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# Romeo & Juliet

by William Shakespeare



Resource Pack

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### 1. SHAKESPEARE AND HIS TIME

- 1558 Accession of Elizabeth I
- 1559 Act of Supremacy and Uniformity restores Protestant Church in England. Puritanism begins.
- 1561 Sackville and Norton write *Gorboduc*.
- 1564 William Shakespeare born on 23 April (narrowly missing the plague that hit Stratford earlier in the year). His father John was a glover and whittawer (curer and whitener of skins) who became a member of the Town Council and one of 14 aldermen of the town. Puritan opposition to Anglicanism in England.
- 1567 Rebellion in Ireland against Elizabeth. Mary Queen of Scots abdicates.
- 1568 John Shakespeare becomes high bailiff (equivalent to today's mayor).
- 1569 Rising of Northern Earls in England.
- 1570 – 80s Known as Shakespeare's 'lost years'. There is no conclusive evidence of how Shakespeare made the transition from unpromising grammar school master to prolific writer. There is evidence to suggest he was a lawyer, soldier, possibly trained as an actor, poached deer, and led a dissolute life. He could have done all, none or a combination of the above.
- 1571 Ridolfi plot against Elizabeth.
- 1575 *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, an early comedy is first produced.
- 1576 Elizabeth I and House of Commons disagree over powers of Sovereign. Burbage opens The Theatre.
- 1580 Birth of Shakespeare's youngest brother Edmund who became an actor.
- 1581 Roman Catholic converts declared guilty of High Treason by Elizabeth. Drake circumnavigates the world.
- 1582 Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway on 28 November. At 26, she is 8 years his senior. There is no record of the ceremony although it is evident that the usual publishing of the banns over three successive Sundays, as was the custom, was not adhered to due to Anne's pregnancy. The need for a speedy wedding was complicated by the fact that Shakespeare was 18 and therefore a minor, and so needed his father's consent.

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- 1583 Throckmorton plot against Elizabeth. Galileo begins his experiments. Anne Hathaway gives birth to Susanna in May.
- 1585 Anne gives birth to twins Hamnet and Judith.
- 1586 Babington plot against Elizabeth. Mary Queen of Scots arrested. John Shakespeare deprived of his alderman statues due to debts.
- 1587 Mary Queen of Scots is executed. Marlowe writes *Tamburlaine*, a blank verse tragedy.
- 1588 Spanish Armada is defeated by Sir Francis Drake.
- 1590 Marlowe writes *The Jew of Malta*. Janssen invents the microscope.
- 1592 Marlowe writes *Doctor Faustus*. Shakespeare writes *Henry VI*, *Richard III* and *Venus and Adonis*. From this year until 1594 theatre activity in London severely reduced due to the outbreak of the plague.
- 1593 Imprisonment of absentees from Church in England. Marlowe writes *Edward II*. Shakespeare writes *Richard II*. Marlowe dies.
- 1594 Thomas Kyd writes *The Spanish Tragedy*. Shakespeare writes *Love's Labours Lost*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Rape of Lucrece*.
- 1595 English sack Cadiz. Peasants rise in Oxfordshire. First W.C. is installed in royal palace. Shakespeare writes *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*.
- 1596 Shakespeare's son Hamnet, aged 11, dies.
- 1597 Second Spanish Armada destroyed by storms. Shakespeare writes *Henry IV (Parts I & II)*. Shakespeare purchases the Great House of New Place, the second largest dwelling in Stratford.. There is no record of his wife and children joining him during his residencies in London. It is not clear how many times he visited Stratford a year and his absences have led to speculation about an unhappy marriage.
- 1598 Uprising in Ireland.
- 1599 Jonson writes *Every Man Out of His Humour*. Shakespeare writes *As You Like It*, *Henry V*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night*. The Globe Theatre opens.
- 1600 Gilbert publishes work on magnetism and electricity. Dekker writes *A Shoe Maker's Holiday*. Shakespeare writes *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Julius Caesar*. Shakespeare's father dies.

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- 1603 Elizabeth I dies. Accession of James VI of Scotland as James I of England. Several plots are hatched against new king. Plague sweeps England. Heywood writes *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. Shakespeare writes *Troillus and Cressida*. The Chamberlain's Men become the King's Men.
- 1604 Shakespeare writes *Measure for Measure* and *Othello*.
- 1605 Discovery of Gunpowder Plot. Shakespeare writes *Macbeth*.
- 1606 Execution of Guy Fawkes. Jonson writes *Volpone*. Shakespeare writes *King Lear*.
- 1607 Union of Scotland and England rejected by Parliament. Beaumont writes *The Woman Hater*. Shakespeare writes *Timon of Athens*. Susanna, Shakespeare's favourite daughter, marries John Hall, a physician.
- 1608 Confiscation of lands in Ireland. Lippershev invents the first practical telescope. Middleton and Dekker write *The Roaring Girl*. Shakespeare writes *Antony and Cleopatra*. His grandchild Elizabeth is born and his mother Mary dies. The King's Men acquire Blackfriars Theatre.
- 1609 Kepler defines laws of planetary motion. Beaumont and Fletcher write *The Knight of The Burning Pestle*. Shakespeare writes *Coriolanus*, and *The Sonnets*.
- 1610 Galileo discovers Saturn's rings and the four moons of Jupiter. Jonson writes *The Alchemist*. Shakespeare writes *Cymbeline*.
- 1611 Dissolution of Parliament by James I. The authorised version of the Bible is published (King James Bible). Shakespeare writes *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*.
- 1612 Webster writes *The White Devil*. Shakespeare writes what is probably his last play, *Henry VIII*.
- 1613 Fire at Globe Theatre.
- 1614 Webster writes *The Duchess of Malfi*. Jonson writes *Bartholomew Fair*.
- 1616 Judith, Shakespeare's daughter, marries aged 31. Shakespeare dies on 23 April. Little is known about his last illness or the cause of death.
- 1623 Anne Hathaway dies.

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### 2. BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

*Romeo and Juliet* is not an original story. As with many of his plays Shakespeare used a well-known story as the basis for his play, which provided him with a plot, characters and subject he modified or adapted to suit his needs. He used as his source for *Romeo and Juliet* a popular poem, 3020 lines long, by the English author and translator, Brooke. Although Brooke claimed to have seen a play of *Romeo and Juliet* before he wrote his poem, evidence suggests that he in fact translated it into English from a French poem.

The original story of *Romeo and Juliet* can be traced back to the third century A.D. in *The Ephesiaca of Xenophon of Ephesus*. However it is likely that a more recent version in *The Cinquante Nouvelle of Masuccio Salernitano* (c. 1476) may have been used as a source by both Brooke and Shakespeare. This story follows the fates of young lovers Gianozza and Mariotto and includes their clandestine marriage, a family dispute, banishment, sleeping potions and a burial in the family vault.

Another version of the story was also written by the Italian author Bandello in 1554. There were additions and changes to the story. The young hero is now more melancholic and attended the ball in disguise with other young men; the feud between the families is more active and is not just an old quarrel and the characters of the nurse, Benvolio and Paris appear for the first time.

This version of the story was translated into French from the Italian in 1559. It was sentimentalised and the language made more rhetorical in the process. It was this version of *Romeo and Juliet* that Brooke translated into English and which Shakespeare then used as the source for his play. Brooke added the notion of Fortune as a controlling power, influencing the lives of the characters. Shakespeare, who adheres to Brooke's poem closely, increases this aspect so that the idea of Fortune and Fate become a dominating theme in the play. Shakespeare also chose to reduce Juliet's age from 16 to 14.

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### 3. MARRIAGE IN 1595

#### Parent and Child Relationships

The fifth commandment, '*Honour thy father and thy mother*' was treated with absolute seriousness in Elizabethan society. The absolute right of parents over children, in particular daughters, was commonplace. Showing ingratitude or disrespect to one's parents – especially to the father as ruler of the household – would be considered outrageous behaviour. Juliet takes an enormous step in defying Capulet outright over her marriage. Although he may speak to Paris of gaining her consent to the match he never considers for a moment that she will doubt, oppose or even just dislike his choice of husband for her.

Marriages, particularly in noble families like the Capulets and Montagues, were an important part of exercising parental authority and dignity when land, wealth or honour were to be preserved. The match was always arranged to the advantage of the family, not the individual. Only younger sons who would not inherit and were therefore not important could please themselves in their choice of partner.

For Romeo and Juliet, both only children, their marriages would almost certainly have been arranged for them. Romeo might have as little choice in the matter as Juliet, for all his apparent freedom.

Daughters were something of a liability. They had to be provided with a dowry and married off lest they remain spinsters and require maintaining and keeping all their adult life. Nunneries were a useful means of stowing away unmarried or expensive daughters.

The rights of women were limited. Daughters could not inherit titles nor hold property in their own right after they married; ironic in an age that had a powerful Queen on the throne. Queen Elizabeth herself never married and therefore never had to surrender her power to a husband.

Hierarchy within the family was strict. Women were subservient to men, and children to parents. In his own home, the father assumed the role of state and church, the next thing to God after a priest.

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Marrying for love as Juliet and Romeo do would have been a rare occurrence. However, in spite of the power of parents over children, both the Church and the State recognised a clandestine marriage made without the approval or consent of parents. Moreover, marriage, to be legally binding, did not require either formal, civil or religious sanctions. As well as a religious ceremony, couples could marry either by making a vow to each other before a witness or by making a promise of marriage and then consummating it by sleeping together. Romeo and Juliet manage all three.

### Marriage and Age

The legal age of consent in Elizabethan England was twelve for a girl and fourteen for a boy. Fourteen was a popular choice for marriage for a girl from a noble family. However, there was debate on the matters, as some considered it too young (for a girl) since marriage inevitably meant children and childbirth at fourteen or earlier might be dangerous for the mother.

Child brides nevertheless appear frequently in history and fiction. Henry Bollingbroke's bride was only 11 years old and she produced a daughter in the same year. In 1396 Richard II of England married Isabella of France when she was only six. In Shakespeare's plays Marina (in *Pericles*) marries at 14, Perdita (in *The Winter's Tale*) marries at 16 and Miranda (in *The Tempest*) marries at 15.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's father is uncertain about the age at which his daughter should marry. At first he feels she is too young:

*'Let two more summers wither in their pride*

*'Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride.'*

But he later changes his mind as Paris argues:

*'Younger than she are happy mothers made.'*

Lady Capulet reminds us that she was married at Juliet's age. However, her difficult relationship with Juliet and her apparent lack of maternal feeling are not a good advertisement for young motherhood. When Capulet remarks:

*'too soon mar'd are those so early made,'*

it is possible that he is referring to his wife.

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### Romance

Shakespeare is always sympathetic to his young lovers. Those who marry for love in defiance of parents include Hermia and Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Jessica and Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*, Anne Page and Fenton in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

Shakespeare often champions the right of the individual to choose his or her own partner in marriage for love, not material or family gain. The end of *Romeo and Juliet* is not a rebuke to rebellious lovers but an attack on a patriarchal state that can rule and destroy its children for its own ends.

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### 4. WHAT IS TRAGEDY?

Everyone is aware of tragedy in life. But tragedy as a form of drama is not universal. That representation of personal suffering and heroism which we call tragic drama is particular to Western dramatic tradition, and originates in the culture of ancient Greece.

Any realistic notion of tragic drama must start from the fact of catastrophe. Tragedies end badly. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. This is crucial. Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be solved through technical or social means, we may have serious drama (for example, Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* or *A Doll's House*), but not perhaps tragedy in the classical sense.

Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order and justice are terribly limited, and that no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance. Outside and within man is the 'otherness' of the world. It mocks and destroys us. In certain rare instances, it leads us after destruction to some incomprehensible repose.

The word 'tragedy' entered the English language in the late fourteenth century. The characteristic medieval definition contained no implication of dramatic form. A tragedy meant a narrative recounting the life of some ancient or eminent person who suffered a decline of fortune towards a disastrous end. See for example Chaucer's definition:

*'Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie  
As olde bookes make us memorie  
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee  
And is fallen out of high degree  
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.'*

Chaucer's definition derives its force from contemporary awareness of sudden reversals of political and dynastic fortune. (The idea of the Wheel of Fortune, perpetually turning, toppling great men from their important positions, was commonplace.) But the rise and fall of men in high places expressed the tragic sense for a much deeper reason: it made explicit the universal drama of the fall of man. Because of original sin, each man had to suffer the tragedy of death.

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The rise of English drama in Tudor and Elizabethan times restored implications of dramatic performance to the term 'tragedy'. But the images of the tragic predicament devised in medieval literature carried over into the language of the theatre (e.g. characteristic emblems such as the Wheel of Fortune). However, the idea of tragedy lost some of its medieval directness. There was a general darkening of spirit and decline of hope in Elizabethan society and the sense of 'the tragic' broadened beyond the medieval idea of the fall of individual greatness. The sense of life itself came to be shadowed by a feeling of tragedy.

The concept of tragedy acquired implications of theatrical form in Elizabethan times, partly through the rediscovery of the Roman dramas of Seneca in the 1560s. From then on, tragedy was a play (no longer a poem or prose romance) dealing with tragic matters. But were all such plays tragedies in the true sense? Conflicting critical attitudes began to appear in the early seventeenth century and the true definition of tragedy continues to be debated.

The neoclassic conception arose with the writers of the Italian Renaissance who appealed to the critical theories of ancient Greek theorist Aristotle (which, however, they did not fully understand) and to reason. The classical ideal is that the tragic action must proceed with total coherence and economy. From this principle of unity, all other conventions follow. Examples of these are:

- a. Unity of Place, i.e. the stage should represent the same place throughout the play.
- b. Unity of Time, i.e. all the action of the play should take place within 24 hours.
- c. Unity of Action, i.e. the tragic and the comic sense of life must be kept strictly apart.

The popular, romantic ideal of drama drew its strength from the theatrical success of the Elizabethan playwrights, who violated every precept of neoclassicism. They broke with the unities, dispensed with the chorus, and combined tragic and comic plots.

But the shape of such plays as *Doctor Faustus* and *Measure for Measure* is influenced by more than just the personal bias of the Elizabethan dramatists and their popular audiences. Beneath recent developments such as borrowing from Seneca and dramatic blank verse, lay a rich inheritance of medieval and popular forms. For example, in Shakespeare's disregard for the limitations of space and time, we recognise the spirit of the medieval mystery cycles which took the world of heaven, earth and hell for their setting.

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### 5. THE PLAYHOUSES

When approaching *Romeo and Juliet* as a play on the page or the stage it is worth bearing in mind that the audiences of Shakespeare's time would have undergone a very different experience from that of audiences today. We have very few first-hand accounts of the impressions and responses of Elizabethan playgoers. One of the most frequently quoted is that of Johannes de Witt, a Dutch tourist visiting London, who recorded his impressions of a visit to The Swan Theatre in 1596.

"There are four amphitheatres in London of notable beauty, which from their diverse signs bear diverse names. In each of them a different play is daily exhibited to the populace. The two more magnificent of these are situated to the southward beyond The Thames, and from the signs suspended before them are called The Rose and The Swan...Of all theatres, however, the largest and the most magnificent is that one of which the sign is a swan, called in the vernacular The Swan Theatre; for it accommodates in its seats three thousand persons, and is built of a mass of flint stones (of which there is a prodigious supply in Britain), and supported by wooden columns painted in such excellent imitation of marble that it is able to deceive even the most cunning."

#### The Beginnings

It is almost certain that the first purpose-built theatre in England was erected in 1576 by James Burbage. He was a carpenter by trade, but also a man with a keen interest in theatre. He had the good sense to build his theatre, which was aptly named The Theatre in Shoreditch, a district outside the jurisdiction of The Lord Mayor of London (and therefore free from much uninvited censorship and control). The following year The Curtain was built nearby and many other theatres soon followed. In 1599 The Theatre burnt down and Burbage built a new, much grander playhouse on Bankside, south of the river. This theatre was The Globe; the theatre with which Shakespeare developed a strong and lasting relationship.

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### The Buildings

The public playhouses were usually round or polygonal buildings built on a timber frame with a plaster infilling and thatch or tile roofing for the galleries. To enter the yard cost one penny. To enter the galleries cost another, and to sit in the relative comfort of the higher galleries cost threepence. There were also partitioned-off galleries called 'Lords Rooms' which, being the most comfortable and closest to the stage, cost the sum of sixpence.

The stage itself was a big platform measuring as much as forty feet across and extending out into the middle of the yard. The effect was to create what we would now call a thrust stage where the audience surrounds the players on three sides. At the back of the stage was a 'tiring-house' or dressing room from which exits and entrances could be made. Attached to the tiring-house were galleries or balconies from which scenes could be played. At the front of this stage was a large trap-door used for sudden or supernatural appearances. Also at the front of the stage, at the corners, were two tall pillars that supported a cover or 'Heavens'. On top of the Heavens sat the stage hands operating the stage machinery that enabled actors to descend onto the stage or to magically fly away. Below the Heavens and overlooking the stage was a gallery to house musicians or to provide extra acting space. Although the evidence is not conclusive it is likely that set into the wall at the back of the stage a curtain would cover a 'hidden stage' or 'discovery space'. Here at appropriate moments the curtain could be drawn to reveal scenes or to discover persons unexpectedly. It is likely that such a space would have been very useful in plays such as *Hamlet*, or *Romeo and Juliet* – both of which involve plays, spying, hiding and revelations.

These public theatres were large and hugely popular. They were places of genuine popular entertainment where the leading companies would expect to draw enthusiastic audiences that probably represented every layer of society and individual. Individual actors and playwrights often commanded loyal followings. However, as is indicated later (see The Actors and Companies) theatre artists did not always achieve respected status in society.

In addition to these open air amphitheatres there were also the private playhouses. These were smaller, rectangular enclosed buildings, often converted halls. Although the seating arrangement was probably different, owing to the design of the building, it seems likely that the playing space would have been very similar to enable the companies to transfer their productions from one

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theatre to another. As it was impractical to perform in the public playhouses in the colder months of the year, the smaller halls provided alternative venues to ensure the companies maintained year-round employment and a means of existing.

### The Actors and The Companies

In 1572 the 'Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds and for Relief of the Poor and Impotent' forced the itinerant actors and strolling players to seek a noble patron. Previously companies had travelled freely from town to town but now only those in possession of a patron's livery and consequently his protection could perform legally. Terrible punishments were set out for any actor found breaking the law: first offenders could expect to have a hole burnt through their ear lobe; second offenders were thrown into prison and third offenders were hung, drawn and quartered. The City Fathers who hoped this law would completely stamp out theatre were disappointed to discover that their actions had the opposite effect. Instead, the best players, stage-hands, and writers were drawn together to establish the first true acting companies. Among the most respected and well known were The Lord Chamberlain's Men who later became The King's Men, for whom Shakespeare both acted and wrote.

Throughout the period of 1572 to the closing of the theatres in 1642 there was an open hostility between puritan leaders and the companies and their audiences. Playhouses were seen as hothouses of debauchery and impurity – a fact substantiated by their proximity to the 'bawdy-houses'. To survive the hostile religious and political climate royal patronage was essential and fortunately the court of Queen Elizabeth and later that of King James I both encouraged and supported the companies. Players were a royal pleasure – and to please royalty was a major aim of the companies.

As these companies benefited from patronage and being organised into tight nucleuses of talent – new plays and production methods rapidly emerged. These called for the players to develop new skills. The actors were complete performers with the ability not only to speak their lines and play their character but also to sing and dance, to play musical instruments, to juggle and to clown. There were extraordinary performers able to hold huge and varied audiences often under adverse conditions.

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As the repertoires of each company developed so did the specialist abilities of individual actors. There were, of course, no women on the stage. Women's roles were played by men, and young boys took the roles written for girls. Actors would train in a certain type of role and would then specialise in that type of role for the rest of their career. Consequently masters of clowning, tragedy and comedy gradually emerged. Of the many great actors perhaps the best known were Richard Burbage, son of the builder of the first theatre, and Edward Alleyn of The Admiral's Men, who was considered one of the greatest tragic actors of his time. Among the actors who specialised in comic and clowning roles two of the best remembered are Will Kempe and Richard Tarlton.

Despite their great displays of skill and talent, actors were still deemed to be at the bottom of society's ladder. Although during the Elizabethan period the stature of the acting profession was to grow it never gained full respectability. The life of an actor was constantly precarious; theatres were often closed at times of political tension and the recurrence of the plague not only closed the theatres, but fatally depleted their audiences. As a reflection of the unstable times, audiences were demanding and often fickle and popularity could be short-lived.

Along with the organisational changes in the theatre world came a revolution in theatrical methods. Essentially, the stages on which these players performed were, for the most part, bare. Only the minimum of scenery was used and this allowed a continuous flow of action. The 'scene' was changed simply by the exit of one actor and the entrance of another. If there was any doubt about the locale of the actions playwrights would slip in a subtle reference early in the scene.

The theatre was a great spectacle, a feast for the senses. So each company endeavouring to develop a loyal following had to out-do the others. Instead of scenery, attention was paid to stage effects. At the moment of Hamlet's death, for example, a real cannon would have been fired (it was probably the same cannon which, when fired in *Henry VIII*, burned down The Globe Theatre). Sponges or bladders soaked in red vinegar were concealed in actors' armpits and squeezed at the relevant moment to produce the effect of flowing blood. Those demanding more gory realism would often use sheep's liver, hearts, or lungs when the text called for raw flesh. It is likely that the duels in *Romeo and Juliet* would have been full-blooded, as fencing displays were a favourite with audiences and many of the younger more acrobatic actors.

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Money was also spent on lavish costumes and to some extent props. The properties of the company were, in many instances, the only monetary assets they had. Costumes too would often be unashamedly displayed in a procession across the stage – even if they were not immediately relevant to the play. One company bought a black velvet cloak for more than a third of the price of Shakespeare's house. Costumes were often the cast-off garments of fine lords bequeathed to servants. The servants, unable to wear such inappropriately grand garments, would sell them to companies for a small sum. It is therefore understandable when considering the status of actors in contrast to their fine theatrical apparel that players became the symbol of the distance between appearance and reality.

### The Boy Players

As with all of Shakespeare's female characters, Juliet would have been played by a young boy of fourteen or so. There is no reason to believe that Shakespeare was anything but secure in the abilities of his boy-actors and the willingness of his audience to suspend their disbelief. Sir Walter Raleigh remarked 'With the disappearance of the boy players the poetic drama died in England'.

The actor would also have been helped by his costume, which would impose the gait and demeanour of a woman. The historical accuracy of the costume was not the concern of Shakespeare's stage and costumes were generally a strange blend of the contemporary and historical. The colours and textures were emblematic of the characters' social status and symbolic of their emotional state and nature.

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### 6. THE LANGUAGE OF LOVERS

Romeo's early language of love, the words and phrases he uses to describe his love for Rosaline are borrowed from other lovers and poets. He is well-versed in the clichés of Romantic love and fancies himself in the part of distraught lover. Friar Lawrence says of his feelings for Rosaline that 'Thy love did read by rote that could not spell' i.e. Your feelings were learnt, not experienced.

Romeo's love for Rosaline and the way he expresses it are linked to the work of Petrarch, an Italian poet popular at the time Shakespeare was writing. Petrarch's subject was often a young man's unrequited love for a disdainful or unobtainable woman. This was the style or fashion of courtly or romantic love. Romeo is as much in love with the idea of love as he is with Rosaline.

When he meets Juliet his language changes. Gradually, as she initiates him into becoming a true lover and a worthy match for her – his expressions become more original and more personal. Compare:

'Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs  
Being purged, a fire sparkling in lover's eyes' (I.i – 188)

To:

'O my love, my wife  
Death that hath sucked the honey of thy breath  
Have no power yet upon thy beauty' (V.iii – 911)

Of the two, Juliet has the better command of language. Her wit is sharper; her expression clearer and more pithy. There is a directness in her approach. Until she is sure of Romeo in the balcony scene she keeps him at bay with questions: Who are you? How did you get here? Each time Romeo attempts a grandiose wooing she cuts him off with a question or statement.

Romeo: With love's light wings I do o'er perch these walls,  
For stony limits cannot hold love out  
And what love can do, that dares love attempt  
Therefore thy kinsmen are no stop to me.

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Juliet If they do find thee, they will murder thee.

(II.ii – 70)

This style continues through the scene until Juliet is confident enough to trust him. Even then, though, she does not speak to him in complicated abstract imagery of night or love but plainly, and asks him to do the same, abandoning the conventional pattern of wooing.

Juliet Fain would I dwell on form: fain, fain deny  
What I have spoke  
Oh gentle Romeo  
If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully.

And later:

Swear not by the moon  
Do not swear at all  
Or if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self.

(II.ii – 112)

Only speak what you mean and what you can adhere to, she asks him. Just be honest.

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### 7. THE LANGUAGE OF ADDRESS

The way in which characters address one another can tell us much about their relationships and their feelings towards other people and events. Names can have a very precise power. By choosing to call someone a distinct name we are defining our relationship and status to them. For example, choosing, or being asked to call a teacher 'Sir', maintains a distance and prevents familiarity between teacher and pupil. Shortening a friend's name can demonstrate endearment or closeness. For example, when Juliet was a toddler, the nurse's husband called her 'Jules'.

Juliet's relationship with her mother can be traced through her language of address. Striving towards adulthood and recognition of herself as an equal, Juliet attempts a formal language with her mother. In the first three acts of the play, Lady Capulet is always called 'Madam' by her daughter – even when they talk of intimate things such as marriage. It is only when Juliet is threatened by her father with banishment that she returns to a more informal, and child-like address – when she is feeling vulnerable and threatened:

'Oh sweet mother, cast me not away' (III.v – 198)

Juliet keeps Paris at bay in IV.i by calling him 'Sir' – constantly implying a distance between them. She corrects him when he addresses her as his lady:

Paris Happily met my lady and my wife.  
Juliet That may be, Sir, when I may be a wife.

Note that she says 'a wife', not 'your wife', even though she's talking to the man who intends to marry her. Paris always remains 'Sir' – a man she does not wish to become familiar with. Romeo, however, once they have married, is

'Love, Lord, my husband friend.' (III.v – 43)

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### 8. FATE, FEUD AND FORTUNE

We know from the words of the prologue that the future is bleak for Juliet and Romeo. Fate and fortune are dominant themes of the play, interweaving through the feud between the families and the lost fortunes of the lovers. Having been told the outcome of the story before they see the play, the audience is given a feeling of destiny fulfilling itself as the drama is played out on the stage – until Romeo and Juliet take their own lives.

The feud between the families decides the fate of the lovers long before they meet. The origin of the quarrel between the Capulets and the Montagues is unclear. One gets the impression that it happened so long ago that the original argument has been forgotten and the feud has become an issue of honour to be maintained.

Shakespeare weaves the idea of Fate throughout the fabric of the play. He makes characters concentrate on the whim of Fortune, on dreams, on premonitions. All believe that dreams have the power to foretell and influence the future. Mercutio may mock Romeo's love-sick dreaming, but his Queen Mab speech, although cynically declaimed, attests to the common belief in the power of dreams.

Those in the play who tell of their dreams also tell us of the future. Romeo says he 'dreamt my lady came and found me dead,' as of course Juliet does when she wakes in the vault beside her poisoned lover. While Paris and Romeo fight in the tomb, Balthazar, asleep under a tree outside dreams that:

'my master and another fought,  
And that my master did slay him.'

(V.iii-137)

Dreams are also linked to omens and curses. Romeo, setting out for the ball, senses there is trouble ahead:

'My mind misgives  
Some consequence yet hanging in the stars  
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date  
With this night's revels.'

(I.iv – 106)

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Juliet twice predicts the death of both of them; first, as Romeo leaves her to go into exile:

'O God I have an ill-divining soul  
Methinks I see thee, now thou art below  
As one dead in the bottom of a tomb' (III.v – 54)

and later in the same scene when she refuses to marry Paris, before she learns of Friar Lawrence's plan:

'Or if you do not, make the bridal bed  
In that dim monument where Tybalt lies.' (III.v – 202)

Fortune is not called upon to help or guide them in the play, but is rather a giver of omens or precursor of doom which can lead you astray:

'These violent delights have violent ends  
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder  
Which as they kiss / consume' (II.vi – 9)

Shakespeare threads the idea of feud and division throughout the play by his constant use of juxtaposed and contrasting images. Night is set against day, dark against light:

'More light and light, more dark and dark our woes.'

Love stands against hate. Everything in *Romeo and Juliet* is in opposition to something else – not just the Capulets and Montagues. A wedding feast can become a funeral wake with very little difficulty. Scenes move between public and private settings. The freedom of Romeo and his friends to roam the streets is contrasted with the controlled and secluded life of Juliet, who never once in the play appears in the streets of Verona in public.

Men and women are always in opposition; in their behaviour, their views and the choices they make. However, fortune does not discriminate between them when it comes to determining their fate. The feud between Capulet and Montague touches and taints everyone, from servant to Prince. It is only death that can bring about reconciliation, the death of the two lovers who took no part in the feud but must pay the price of ancient hatred anyway.

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### 9. READING A SCENE

A few useful questions to consider when initially looking at a scene.

- How relevant is this scene to the principle action of the play?
- How often are the words and activities repeated elsewhere in the play?
- Are significant narrative points given here – are the audience's expectations satisfied or further delayed?
- How do the rhythms in single passages, and the whole scene, change?
- Is the language in terms of images and phrasing simple or complex? Does this change at any time; is a contrast made?
- Is the dominant focus of a scene on an individual or on a group? Is the number of characters on stage different from the scenes that go before / after? How are the characters grouped to reflect the content of the scene?
- What is the relative status of the characters (not just in terms of social standing, but also in terms of their emotional strength, personality traits, command of the situation etc). Does the distribution of power change at any point in the scene – if so where and how is this achieved?
- Are there any climactic revelations?
- Trace the route a character takes through the play. What does this scene serve to tell us about this character? How is the character reacting to the occasion in hand and how does this differ from the other characters? How much should the audience be laughing or crying at this point – and why?
- What relevance does this scene have to your life? Does it make you reflect on your life and does it provide you with any new personal or universal insights? Is our appreciation of life in general enhanced or deepened?
- As an audience what satisfactions, doubts, excitements or frustrations have we experienced in the course of this scene?

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### 10. OBJECTIVES

A useful rehearsal exercise involves the actors expressing their objectives before saying each line. In real life, we rarely speak without wanting to express ourselves, to make a point, or to inspire some reaction from the person we are talking to. Getting the actor to express what they want before saying each line ensures that conversations become active and purposeful, and stops the actors enjoying the language at the expense of the action of the scene. An example of a scene where it is easy to let the density of the language conceal the true needs and wants of the characters is the first meeting of Romeo and Juliet at the Capulet's party. The scene works on two levels; Romeo and Juliet are enjoying their ability to match each other with verbal agility, but their playful dialogue springs from their strong physical attraction and their need / want / desire to kiss each other.

#### Act I Scene v

- Romeo            *[I want to kiss your hand as well as hold it]*  
If I profane with my unwortheiest hand  
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:  
My lips two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss
- Juliet            *[I want you to know that I like you holding my hand.]*  
Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,  
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;  
For saints have hands that pilgrim's hands do touch,  
And palm to palm for holy palmer's kiss.
- Romeo            *[I really want to kiss your lips as well as your hand.]*  
Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?
- Juliet            *[I want you to woo me a bit more first.]*  
Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

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- Romeo            *[I want you to kiss me otherwise I'll be distraught.]*  
O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;  
Then pray: grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.
- Juliet            *[I want to kiss you but I can't make the first move.]*  
Saints do not move, though grant for prayer's sake.
- Romeo            *[I want you to accept my kiss then.]*  
Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take (He kisses her)  
*[I want you to know I enjoyed it.]*  
Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purg'd
- Juliet            *[I want you to kiss me again.]*  
Then have my lips the sin that they have took.
- Romeo            *[I want you to kiss me back.]*  
Sin from my lips? O trespass sweetly urg'd (He kisses her)  
Give me my sin again
- Juliet            *[I want you to kiss me less formally]*  
You kiss by th'book.

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### 11. PARAPHRASING

In order to ensure a full understanding of the text it is useful to go over the speeches and put the character's words into modern colloquial English. Note how long it takes to say the same thing that Shakespeare compresses into a few lines. Paraphrasing ensures that the meaning is clear. Once this has been done it is always best to reassemble the speech.

The text below provides an example of the type of paraphrasing an actor may provide during such an exercise. The actors would be expected to do this spontaneously and this sheet is included to complement and demonstrate the technique.

#### Act II Scene iii

Friar Before the sun rises to welcome the new day and evaporate the mist and dew from the grass, I must fill up my basket with harmful weeds and beneficial flowers. Mother Earth is both the beginning and the end of life; it is the grave where the dead are buried, and the womb from which all new life begins. From the soil all kinds of flowers and plants draw goodness and life, as a child does from its mother's breast. Many of these plants have amazing healing power – all are useful for something, yet they all have different qualities. The virtuous powers of plants, herbs and minerals are numerous and far-reaching. Even the most poisonous of plants have beneficial qualities, and similarly, even the most medicinal of plants, if wrongly used, can have the opposite effect and cause harm. Even the most pure action can become evil if it is wrongly motivated, and sometimes negative qualities can become positive if they are used for good purpose. Inside the flimsy stem of this young flower, the smell revives the whole body, but when you taste it, it stops all your senses functioning and kills you. The same opposite extremes exist in people as well as plants; the ability to behave honourably and the ability to behave sinfully. And when a person allows their sinful behaviour to have the upper hand, sooner or later the person will be so disease-ridden with sin that they will die.

Romeo Good morning father.

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Friar God bless you. Who can it be that has got up so early to greet me so pleasantly? Dear boy, getting out of bed so early implies that you've got a troubled mind. It is natural for troubles to keep old men awake, because when the mind is overactive, relaxation is impossible. But a young carefree person with no problems should fall into a welcome sleep the minute his head touches the pillow. This leads me to think that you have woken up so early because you've got something on your mind. Or if that's not the case, I can only assume that you've been up all night.

Romeo You've hit the nail on the head with your last suggestion. I've been doing something more wonderful than sleeping.

Friar God forgive you, you haven't spent the night with Rosaline have you?

Romeo Who? Rosaline? My dear holy father, no I haven't! I have completely forgotten about her, and the grief she gave me.

Friar Good boy. But where have you been then?

Romeo Don't worry. You don't need to ask again as I'm dying to tell you. I've been to dinner with my enemy and suddenly my 'enemy' shot an arrow through my heart. Both our injuries can only be cured by your help as a homeopath and a priest. Please don't hate my enemy, dear father, because my plea to you is both for myself and my enemy.

Friar Please use more simple and down to earth language dear boy. Confusing explanations get confusing advice.

Romeo The simple truth is that I have fallen in love with the beautiful daughter of the wealthy Capulet. And in the same way that I love her, she loves me. And everything is tied up except the knot you must tie by marrying us. All the details of the time and place of our meeting, falling in love and engagement I will explain to you in due time. All I ask is that you agree to marry us today.

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Friar God in heaven, what a complete and utter U-turn. Are you telling me that the woman who you said was the love of your life means nothing to you now? Young men obviously judge by appearances rather than loving from the heart. You have cried oceans of tears and almost washed your face away by crying over Rosaline. What a waste of emotions to love and cherish someone and then throw her away before you've enjoyed that love. The tears and sighs you breathed yesterday and are still hanging heavily in the air, and my ears are still ringing from your lovesick moaning about Rosaline. Look, here on your cheek is a crusty old tear that you cried yesterday and haven't had time to wash off yet. As surely as you are Romeo and the tears you shed were Romeo's you and your tears were devoted to Rosaline. And are you telling me that you've changed your mind? Listen to this proverb then; there's no hope for women when men are weak.

Romeo You always told me off for loving Rosaline.

Friar I told you off for being obsessed with her, not for loving her.

Romeo And you told me to forget all about her.

Friar I didn't tell you to forget all about her by picking on someone else.

Romeo Please don't tell me off. The one I love now loves me as deeply and honestly as I love her. The other one didn't.

Friar She was intelligent enough to see through you and realise that you were reciting words you didn't understand. But come with me, you fickle boy. I'll help you for one reason only. It may just happen that your love and marriage will manage to change the animosity between your two families to friendship.

There are several ways in which to develop this exercise, or rather to adapt it to the group concerned. The first might be to encourage participants to paraphrase in precisely the way they talk in everyday life, free from the pressure to conform to "standard" English. This serves to

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illustrate just how secure their understanding is, but more importantly may release a certain rhythmic, natural quality to their speech patterns. Shakespeare's verse is full of these patterns, albeit heightened, and an actor's appreciation of this organic quality is essential.

Secondly, the exercise can be compressed. What is really being said? If a scene is distilled to its absolute essence, the core dynamics of the argument often become clearer.

(from Romeo's entrance)

Friar Hi. This is a bit early for a teenager to be up. You haven't gone to bed have you?

Romeo Too right.

Friar Don't tell me you were with Rosaline?

Romeo Her? No way. She's history.

Friar What then?

Romeo I've been shot in the heart by my enemy. We need your help.

Friar What are you talking about?

Romeo I've fallen in love with Juliet! Marry us!

Friar Oh my God. What happened to Rosaline? You can't be serious.

And so on. It loses all the detail, but focuses on the core of the dramatic exchange.

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### 12. CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

<b>Member of Tybalt's gang</b>	Stefan Hristov Dermendjiev
<b>Tybalt and Jesus</b>	Ólafur Egill Egilsson
<b>Paris</b>	Erlendur Eiríksson
<b>Juliet</b>	Nína Dögg Filippusdóttir
<b>Romeo</b>	Gísli Örn Gardarsson
<b>Friar Laurence</b>	Árni Pétur Guðjónsson
<b>Prince</b>	Tómas Aron Guðmundsson
<b>Mercutio</b>	Björn Hlynur Haraldsson
<b>Peter</b>	Víkingur Kristjánsson
<b>Nurse to Juliet</b>	Ólafur Darri Ólafsson
<b>Capulet</b>	Ingvar E. Sigurdsson
<b>Member of Tybalt's gang</b>	Jóhannes Níels Sigurdsson
<b>Lady Capulet and Benvolio</b>	Margrét Vilhjálmsdóttir
Direction	Gísli Örn Gardarsson
Design	Börkur Jónsson
Costumes	Thórunn Elísabet Sveinsdóttir
Lighting	Paul Russell
Choreography	Katrin Hall
Sound	Crispian Covell
Musical Direction	Karl Olgeirsson
Voice/Dialect	Neil Swain

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### 13. INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR GISLI ÖRN GARDARSSON

*What drew you to Romeo and Juliet?*

The idea of flying on the wings of love.

*How did the project evolve? Were you looking for a play which could accommodate your very physical, circus-inspired performance style, or did the acrobatics and aerobatics come out of your understanding of the play?*

There is a term in theatre that says, "Less is more". On doing *Romeo and Juliet* I was really inspired to do a production where the key sentence would be "more is more". I therefore wanted to mix whatever has inspired me in theatre, films, music, circus etc, and do whatever I felt was right and basically stage a production I have not seen before...with a lot of elements I have seen before.

During acting school and as an actor in Reykjavik, some of my characters have been of the 'love-sick' type. It is sometimes pretty challenging to do these characters, I mean how do you act being in love? It is often an inner state which is difficult to project to an audience. I was therefore tickled by the idea of doing a production where a character in love would literally fly on the wings of love. When you feel like love is in the air...let it be in the air.

When searching for a play to match this idea, it was kind of obvious for me to choose the most famous love story of all time. Having chosen the play, every move we make in the production springs from the text of the play. I have seen some of the 'new circuses', where they play around with a theatre/circus mixture. For me I have never seen the story work within that frame, so I thought it would be interesting to give it a try myself.

*What were the challenges and choices involved in creating your version of the play (an Icelandic adaptation of an English interpretation of a sixteenth-century Italian love story!)?*

The challenge was to keep the essence of the story, in a language that is constructed in the same way as Shakespeare's original text. Our challenge was also to make word games that were funny in England 1596 funny in Reykjavik 2002. Our translator was very true to Shakespeare. At the

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moment we are re-rehearsing the play in the original English text and I really must say that our translation is extremely close to the original.

*How did you learn the circus skills used in the show?*

I did gymnastics when I was younger, so my inspiration towards the circus comes from that source. None of the other actors had that experience, so basically I had to put them through really intensive circus/gymnastic/physical/ camps. We trained physically for almost six months, every day.

The process was that I would watch circus shows on video in the evening and then experiment with elements that inspired me in rehearsals. I also had to push each and every one to the maximum of his or her competence to find out what would be realistic for us to do. None of the equipment that we wanted to use (trapezes, aerial rings, tissues etc.) exists in Iceland. I therefore had to ask a blacksmith who is my neighbour to help make these things. What the cast has achieved as a result of this tough period of training is pretty impressive. Of course we had quite a few injuries, like a broken toe, a dislocated elbow, some stitches here and there, twisted ankles, bruises etc, but we were aware of that risk when we started out so we accepted it.

*What images and ideas lie at the heart of the production?*

Flying in the balcony scene. Killing from above. Bursting into singing. Dancing with a dead Juliet. Friends hanging in a trapeze. Characters falling around on each other's shoulder. Love at first sight in mid-air...

*What do you think is the relationship between the language of the play and the very visual, physical character of the production?*

It is completely linked. The language is like the powder in a rocket. The physical aspects are the fire. If used correctly you will experience some pretty amazing fireworks.

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*Is there anything you consider to be specifically Icelandic about the production? Do you see any significant differences between contemporary Icelandic and British theatre practice?*

Apart from the language we speak, I am not sure. The only thing I have as a guideline is what I like or dislike. Maybe I have a different taste from those who are my age somewhere else. My inspiration springs from all over, so...hmm...Probably not.

*What particular challenges do you face as both the director and one of the central characters in the play?*

Well, one major difficulty is that I am never able to see what the show looks like when being performed on stage. You have the feeling of what it is like...but you'll never see it as a whole.

It is therefore extremely important to surround yourself with the right people for this kind of work: people who are extremely open-minded and willing to go the whole distance with you. It is often a difficult journey, and will certainly reveal your true character. Your nerves and temperature have to be under control for this kind of work. The atmosphere has to be embracing, so that we trust one another one hundred percent. I have worked with almost everyone in this production before, so I was pretty confident of the company's commitment to it.

*How do you approach rehearsals?*

I try to make it a process where everyone becomes as engaged as myself. I try to make it worth the effort by keeping the spirits high and I have a burning urge towards the play. Thus I know the goal of the journey and it's all about clearing a space for it.

*How do you get the best performances out of actors while they are hanging upside down or concentrating on dangerous aerobatics?*

Another aspect of the experiment involved in doing this production was to challenge this. How do you act when your focus is not based on your performance as an actor, but on the physical reality of how the scene is solved. The danger involved is that all your focus goes into, "If I screw up this jump, I am not finishing this performance..." In a situation like this you are no longer part of the play, but stuck in your own consciousness of the fact that you're hanging upside down. Of course the aim is to get to the point where hanging upside down helps you create a feeling of something you've not felt before and thus adds an element to your character which is beyond your usual habits. It's all about making actors do physical stuff that helps them reach the character's

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feelings. Sometimes it doesn't work together and then you have to lose the idea of adding the physical elements. But when this works we're creating some pretty amazing stuff.

*You're an actor, acrobat and director whose work has encompassed dance, theatre and film, and moved from classical to contemporary texts as well as devised projects. What qualities do you respond to in a potential performance piece?*

For me, nothing is as boring as boring theatre, no matter how fantastic all the surroundings might be. My respect for theatre is so great, that I get really pissed off when a production has no effect on me. When I watch theatre I really want to go, 'YES!'

For me, at the moment, I am really into finding the heart of things. I just want to see a character look another character in the eye and tell the truth. Then it doesn't matter if you are hanging upside down 20 feet above the ground or sitting with a cup of tea around a table. Although if I had to choose I would want to see the one with the actor upside down - until I'm too old to do it myself.

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### 14. CONVERSATION WITH DAVID AND GISLI

**David Lan, Artistic Director of the Young Vic, talks to Gísli Örn Gardarsson, director of Romeo and Juliet, about how this co-production was born.**

Gisli What was the thinking behind transferring our Icelandic production to London? Surely it would have been less hassle and cheaper to do an original production in England?

David There is such *life* in your version even though I couldn't understand a word of the language! You've found a poetic way of expressing the heart of the story. You're not at all true to 'the letter' of the play but you are to 'the spirit' of it.  
That excited me, so I sent some other people along to see if they agreed with me.

Gisli You sent everybody but the cleaner!

David Well, I've had the experience of seeing a show in one place and it's great, then you see it somewhere else and it isn't. Some shows lose something if they move from where they were born. And also you people were all so charming – I didn't want to be seduced merely by the charm of the Icelanders! But why, as an Icelander, did you choose to do Shakespeare in the first place?

Gisli Because it's full of freedom.

David Freedom in what sense?

Gisli The text is so rich in imagery that you can interpret it any way you like. You can approach the scenes in 15 different ways, so you have countless options. All that we do in this production evolves from the text.

David What do Icelanders think about Shakespeare?

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Gisli Well, we've had the same translations of Shakespeare for 50 years now, all by the same writer. He's done a fantastic job. But on a cerebral level the poetry can be quite hard to understand. At least, that's what I thought before I became an actor, and I know many people see it that way. What are your impressions? Do you think that we approach theatre differently to you?

David There are so many different kinds of theatre in Britain. Some people say theatre here is too literary. I believe literature steals plays from the theatre. Plays belong in the theatre. Obviously there is overlap but some productions in our country are *very* literary. I see *your* approach as being very much 'in the moment, of the moment'. There's nowhere to hide and it has to be real *now* or it's nothing.

Gisli For me, it's all about standing on stage and finding the truth.

David How do you know when you're being true?

Gisli It's a gut feeling. You have your own vision and if you stick to that nothing else matters. It may be that people disagree with you but you have to stick to your instincts.

David Which has been the best part for you throughout the journey of this production?

Gisli Working with the people. The show would not have the energy it has without them. And it would only take one 'no' person to destroy it. Of course there's been a lot of outside hassle because we did this with no money, and we were all simultaneously working on other projects to pay the bills. So this became almost a 'hobby' job that we were rehearsing whenever we could grab the time. The storm of daily life as performers meant that our schedule was constantly interrupted by outside influences. Many of the cast, myself included, had contractual commitments elsewhere. The result was that you had a theatre company saying one thing and a film company saying another and so on. The upshot was that it became incredibly hectic. And the whole thing was exacerbated by the nature of the production. It's hard to imagine an entire scene taking place in a trapeze when you don't have a trapeze for the whole rehearsal period!

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David Why did you persevere?

Gisli Because I am surrounded by the best possible people. You wouldn't really want to be anywhere else. The production was in a way an experiment for everyone and at times things were tough. People were physically exhausted, the plans changed more often than the weather in Iceland and the technical requirements kept delaying the premier again and again. It takes a bunch of pretty fantastic people not to jump off the train.

David Why did it have to be Gisli directing and Gisli playing Romeo?

Gisli The first image I got was the idea of finishing a show and standing backstage sweating and completely exhausted. I think as actors it is easy to become lazy, but I wanted to be involved in something that was a genuine challenge. And fortunately the other actors adopted that idea. I chose Romeo because I wanted to explore the emotions he goes through in a circus inspired environment. I chose to direct it so it would turn out to be the show I wanted it to be. On a different level, I feel a great responsibility to the theatre. I feel that I need to show my non-theatre friends that acting is a worthwhile profession and that theatre is not dead.

David How does this circus style help illustrate the emotions of the piece?

Gisli There are countless songs about 'Flying on the wings of Love'. When you are 'in love' and your love is returned, you feel you can do absolutely anything, and I had a very clear thought of how effective it would be if people in that category were actually flying. So that you could literally just point up at someone and say 'Yep, he's in love!'