LAUGHTER AND TRAGEDY: *ROMEO AND JULIET* DIRECTED BY DOMINIC DROMGOOLE AT SHAKESPEARE'S GLOBE (2009)

Lavinia RUSU MIRCEA
Ovidius University of Constanţa

Abstract: *This essay discusses moments of laughter as recorded in the 2009 production of* Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Dominic Dromgoole at Shakespeare's Globe. The space of the production is essential because the Shakespeare's Globe Theatre replicates exactly the conditions of performance in Shakespeare's time. However, twenty-first-century audiences react differently to the language and actors' jokes. Even if this is one of Shakespeare's deepest tragedies, a story of "star-crossed" lovers famous throughout the globe, the expectations of laughter are high, in both text and performance. Shakespeare's text reveals moments of humour and bawdy repartee, while this particular production makes the most of these moments through acting, the music played, as well as dance. Moreover, the expectations of the young audiences attending this production at Shakespeare's Globe in 2009 (as seen in the live recording of the production, published on the site of Shakespeare's Globe Online) are quite high. Therefore, young people attend the production with the preconception that they are going to see one of the most famous love stories, and their spirits are high and prepared for laughter even before the play begins. I argue that the audience's expectations have changed throughout the centuries of performing* Romeo and Juliet*. Twenty-first-century audiences attend a well-known Shakespearean tragedy with the mental set of attending the production of a comedy, so they react to the moments of laughter in the play readily. Laughter, therefore, has become not only a sign of comedy, but also a symbol of light-hearted reception of the age-long Shakespearean appropriations, even in tragedy.*

Keywords: *audience response; laughter; production;* Romeo and Juliet*; Shakespeare*

In the book *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary*, John Elsom debates Jan Kott's famous 1967 statement, delineated in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, and asserts cogently: "Shakespeare is an elastic writer. He can be stretched in many directions before he snaps." (4) This is why a tragedy may have comedic moments—as we often find in Shakespearean tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Romeo and Juliet*. But this may also mean that a tragedy may register frequent moments of laughter from the audiences, paradoxically, even during the most romantic and grave scenes of the play, in contemporary productions that try to recreate precisely the atmosphere of theatrical productions in Shakespeare's time. The space of performance is of a great importance as the accurate and precise reconstruction of Shakespeare's open-air theatre, which offers the audience the chance of encountering and

experiencing directly the situation of the original productions of Shakespeare's plays. All the more so in a production of a play such as *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the tragic lovers seem like two of the youngsters of nowadays. As Chris Jeffery observes, "Romeo and Juliet serve the exemplum not as tragic lovers but as representative youngsters still in need of wise adult guidance" (60). Indeed, the production of the play can speak to various audiences differently and they respond through laughter most of the times, during comic scenes or even during serious romantic encounters. Moreover, Shakespeare's theatre in his time allowed for humorous interpretations of the plays. As Eugene F. Shewmaker observes in the introduction to *Shakespeare's Language: A Glossary of Unfamiliar Words in His Plays and Poems*, "During Shakespeare's lifetime, plays were not regarded as literature; at best they were tolerated by the authorities as popular entertainments" (xiv). So, what can audiences do during popular entertainments[1] other than laugh?

The Shakespeare's Globe Theatre production (viewed in the live recording broadcast on the database *Digital Theatre Plus*), directed by Dominic Dromgoole[2] and premiered in 2009, was an example of how the tragedy background could be transformed into comedy at specific moments during the play. In "The Occasional Word: Dominic Dromgoole on *Romeo and Juliet*," presented in the Programme of the 2009 production, the director records his first perception of the play, as a child of eight:

[1] In the *Programme* of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre with the production of *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Dominic Dromgoole on tour, Andrew Gurr, an eminent theatre in performance critic, observes: "Besides performing six times a week at their main playhouse, Shakespeare's company was often invited to give special evening shows of the newer plays in the repertory" (3). Therefore, the popular plays were frequently required by audiences. As concerns the first performance of the play, Gurr notes: "*Romeo and Juliet* was almost certainly first performed by Shakespeare's company the Chamberlain's Men in or around 1596—a 'lyrical' period of Shakespeare's writing career which also includes *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard II* and the Sonnets. No records exist to tell us where it was first performed, but it is likely to have been either at the Theatre or the Curtain Playhouse in Shoreditch. It has been suggested that Richard Burbage, the company's leading man, took the role of Romeo (he would then have been about 28) and that the part of Juliet was taken by Master Robert Gough, who seems to have been allocated leading female roles in Shakespeare's early plays" (Gurr in *Programme* 4).

[2] *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Dominic Dromgoole (2009). With Holly Atkins (Lady Montague), Philip Cumbus (Mercutio), Adetomiwa Edun (Romeo), Jack Farthing (Benvolio), Ellie Kendrick (Juliet), James Lailey (Friar John, Sampson), Penny Layden (Nurse), Fergal McElherron (Peter, Gregory, Balthazar), Michael O'Hagan (Montague), Rawiri Paratene (Friar Laurence), Ukweli Roach (Tybalt), Ian Redford (Capulet), Tom Stuart (Paris), Graham Vick (Abraham, Apothecary), Andrew Vincent (Prince), Miranda Foster (Lady Capulet). Designer: Simon Daw. Composer: Nigel Hess. Choreographer: Siân Williams. Fight director: Malcom Ranson.

> I remember my first *Romeo and Juliet*; I was eight and on my first visit to Stratford. There was a huge humdinger of a fight at the beginning as the Montagues and Capulets piled into each other. Then I had my first experience of what was to become a constant in all my Shakespeare-going life. Stupefaction. At first, I tried to pretend it wasn't happening, but soon I had to admit it. I couldn't understand a blind word anyone was saying. (Dominic Dromgoole in *Programme* 7)

The fact that an eight-year-old child could not understand Shakespeare's language, and then eventually became a director of many Shakespearean plays, tells us a lot about the fascination that this author has had on generations of young people. This fascination, however, comes at a price, which is that, at times, the young audiences understand the text in performance differently, especially in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, which is also about young people.

The 2009 production started in a space and atmosphere filled with live music and dance, like in a comedy. The mood of comedy could be seen on the close-up faces of the spectators in the filmed production: the young people in the groundling audience looked happy and smiling in anticipation of seeing the famous play about love. The song interpreted by the acting cast—accompanied by tambourines and drums—had the following lyrics:

> O you, comrade Vasillo,
> Who doth live in a happy home,
> O bid the lady good day, yes
> Bid her happy fortune
> O come to the window now
> Or I shall die
> Or I shall die
>
> O bid the lady good day, yes
> Bid her happy fortune
> O come to the window now
> Or I shall die
> Or I shall die

Although the lyrics of the love song mentioned death because of love, it was as if in jest, and the mood was light and the music lively. During this time, the camera travelled among the spectators (most of them young), and all of them were laughing or smiling; generally, they were in a good mood, created partly as a result of the beautiful music. Therefore, the best-known tragedy about love started in a good mood for the 2009 audiences of this production at the Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.

The well-known verses of the Prologue/Chorus, referring to the "star-crossed lovers" (Chorus 6)[3] and the "two hours' traffic of our stage" (Chorus 12)—an allusion to theatrical activity—were spoken, alternatively, by Sampson (James Lailey) and Gregory (Fergal McElherron), the menial representatives of the Capulet household. At times, Gregory was smiling, as if in jest, when he narrated about "Two households, both alike in dignity / In fair Verona, where we lay our scene" (Chorus 1-2). It was as if the well-known setting of Shakespeare's Verona had been so frequently reiterated in countless productions that even the actors themselves, as well as the audience, could afford to look at it ironically and take everything with a grain of salt. Moreover, Shakespeare's text and the Chorus verses were well-known to the young spectators forming the audience, because *Romeo and Juliet* had been a part of the English core curriculum for at least twenty years, and young audiences were accustomed not only with the main speeches, but also with the analysis of the main characters and themes, the imagery of light and darkness, the play's sonnet-form structure, the setting of Verona and the story of the feuding Montagues and Capulets. The expectations were high and one could see in the young people's eyes the unspoken joking comment: "Yeah, yet another *Romeo and Juliet*; let's see what this is all about!" So, the production started as a renowned joke about love, told several times, therefore laughter and the light mood were inevitable.

The first scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, which was a lively dialogue between Sampson and Gregory, was full of inuendo and bawdy humour, such as, for instance, when the two servants talked about women as the "weaker vessels" (I.1.15)—which is a biblical phrase taken over by Shakespeare—so Sampson felt inclined to "push the Montague's men from the wall" (I.1.16) and "thrust his maids to the wall" (I.1.16-17). The lewd joke was accompanied by Sampson's (James Lailey) active gesture of thrusting his pelvis forward, so the audiences would understand Shakespeare's bawdy meaning, namely of Sampson having rough sex with the Montague maids perched against the wall. The joke was pushed forward when Sampson clarified the issue of the maids and cutting off their heads: "Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads. Take it in what sense thou wilt" (I.1.24-25). The double-entendres and the puns go along with Shakespeare's bawdiness, especially in this play. As Maurice Charney observes in *Shakespeare on Love and Lust*,

> Of all Shakespeare's plays, only *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra* can be considered love tragedies. But *Romeo and Juliet* has trouble developing the tragedy from what are essentially comic

[3] All references to Shakespeare's text are keyed to *Romeo and Juliet*, The New Penguin Shakespeare, edited by T. J. B. Spencer.

> materials. The feud is like the perturbations of comedy until it becomes deadly with the murder of Mercutio. Romeo and Juliet are like the intensely lyrical and playful lovers of comedy, so that their final tragic status seems thrust upon them. (Charney 106)

Laughter was imminent as a result of Sampson's sexual allusions, and some members of the audience got the joke and reacted accordingly. Yet most of them kept aloof, probably still uncertain whether to laugh or keep sober when viewing the greatest tragedy of love of all times. Laughter was general, however, when Sampson drew his sword saying "My naked weapon is out" (I.1.32), thus concluding the lewd exchange.

The riotous scene between the Montagues and the Capulets in the streets of Verona continued with more fighting in this production, but it was clear that the theatrical fighting was just mock action of the real thing. While Tybalt was menacing Sampson, with the tip of his sword pointed at Sampson's neck, the brave servant—with the name of the biblical hero of great strength—mocked Tybalt's aggressiveness by circling his palm around Tybalt's sword and moving it rapidly along the sword, as if giving the sword a hand job. The audience burst into laughter because this gesture—taken from the arsenal of the modern sexually connoting body language—had no correspondent in Shakespeare's text, but it was quite suitable to the tastes of a twenty-first-century young audience, who clearly reacted to the current body language. Moreover, such lewd gestures were in sequence with Shakespeare's own bawdy language, exhibited during the previous interaction between Sampson and Gregory. Laughter, therefore, was not only triggered by Shakespeare's lewd jokes in *Romeo and Juliet*, but it was conditioned by the young audience's expectations of vulgarity in a contemporary context, using the tools of contemporary body language.

The entrance of the illiterate Servant with an uneducated accent, who could not read the guest list at the Capulets' party, provoked some laughter in the audience. However, it was the Servant's question: "I pray you, sir, can you read?" (I.1.57) and Romeo's answer: "Ay, my own fortune in my misery" (I.1.58) which provoked laughter. This was not because of the question as such, but because the audience anticipated the importance of Romeo's reading the guest list. Romeo read Rosaline's name on the guest list and, because he wanted to meet Rosaline at the party, he gate-crashed Capulet's party and met Juliet for the first time. Moreover, Romeo's theatrical interpretation of the verses, "Ay, my own fortune in my misery" (I.1.58), in the rendering of the actor Adetomiwa Edun, suggested a larger-than-life romantic interpretation, in the sonneteering mode, suitable to the expectations of a "Romeo". In the case of this production, the audiences superimposed Shakespeare's text—played live on the stage—to their own readings of Romeo's character—derived from

their school years—in which Romeo was associated with a romantic hero who took the illusion of love for Rosaline, expressed in the sonneteering mode, as the real feeling. The audiences could perceive the irony of the actor's interpretation just because they were well-versed in various critical views of the play.

While Romeo was reading the guest list, the Servant made a pantomime characterisation of each name on the list, which was met with peals of laughter by the audience. This exchange also highlighted the theatrical cues. For example, when Romeo read "County Anselm and his beauteous sisters" (I.1.64), the Servant represented a lady who walked stately, moving her hips widely, but whose behaviour indicated that she willingly invited sexual encounters; this was how the "beauteous" sisters of Count Anselm were perceived by the servant as a bystander. When Romeo read "the lady widow of Utruvio" (I.1.65), the Servant impersonated an old fat woman, walking with her legs apart, who farted frequently and made unpleasant noises. When Romeo read "Signor Placentio and his lovely nieces" (I.1.66), the Servant made a sign as if vomiting, then covered his mouth and made the sign of no, no, thus indicating that the epithet "lovely" was far from being suitable for the nieces of Signior Placentio. At Romeo's reading of "Mercutio and his brother Valentine" (I.1. 66-67), the Servant made a sound and gesture as if uncorking a bottle and then drinking from it, which suggested that either Mercutio or his brother Valentine, or both, were hard drinkers. When Romeo read "my fair niece Rosaline" (I.1.68), the Servant made a gesture which, in modern body language would mean "Yesss!", but accompanied by a vulgar gesture suggesting sexual intercourse, from which the audiences might infer that the good-looking Rosaline was courted by many men and had sexual relations with them. When Romeo read "Signior Valentio and his cousin Tybalt" (I.1.69), the Servant looked as if he was scared and made the sign of the cross (in the Catholic style), which suggested that Tybalt was cruel and he was to be feared. Each of these pantomime gestures, which could be interpreted as mini plays-within-the play, were met with laughter by the audience. Thus, the audiences would get acquainted not only with Romeo's personality, but also with several versions of theatrical characterisations of the guests at the Capulet party, who never appeared on stage and had no text, but who were ghost characters at the party, given life by the Servant's theatrical interpretation.

Surprisingly, the Nurse's long and bawdy narrative of Juliet's childhood and the interpretation of her falling on her face, instead of falling on her back in older years (I.3.17-49), was not received with too much laughter, despite the sexual puns and innuendo pertaining to Shakespeare's text. This is probably because the Nurse spewed words so fast that there was no room for the audience to laugh at so many jokes, even if they understood them. Yet when Lady Capulet disclosed her real age in the lines: "I was your mother much upon

these years / That you are now a maid" (I.3.73-74), followed by a deep sigh of distress and a hand raised to the brow, some members of the audience understood the allusion and laughed. It was customary for a thirty-year-old woman in early modern society to consider herself aged—as Lady Capulet was—at thirty, but Lady Capulet's interpretation (Miranda Foster) made it look as if she expressed the regret of any woman who approached middle age and regretted the passing of time, now or in the past. The Nurse's praise of Lord Paris, however, as in "A man, young lady! Lady, such a man / As all the world—why, he's a man of wax" (I.3.76-77), was received with peals of laughter, especially at the word "wax". This is amazing because of the unexpected remark in the description; while the first part of the Nurse's depiction of Paris's manly qualities was rather straightforward and the audiences expected further praise of his masculinity, the unexpected "man of wax" (I.3.77) metaphor gives exactly the opposite meaning; Paris was only apparently the manly figure of vigour and courage that all the world praised, but in essence he could be moulded and manipulated into different shapes, as if made of warm wax. The audience reacted with laughter to the incongruity within the joke, because paradox and incompatibility are sources of humour in Shakespeare's comedies. Yet this is a tragedy, and the unexpected jokes and the audience's laughter were meant to ease off the atmosphere.

Modern audiences are especially perceptive to sexual jokes and allusions to love in *Romeo and Juliet*, and it is amazing how the audience reacted to Lady Capulet's coquetry. When she continued her description of the mysteries of Paris's body and heart with the lines "This precious book of love, this unbound lover, / To beautify him only lacks a cover" (I.3.88-89), the audience started laughing heartily. At the word "cover," the actress interpreting Lady Capulet (Miranda Foster) made the gestures of the vain woman arranging her hair, which meant that she interpreted the allure of love as female seduction; men are attracted by a woman's good looks, which is the outward appearance, like a book's cover. The metaphor of the mysterious book of love, reiterated in Juliet's later reply to Romeo, "You kiss by th' book" (I.3.110), is given different meanings in the play. While in Lady Capulet's vain interpretation men are attracted by a woman's good looks and she is, supposedly, like a rich cover to a book whose content is irrelevant to the public, but essential to the couple, in Juliet's metaphoric book of love, Romeo is like a student who appreciates emotion by learning it from others' books. To these views about love is added the Nurse's coarse remark "No less? Nay, bigger! Women grow by men (I.3.96), to which the audience laughed again, understanding the bawdy joke that women get pregnant after sexual intercourse with men. None of these attitudes and opinions about love reveals the essence of love, and the audience's laughter at Lady Capulet's coquettish remark not only sanctioned her view with sarcasm, but also revealed that the deep

meanings of Shakespeare's metaphors could be fully understood by twentieth-century audiences.

The bawdy talk about love among men, namely Romeo, Benvolio and Mercutio (I.4.1-32), was peppered with some laughter from the audience. This is true especially as Mercutio was lying down besides Romeo (as if lying in bed) and embraced him bodily as he was saying, "If love be rough with you, be rough with love. / Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down" (I.4.27-28). The pun on "prick" (the male penis) and "prick" (as in the act of piercing something with a sharp point) was not lost on the educated audience because the two actors vividly imitated the positions of sex in bed. However, the laughter was rather feeble, which indicated that contemporary audiences may have lost the taste for coarse sexual jokes in favour of subtler ones. The audience reacted with awed silence during the entire impressive Queen Mab speech, delivered by Philip Cumbus as Mercutio (I.4.53-95), even as he spoke in tears the rather vulgar lines "This is the hag, when maids lie on their back, / That presses them and learns them first to bear, / Making them women of good carriage" (1.4.92-94). Instead of laughing at the imaginary picture of a woman on her back during sexual intercourse, followed by procreation and pregnancy, Mercutio speaks in tears of this act, showing compassion for the women forced to bear all sorts of iniquities, as was the case in Shakespeare's time. The past century of feminist criticism has had an impact on male actors interpreting *Romeo and Juliet*, and they could make the Queen Mab speech look like a compassionate understanding of the sad lot of women, oppressed under male dominance. Contemporary audiences also understood this empathetic interpretation and reacted accordingly, through awed silence and admiration instead of laughter in response to coarse jokes.

Mercutio's exchange with Benvolio, starting with "Romeo! Humours! Madman! Passions! Lover!" (II.1.7), was punctuated with laughter at each word, while Mercutio embraced Benvolio and even touched him in his nether parts. The speech is ironically addressed to the romantic lovers, for whom the expression "a Romeo" has become a fitting description. Through Mercutio's voice, Shakespeare mocks not only the superficial lovers who "sigh" (II.1.8) and "cry" (II.1.10) for imaginary love, but also the poets who produce bad verses about love, rhyming, inevitably, as "'love' and 'dove'" (II.1.10). Just as, in recent times, "Romeo" has become synonymous with this kind of superficial puppy love, Mercutio placed himself in the position of a magician who conjured Romeo "by Rosaline's bright eyes" (II.1.17). The ensuing description of Rosaline's body parts—"her high forehead and her scarlet lip" (II.1.18), "her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh" (II.1.19)—was met with roars of laughter. Especially when Mercutio moved further from the thigh, to the lady's nether parts, expressed through the phrase "And the domains that there adjacent lie" (II.1.20), the audience started laughing heartily. Despite the

absurd male commodification of the woman's body, when Mercutio gave a lewd description of Rosaline's charms, to the point of even moving his tongue when speaking of the woman's lower parts, the audience laughed in unison. Yet they were not laughing at the woman's portrait as such, but at the man's imaginative description of it. Through these theatrical renderings of sexual love and the woman's body, in fact, the sensible Mercutio mocked the bad poets who wrote verses in praise of women's sexual appeal, when women's bodies were taken as objects of male desire. Even if modern audiences were uninhibited and could laugh openly at such vulgar jokes about men and women, the actor's interpretation implied meta-theatricality: it was only in the theatre's poetry, through bad or good verses, that the woman's body could achieve the grandeur it deserved.

The famous balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet* has become the epitome of love declarations throughout the world and the touristic site of Juliet's Balcony in Verona is visited by many romantic lovers. Yet in this production, the moment of Juliet's "O Romeo, Romeo!" (II.2.33) was met with laughter and giggles from the audience; this is because the reiteration of this declaration of love throughout the stages and screens of the world has made the echo of love almost empty of meaning; repetition of the words has transformed Juliet's sincere invocation of love into a stereotype of unfulfilled desire. Moreover, young audiences expected sexual innuendo from this scene, so when Juliet said "What's Montague? It is nor hand nor foot / Nor arm nor face nor any other part / Belonging to a man" (II.2.40-42), the audience burst into laughter at the words, "nor any other part" (II.2.41), which was perceived as a sexually charged phrase. Even the actress interpreting Juliet (Ellie Kendrick) smiled and suggested the sexual innuendo, because this was expected of this part of the play. However hard both audiences and actors might have tried, they could not escape the long-lived ghosts of previous productions of the play, as well as critical analyses and students' graded essays about it. The result is a composite tragedy in which the sense of tragic is made lighter by superimposed layers of audience expectations involving comedy. Twenty-first-century productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, such as the one at the Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, have become composite theatrical affairs in which the value of poetic language, as well as the concept named "Shakespeare" are debated constantly. The result is, paradoxically, represented by laughter in tragedy.

Works Cited

Charney, Maurice. *Shakespeare on Love & Lust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Elsom, John. *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?* London: Routledge, 1989.

Jeffery, Chris. “What Kinds of Play Is *Romeo and Juliet*?” *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*. 2. 1 (2016): 51-72. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/sisa.v28i1.5

Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Trans. Boleslaw Taborski. London: Methuen, 1967.

Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre. *Romeo and Juliet*. Directed by Dominic Dromgoole. Opus Art co-production in Association with Electric Sky. 2009. Theatre Production. *Digital Theatre Plus*. https://www.digitaltheatreplus.com. Accessed 19 June 2020.

Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Ed. T.J. B. Spencer. London: Penguin Books, 1967.

Shewmaker, Eugene F. *Shakespeare’s Language: A Glossary of Unfamiliar Words in His Plays and Poems*. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2008.

Programme of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre. *Romeo and Juliet*. Directed by Dominic Dromgoole. Shakespeare’s Globe on Tour Presents *Romeo and Juliet*. 2009. *Shakespeare’s Globe Archive*. www. shakespearesglobearchive.amdigital.co.uk. Accessed 19 June 2020.