

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Julia & Romeo (Juliet & Romeo)*, a ballet presented by the Royal Swedish Opera,
Stockholm, 24 March and 9 April 2016**

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Choreography: Mats Ek. Music: Pyotr Tchaikovsky selected by Mats Ek, adapted by Anders Högstedt. Scenography and costume: Magdalena Åberg. Lighting: Linus Fellbom. Répétiteur: Eva Säfström, Rafael Sady. Choreologist: Eva Säfström. Mask: Carola Berglund. Royal Swedish Orchestra. Conductor: Eva Ollikainen. Leaders: Jannika Gustafsson, Alexander Kagan, Anders Nilsson. Piano soloist: Bengt-Åke Lundin. Stage manager: Eric Alm. Producer: Ann-Christin Danhammar.

With Mariko Kida (Juliet), Anthony Lomuljo (Romeo), Arsen Mehrabyan (Juliet's Father), Nadja Sellrup (Juliet's Mother), Pascal Jansson (The Prince), Ana Laguna (Juliet's Nurse), Oscar Salomonsson (Paris), Dawid Kupinski (Tybalt), Jérôme Marchand (Mercutio), Hokuto Kodama (Benvolio), Daria Ivanova (Rosaline), Jörgen Stövind (Peter). Second team: Ema Yuasa (Juliet), Anton Valdbauer (Romeo), Andrey Leonovitch (Juliet's Father), Daria Ivanova (Juliet's Mother), Marie Lindqvist (Juliet's Nurse), Dawid Kupinski (Paris), Clyde Emmanuel Archer (Mercutio), Jens Rosén (Benvolio), Jeanette Diaz-Barboza (Rosaline), Hampus Gauffin (Peter).

Mats Ek's full-length ballet *Juliet & Romeo*, especially created for the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm and first performed in 2013, can be placed in a tradition of productions that subtly manipulate Shakespeare's story of the star-crossed lovers, and it is a production that rehearses thematic interests in Ek's recent work. In 1679, Thomas Otway's adaptation of the play extended the death scene by having Juliet wake up before Romeo dies, thus allowing them to speak a last farewell; Theophilus Cibber kept Otway's scene in his 1744 version and David Garrick expanded on it in 1748. Beside giving more time and focus to the young lovers, the confusion and delusion expressed in the added Otway/Cibber scene underline the disastrous results of civil strife on innocent victims,

and Garrick's expansion heightened the emotional distress, in line with aesthetic ideals of the time. In Ek's ballet too, which recently reappeared for a short second season in Stockholm, the death scene provided one final opportunity for the audience to see the young lovers, and, through their dance, remember their previous breathtakingly beautiful duets. As Romeo (Anthony Lomuljo) leaned over the dead Juliet (Mariko Kida), he froze and she came to life in a brief solo before resuming her position and then sinking down through the trapdoor together with Romeo; perhaps we saw a memory of Romeo's, perhaps a dream, perhaps she did wake up for a brief moment? An earlier scene used a similar ploy, in which Paris (Oscar Salomonsson), in his first meeting with Juliet during the wooing scene, resumed a posture afloat over Juliet lying on her back (Paris was held in air by her parents and nurse), after having broken from the position for a pas de deux with Juliet that expressed the couple's mixed emotions about the match.

But before this ending, Ek introduced a more radical alteration: Juliet did not commit suicide, but was killed by her father (Arsen Mehrabyan). In the second scene with Paris, Juliet rejected his proposal, and her father's pent-up anger could no longer be controlled. The danger of this scene was swiftly built up through the father's threatening movements, which were completely focused on and around Kida's Juliet, who in turn spun faster and faster like a spinning top at the centre of the circles he danced around her; his hand suddenly extended to point straight at her and everything stopped as she dropped to the floor. The suggestion of an honour killing was in line with the production's representation of a politically hierarchical and patriarchal society: this Verona was a place of high black walls of corrugated metal that were moved swiftly back and forth across the stage by the dancers to form barriers, between which groupings of people moved and interacted, at times with deadly results. Darkness dominated the stage, smoke and light were used to indicate mist and shifting times of day. The only colour was provided by the costumes, and these too were of toned-down earthy colours, excepting the women's costumes for the ball. A Segway police or surveillance force operated the streets of this threatening place. Mercutio's death became yet another sacrifice to a society in which rebellion is quenched; his bare-chested appearance at the ball, sporting tattoos, leather pants and a tutu, posed a challenge to social and gender conventions that was really only marginally different from Juliet's. The Prince seemed to have lost control of his city, troubled at what went on in its streets. He made his entrance rolling onto the stage after the opening scene's fight had resulted in several dead, indicating weakness perhaps, or helplessness. Soon alone on stage, he took hold of one of the barriers for support and started moving repetitively as if skating, then changed to the other side of the wall, tired, took hold, and started skating again. It was an extraordinary scene, the repetitive and seemingly hopeless yet powerful movements both contrasting with and accentuated by the dramatic beauty of Tchaikovsky's first Piano Concerto.

The theatre programme told us that the production was inspired by Luigi da Porto (1485–1529), whose version of the story puts stronger emphasis on Giulietta than Shakespeare does, and the reversed title of Ek's production signals a similar focus of interest. Romeo's family had been cut entirely and, as noted, the ending stressed Juliet's situation in a violent and patriarchal society, rather than a feud between two families. Juliet shone in her bright yellow dress, and was in several ways the centre of attention, her playful youth and discovery of love brilliantly expressed by Kido. But the female roles were generally given space in the production, recalling earlier projects in which Ek has similarly expanded on female roles or cast women in male roles (Shylock in his 2004 *Merchant of Venice* and Jacob Hummel in his 2012 *Ghost Sonata* were both played by women). The female dancers wore long stretchy colourful dresses in the ball scene and their mantels were swished in elegant and dramatic gestures, stealing the attention from the men, all dressed in dark grey with exaggeratedly high hats. Again, the colourful dresses could be a sign of a society in which the woman's role is to please and be beautiful, but they also signalled where the passion was; the women arched their backs in abandon above the men who seemed to wish to escape away from them, rolling on the floor, indicating complicated and possibly frustrated relationships. One clear example of such a relationship was that between Juliet's parents. Her mother (Nadja Sellrup) was in love with Tybalt (Dawid Kupinski), and we saw nothing of the passion displayed in their pas de deux in her interactions with her husband. Her grief at Tybalt's death was painful but also formed a kind of protest, accentuated by the gradual addition on stage of more women joining in her movements. Even though her role was fairly small, Rosaline was included in this production. Finally, the Nurse (Ana Laguna) was given ample space, both as maternal figure in her warm and loving interactions with Juliet, but also as a figure of both comedy and authority in scenes with Peter (Jörgen Stövind). One entry on a Segway in a flowing red dress and a yellow bicycle helmet functioned as comic contrast to the police force, and her whisking Romeo off for his marriage on the same vehicle also gained laughs. She was allowed to dominate Mercutio (Jérôme Marchand), Benvolio (Hokuto Kodama), and Peter, having them perform tricks orchestrated by her, and she happily tumbled around in the arms of Mercutio. But also in this scene there was a sense of threat, of games threatening to spin out of control, as the men swung Laguna around. The possible allusion to Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* found in Peter's costume, a small tight grey suit and bowler hat, enhanced the sinister undertones. The Nurse also filled a choral function in the production, commenting on the action with frustration, anger, and impossible balancing acts.

Ek also used the story to give space to and explore aging dancers and old age on stage, a topic he has returned to over at least the last decade. The Prince was created for and

danced by Ek's brother, Niklas Ek (born in 1943), in the 2013 production (interchanging with Yvan Auzely, born in 1959), and the Nurse was danced by Laguna (born in 1955), both in 2013 and 2015. The interest in age, aged bodies and dancers is found also in earlier theatrical and dance productions directed and choreographed by Mats Ek, among them the previously mentioned *Ghost Sonata* set in an old people's home, and the choreographies *Stille* (2008, with Michail Baryshnikov and Laguna), and *Yxa* (2015, with Auzely and Laguna). It could be added that Niklas Ek also appeared in a much more radical Swedish rewriting of *Romeo and Juliet*, Suzanne Osten's film *Wellkåmm to Verona* (2006). Unlike Osten, who used the story to comment specifically on old age and dying, Mats Ek simply cast older dancers in roles where it makes sense in *Juliet & Romeo*: the Nurse representing wisdom, understanding and maternal love, characteristics that were underlined by Laguna's physical age, and the Prince's tiredness and weakness similarly expressed not only through choreography and posture (as performed by Pascal Jansson in 2015) but again with the addition of the physical ages of Niklas Ek/Yvan Auzely in 2013, and by Mats Ek himself in two performances in 2015.

Together, these components made for a dark version of the story, but also a version filled with beauty and humour. Mats Ek's statement in the theatre programme that there is 'a beauty that is not beautiful' captures the essence of his style, which breaks with the classical tradition of elongated limbs and graceful movement, and instead gives us angular shapes and prosaic postures, and shows us as much of the dancers' backs (and backsides) as their fronts. Humour was at times a result of gimmicks, and at times came from the sheer surprise of seeing mundane gestures on a ballet stage, which also makes us discover their beauty. The final tableau was an illustrative example of such mundane beauty. After the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, the Prince rolled onto stage, got up and for a while he stood, sloping shoulders and bent head, looking at the lovers' dead bodies. Then he joined the rest of the company, who had all lain down on their backs with their legs raised, in a form of tribute to the dead lovers, similarly posed in the central trapdoor. Again Garrick comes to mind, in whose adaptation the Prince still has the final lines of the play, but speaks not of retribution as in Shakespeare – 'Some shall be pardoned, and some punished' – but solely of mourning and woe.