciliation that collaboration through culture – in this case, through Shakespeare – can offer” (Taneja 2016, 26).

During the same season (spring 2015), across the eastern part of the Mediterranean, the Syrian theatre artist Nawar Bulbul was directing an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, performed by young Syrian refugees of The Souriyat Without Borders hospice near Amman, Jordan. As reported by Taneja, again a first-hand observer of the event:

Under the eaves of a hospice for Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan, a wounded young Romeo reaches out to the blurred image of a girl on a screen. From the besieged and bombed-out city of Homs, Syria, Juliet gazes back. Her head is covered because of her religion; her face is masked to protect her identity from the watchful regime of Bashar al-Assad. This is Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, performed by young people separated by war and reunited, in real time, via Skype. In Amman, the attic of the hospice has been transformed into Verona with painted cardboard pergolas, pieces of scrap from the streets and a children’s globe to light the stage. The audience includes young men who have lost limbs in the conflict and have been carried up by their carers to see the play (Taneja 2015, 1).

In this case, spectators' sympathy for and identification with a character was not merely imaginary but physical, felt through the blood, nerves, and bones. Ibrahim, the 12-year old refugee actor who played Romeo, was himself a wounded orphan survivor. As Taneja recounts,

Before he arrived in Jordan, his home had been destroyed by Assad's bombs. His mother and sisters were killed; his leg was crushed. When I met him in early February, he could barely stand without crutches. Now, following weeks of intense rehearsals, he uses them in a sword fight, then casts them aside to perform a forward roll that leaves the audience on both sides of the screen cheering. (Ibid.)

Bulbul, who in 2014 had adapted *King Lear* with a cast of over 100 children at the Za'atari refugee camp near in northern Jordan, worked for three months in person with the young victims of the civil war. Combined with this traditional mode of preparing an ensemble of non-professional actors in a specific shared space, he also worked each day

via Skype, with the group in Homs and their drama teacher, who carried on rehearsals when the connection could not be made. The two groups "met" just two weeks before the performance, going "palm to palm" as Juliet's line has it, via the screen and getting to know each other as if the technology was not there (2015, 2).

Beset not only by the brutal displacements and deprivations caused by the war, but also by the vagaries of limited and irregular technological access, the politically imposed physical divide between the young lovers was forced to endure recurrent interruptions of their Skype connection. At one performance, the spectators waited an hour before the video feed of Juliet's balcony returned, and Romeo at last declared his love. In Shakespeare's play, Romeo climbs the high orchard walls of the Capulet estate and eventually gains access to Juliet's chamber, but in this production the circumstances more closely resembled those of the original source-text 'Pyramus and Thisbe', with a virtual live stream video feed updating the crack in the wall that simultaneously enables and disables contact between the lovers.

In this case, the representation of such a cruel, arbitrary, so-near-

and-yet-so-far condition became integral to the presentation, with tragicomic effects: a young narrator in Homs, evidently equivalent to the play's Chorus, earned applause as well as laughter when he reappeared after a long interruption, promising "I swear, if we are not caught by bombs or explosives, and if Juliet is not fired at by a sniper, we will still be here in the next scene" (Taneja 2015, 1). Instead of the performance of an on-stage ceremony, the Romeo and Juliet actors poignantly played a virtual version of the secret wedding, as the groom in Amman put a ring on his own finger, while in Homs the bride kneeled in front of the young Muslim actor playing Friar Lawrence. The latter character wore a large cardboard crucifix, and thus gave homage and virtual revival to the Jesuit priest Father Frans van de Lugt, who had been murdered in Homs the year before (in 2014) by the Assad regime, after almost twenty years of assisting disadvantaged Christians and Muslims. As if in defiance of both the inhumane real-life carnage and the *Liebested* paradigm of doomed lovers, Bulbul's hospice-staged version rejected the familiar tragic conclusion,

to reflect Father Frans's message and the desire of all present for the conflict to end. Juliet, then Romeo, dash their poison to the ground. Roxanne, playing Juliet's companion, cries: "Enough killing! Enough blood! Why are you killing us? We want to live like the rest of the world!" Many of the audience are in tears. When the play was over, the two groups of actors took their bows turning first to the audience in Syria and then to the audience in Jordan (Taneja 2015, 2).

As reported by the *Hindustan Times*, in an article published on 6 April, 2015, Ibrahim felt a closeness with the actors on the other side of the camera, and hoped to see them face-to-face, if and when the civil war ends. Uncannily, many hundreds of years after the impacted civil mutiny and civil bloodshed portrayed in the play, a syndrome shown by Glenn Clark (2011) to be endemic to the self-contradictory as well as self-mutilating clash of Verona's uncivil internal civilizations, the feud perpetuates itself by destroying the younger generation, denying them the kind of transcendent, liberating love shared by Juliet and Romeo, or even more ordinary but no less meaningful love. As Mohammad Halima, a 24-year-old

wheelchair-bound refugee put it, “We young men are the biggest victims of this insane war, and everyone had a love story with someone. But now we don’t know where they are or if they are still alive” (*Hindustan Times* 2015, 2). Staging the play in this context, and changing its dénouement so that the lovers refuse to poison and stab themselves, is not a gesture towards a utopian happy ending alternative, but rather a protest against a regime of institutionalized violence and repression.

This kind of resolution is also a prompt to re-evaluate the traditional western sense of tragic theatrical experience of purging pity and fear, for when the tragedy of real-life civil war intervenes in the Shakespearean representation of deadly internecine conflict, what kind of catharsis can be accomplished? The mix of in-person performance and Skype transmission is not only a vehicle but an embodiment of resistance, a present-absent unreal bridge, a prosthesis seeking to repair broken actual bridges, like the historic one in Mostar, or the one where the Sarajevo *Romeo and Juliet* lost their lives. Emerging from and embedded within cycles of militarized political conflict, these productions from the war-torn late twentieth-early twenty-first-century Balkan and southeastern Mediterranean regions concur in rejecting the fetishization of *Romeo and Juliet* as an emblem of romantic love. As Sara Soncini notes, in her comparative study of stage and film productions (related to other Shakespeare plays) by Katie Mitchell, Sarah Kane, and Mario Martone in the wake of the 1990s Bosnian war, “the Shakespearean presence becomes progressively unstable and fragmented, directly mired in the violence of war or turned into a site of conflict in its own right” (2018, 28).

This ‘conflict turn’ has been richly documented and analyzed by Ian Munro, whose study of the play’s performance history includes an appraisal of the ground-breaking, controversial 1994 production by the Khan Theatre and El Qasaba Theatre in Jerusalem, an unprecedented collaboration between Israeli and Palestinian theatre companies. Anticipating the bilingual production of the National Theatres of Kosovo and Serbia, the actors spoke in both Arabic and Hebrew: for example, Romeo wooed Juliet in the former language, and she responded in the latter. Despite the fact that the Palestinian actors were sometimes prevented from attending rehearsal by Israeli



security forces, and amidst death threats from extremist Jewish organizations, the production went forward, eventually receiving both popular and critical acclaim. While criticized for expressing an Israeli bias, it also went on to have a planetary influence, inspiring an entire series of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations – from Ramallah to Budapest, Brooklyn to Winnipeg – that referenced the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, including the Palestinian-produced film *In Fair Palestine* (2008), and the American independent *West Bank Story* (2008), the second of which won the 2006 Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film (Munro 2016, 70-1). For all these efforts and achievements, however, Palestine remains a scene of ancient grudges and civilian bloodshed, where not even a “gloomy peace” has been achieved. In this context, an Abu Dis high school student reading and staging of the balcony scene communicates not so much exuberant romantic passion and “teenage hyperbole” (Sperlinger 2015, 142) as a sense of actual mortal danger, especially when Juliet reminds Romeo “If they do see thee, they will murder thee” (2.1.113). This type of situation not only gives urgency to politically inflected interpretations of the play in performance, but with its matter-of-life-death reality it overrides terms like ‘radical’, ‘confrontational’, and ‘insurgency’, showing them to be inadequate, generalizing labels.

Munro also devotes several pages to the daringly revisionist and deliberately provocative *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, an adaptation by the Iraqi-born actor, playwright, and director Monadhil Daood for the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival sponsored by the Royal Shakespeare Company during London’s Olympic Games year. Daood, himself a “legitimate son of tragedy” and exile since the 1980s from Saddam Hussein’s regime, and married to World Shakespeare Festival director Deborah Shaw, made several drastic changes to the original script. Not only was the play performed in Arabic with English surtitles, but a new character called ‘The Teacher’, a blend of The Prince and Friar Lawrence was introduced, who called on the audience to reject hatred-reinforcing traditions. Moreover, the confident attempt of the lovers to end the feud between a pair of Shiite and Sunni brothers did not culminate in their double suicide. Instead, their moment of joy and pleasure within a Christian church where they had taken sanctuary was interrupted by a suicide

bomber, none other than the Paris equivalent, a middle-aged foreign-born Al Qaeda operative, who explodes himself along with his victims. No spoken lines followed, only a silent tableau of the two families mourning (Munro 2016, 72-4).

What was for some audience members a clear and harrowing physical allusion to the then recent (October 2010) terrorist massacre of over fifty people during an evening Mass at Baghdad's Our Lady of Salvation, for others was an arbitrary and disturbing subversion of what they expected from the play's ending. As witnessed by theatre scholar Susan Bennett, the sudden simulated explosion and ensuing total blackout caused general bewilderment, with several front-row attendees breaking out into hysterical laughter, and, after subdued applause, most spectators looking anxious to leave the theatre as soon as possible. Bennett acknowledges that on the day after their co-attendance of the performance at Stratford-upon-Avon's Swan Theatre, she and Christie Carson wrote an online review stating "the real tragedy, this adaptation suggests, is the West's passive spectatorship of a story familiar to us from the nightly news", but that later, "with more critical distance from the immediate aspects of the production, I think of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* as a play that literally tore out the possibility of love from the bodies on stage and replaced it with a relentlessly masculinist battle for power" (2016, 704). This interpretation thus coheres with critiques of machismo, masculinist ideology and fratricidal violence, as practiced for millennia from the Tigris to the Adige, that have distinguished recent politically engaged stagings of Shakespeare's play.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the story of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* has one more revealing twist, recorded and assessed by both Bennett and Munro. Two months after its run at the Swan Theatre, the production was revived at the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith, London, where just before the June 28 performance a member of the Reclaim Shakespeare Company (RSC) appeared on the stage, and delivered

5 As Bennet also recognizes, feminist criticism has for several decades accentuated the play's own interrogation of masculinities: she cites Robert Applebaum's essay (1997), and its reading of Verona's society as one of "imperfect masculinities" (268), and masculinity itself as a "structure, a regime, a dominant system" (256).

a two-minute monologue, starting with

Two households, BP and the World Shakespeare Festival, both lacking  
in dignity,  
In befouled Iraq where we lay our scene,  
For oil feud breaks to new hypocrisy,  
Where civil blood makes their money unclean.  
BP, O most wicked fiend, you did conspire to bring Iraq to her knees.  
(Bennett 2016, 705)

Identifying himself as Pete the Temp, the performer went on to denounce the lobbying by British Petroleum (BP) of the British and U.S. governments (then led by Tony Blair and George Bush) to protect and promote its interests before and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He ended his ‘guerrilla soliloquy’ with another satirically creative parody/mash-up of famous lines from *Romeo and Juliet* – “I ne’er saw true hypocrisy till this night. / O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo? / Deny thy sponsor and refuse thy logo / Never was a story of more woe / Than the sponsorship of our Juliet and her Romeo” – and implored the audience, “If you share our concern about BP’s sponsorship of the World Shakespeare Festival we invite you to rip BP’s logo from your programme. Thank you, and enjoy tonight’s show” (Bennett 2016, 706). As Bennett observes, the Reclaim Shakespeare Company flash protests – they staged four others during the Globe to Globe Shakespeare Festival – reminded audiences that contemporary wars in “remote” places are fought for the sake of globally-linked economies, altering her own understanding of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* and its challenge to the original Shakespeare play’s “routine labour, to embody an idealized romantic love”, and its recasting of it “as an exemplary tragedy of and for our neoliberal capitalist times” (2016, 707).

Similarly, Munro sees the Reclaim Shakespeare Company’s intervention as an extension of Daood’s revisionist production, reflecting a desire to fuse the worlds of play and reality, and prodding London audiences to reflect on their potentially compromised participation in the World Shakespeare Festival (2016, 75-7). Connecting the altered 2012 version back to Otway’s 1679 re-scripting and re-directing of Shakespeare’s tragedy as *Caius Marius*, Munro also argues that as

with *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, this repositioning involves imagining theatre as a radically public and political space, where the boundaries between representation and performance are permeable. If the Prince and the other citizens are proxies for the theatre audience in Shakespeare's play, as I suggested at the start of this chapter, the violent entry of Caius Marius might be understood as the audience violating the space of the play, precipitating the conclusion, demanding attention. And while there is no record of any event comparable to the appropriations of the Reclaim Shakespeare Company, the play certainly acknowledges that the world outside may take notice and intervene. (2016, 77)

Thus there is a long and intricate historical dimension to the quest to transform *Romeo and Juliet* in performance, sometimes through specific parody and often through spatial and temporal re-location, and by doing so to suggest ways for audiences to change their own violently oppressive political realities that sacrifice love to the demands of power and greed. Again the goal could be to take up the challenge identified by Joubin, i.e. to listen to a diverse range of voices, including "foreign" and discordant ones, and to see oneself in others' eyes.

The struggle continues, as attested by a July 2021 production in the Mediterranean crossroads city of Palermo. Sounding hopeful notes of inter-cultural collaboration, in the key of celebrating diversity and inclusion, Daniela Morelli's play entitled *Bengala a Palermo* ("A Bengali Woman in Palermo") was produced by the city's Teatro Biondo Stabile, and directed by Marco Carniti. A dramatic love story of a young Bengali woman and a Palermitan "puparo" (puppeteer), *Bengala a Palermo* was, in the words of Carniti, "a slightly ramshackle *Romeo and Juliet* in the time of Covid" ["Un Romeo e Giulietta al tempo di Covid, un po' sgangherato"] (Brunetto 2021, 2). The title character, as Carniti explains, "è una donna di oggi, che decide autonomamente il proprio destino: è la libertà di scelta individuale che trionfa. E Palermo è la città che le permetterà di realizzare il suo sogno. Palermo città dell'accoglienza" ("is a woman of today, who autonomously decides her own destiny: it is the freedom of individual choice that triumphs. And Palermo is the city that allows her to realize her dream. Palermo, city of hospitality and acceptance"; *Bengala a Palermo* 2021,1; translation

mine). Expressing on stage the playwright's aim to avoid Sicilian stereotypes and instead recount the international dynamism of Palermo, Carniti exalted the festive and musical aspects of Shakespeare's play, with a *mélange* of Bengali and Palermitan instruments, chords, rhythms, and melodies, as part of a ritually suffused *mise-en-scène*, marked also by Christian iconography. As Carniti also affirms, this approach embodies how "Gli incontri e le convivenze tra culture differenti creano una società più inclusiva per un futuro migliore" ("encounters and partnerships among diverse cultures create a more inclusive society, for a better future"; Teatro Biondo 2021, 2; translation mine). Morelli's script focuses on the close, trusting, and supportive relationship between the expert embroiderer and caretaker Deeta, the twenty-year old daughter of immigrant parents, and the centenarian Bibi, a native Sicilian of aristocratic origin who long before had eloped with her true love, a humble fisherman, and has recently returned from South America to Palermo. In her dreams, Bibi connects with the world of the *Iascari*, the sailors and the multi-ethnic maritime groups of the Bay of Bengal, again accentuating the transcendent potential of the loving relationships in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the play's poetic expression of dream-world alternatives.

With its agenda of affirming and promoting diversity, transcultural creative collaboration, and the reconciliation of elderly and young generations, *Bengala a Palermo* emphatically rejects the model of cynical mistrust, closed-minded tribalism, and racially as well as economically divisive hostility, a model too often used for shorthand, prejudicial stereotyping of southern and eastern Mediterranean culture, and extending inland to countries like Syria, Kosovo, and Serbia. In this case, the Great Sea is neither morally corrupting nor dangerously unstable, but both a real and imaginative zone where boundaries can be crossed, and new, restorative options can be played out, literally and figuratively, in the innovative space-time continuum of theatrical performance. Tragic ends and self-repeating cycles of violence can be superseded, even in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, and precisely through the positive transformation of audience members into aware interventionists.

I conclude with a pertinent ethical citation of an epilogue by a theatrical visionary-practitioner, adapter of Shakespearean scripts

and prompter of audiences named Bertolt Brecht:

There's only one solution comes to mind:  
 That you yourselves should ponder till you find  
 The ways and means and measures tending  
 To help good people to a happy ending.  
     Ladies and gentlemen, in you we trust:  
     The ending must be happy, must, must, must! (1976, 104)

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