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Introduction to "Early Modern to Postmodern Shakespeares: Three Approaches to Staging Romeo and Juliet"

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One of the main goals of the peer-reviewed section of the *Journal* is to bridge perceived gaps between the crafts of directing and choreography with training and scholarship in the fields. The following piece came out of a new plenary session at the Comparative Drama Conference in Baltimore, MD, in March 2016, organized by Dr. Laura Snyder of Stevenson University. The format for the plenary, helmed by Dr. Verna Foster and our author, Dr. Janna Segal, aims to do just that—gather teachers and artists together to apply scholarly work to practice and exchange ideas, actively demonstrated. We are very pleased to print this peer-reviewed essay by the plenary contributors here in the Fall 2016 issue, in the year marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and as inspiration and example for future submissions to this section.

INTRODUCED • EDITED BY ANNE FLIOTSOS + ANN M. SHANAHAN

EARLY MODERN TO POSTMODERN SHAKESPEARES: THREE APPROACHES TO STAGING ROMEO AND JULIET

WRITTEN + EDITED BY JANNA SEGAL

WITH JAMES KEEGAN, BARON KELLY + DOREEN BECHTOL

"WHERE WE LAY OUR SCENE" (1.P.2)

Fulfilling Prince Escalus's concluding command, "Go hence to have more talk of these sad things" (5.3.306), *Romeo and Juliet* has been produced in myriad ways since its appearance in the 1590s. Although it is an adaptation of Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), which was likewise an adaptation, it is Shakespeare's "talk of these sad things" that has been canonized as the quintessential love "story of more woe" (5.3.308). Shakespeare's dramatization of Verona's young lovers was informed by the conventions of the early modern English stage, which included male performers in female roles, the use of cue-scripts, and lighting that united actors and spectators. Similarly, contemporary productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, and all other Shakespeare plays, are informed by the staging conventions of their target culture. As such, *Romeo and Juliet* presents today's directors with the challenge of retelling a famous story, often imagined as essentially Shakespearean, to a contemporary audience in an exciting way that would be unfamiliar to Shakespeare, who wrote within theatrical conditions different from those now practiced, even at theatres that strive to recreate early modern English staging practices.

The following is a description of different directorial responses to the question of how to stage Shakespeare's well-known love tragedy for a contemporary audience in a way that is immediate, relevant, innovative, and attentive to a target audience's expectations. This exploration was presented at the 2016 Comparative Drama Conference (CDC) at a plenary session organized by Dr. Verna Foster and myself. Three directors, Dr. James Keegan, Dr. Baron Kelly, and Professor Doreen Bechtol, worked with two performers, Tyler Dale and Sarah Wykowski, to illustrate to the target audience of professors and practitioners three approaches to staging one of the most recognizable scenes in the play: Romeo and Juliet's first meeting at the Capulet party (1.5.92-109). The trio of approaches, presented chronologically from the early modern to the postmodern, were: Cue-Scripts (Keegan); Meisner (Kelly); and Viewpoints (Bechtol). After each director demonstrated her or his respective method in a 20-minute mock rehearsal session with the performers, Dr. Foster and I ran a Q&A with the directors, actors, and conference attendees.

The three directors, all of whom are also accomplished Shakespearean actors, were chosen because they represent a broad range of theatrical perspectives on Shakespeare. An Associate Professor of English at the University of Delaware, Dr. Keegan is also a member of the resident acting troupe at the American Shakespeare Center (ASC), a theatre dedicated to the performance of "Shakespeare's works under their original staging conditions" ("What We Do"). In his more than 10 years with the ASC, Keegan has performed such roles as Lear, Macbeth, Iago, Shylock, and Titus Andronicus in the ASC's reconstruction of the private Blackfriars Theatre used by The King's Men troupe, of which Shakespeare was a member. Four-time Fulbright scholar, director, and actor, Dr. Kelly is an Associate Professor of Theatre Arts and the Director

of the African American Theatre Program at the University of Louisville. A film, television, and stage actor, he has played various Shakespearean roles, including: Othello (Utah Shakespeare Festival); King Duncan in *Macbeth* (The Bargello in Florence, Italy); and Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* (Stratford Shakespeare Festival, Canada). Kelly recently published *An Actor's Task: Engaging the Senses* (2015), a practical guide to developing an actor's physical, emotional, and sensory skills. An Assistant Professor in the MLitt/MFA Shakespeare and Performance program at Mary Baldwin College (MBC), Bechtol was an actor and choreographer for the ASC's resident troupe and is a co-founding member of the Performers Exchange Project (PEP). Having trained with the SITI Company and with **Joseph Chaikin**, Bechtol uses ensemble-based theatre-making methods to annually direct a devised piece that is based on the five early modern plays that the MBC MFA students select and produce each season.

We selected actors from the MBC MLitt/MFA Shakespeare and Performance program to ensure that our performers were well-versed in Shakespeare. Our Romeo, Tyler Dale, had recently played Lucentio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and our Juliet, Sarah Wykowski, had played Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. As graduate students in a program partnered with the ASC, Dale and Wykowski had also worked with Bechtol and Keegan on and off the ASC's recreation of the Blackfriars stage. Additionally, Wykowski participated in a series of workshops Kelly had conducted during his visit to the MLitt/MFA program in Fall 2015.

We chose to present Romeo and Juliet's first meeting (1.5.92-109) for its complexity, familiarity, and brevity. While the Act Two Prologue insists that upon meeting the lovers were "Alike bewitched by the charm of looks" (2.P.6), their first encounter suggests that it was their "looks" as much as the "charm of" spontaneously co-authoring a sonnet that left them mutually "bewitched." In only eighteen lines, the audience watches Romeo and Juliet meet, co-create a sonnet, and fall in love. This fast-paced courtship occurs under the surveillance of the attendants at the Capulet party, as the audience is reminded when, after they "kiss by th'book" (1.5.109), the Nurse tells Juliet, "your mother craves a word" (1.5.110). Because this action-packed, brief sonnet-building sequence is well-known, we were able to proceed unburdened by the exposition we might otherwise need to orient an audience. The scene's conciseness guaranteed each director the opportunity to work with the actors on the exchange at least three times, which allowed for a better illustration of how the technique might be applied in a rehearsal room.