

# A Rose By Any Other Name

While Juliet's rose may have smelled as sweet by any other name, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma's recent production at the Philadelphia Live Arts festival, *Romeo and Juliet*, retains the name of the Bard's classic but offers something completely different. This has led to some confusion. When an opening night in Paris attracted an audience expecting this New York based troupe's take on the original, some unlucky theatergoers left promptly – one imagines them in a huff – without being rewarded with a single “Where art thou.” I call these stalwart crusaders for the canon unlucky because the strange new flower here in bloom, though not a rose, smells just as sweet.

This is not to say that it smells the same. In place of Shakespeare's tragic tale of forbidden love, directors Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper give us a comic meditation on love, eroticism and memory in our age. The considerable and at times hysterical laughs derive both from the concept of the piece and from the appropriately hyperbolic acting of Anne Gridley, Robert Johanson, and Elisabeth Conner (as the dancing chicken). But one cannot classify this production strictly as Shakespearian parody, and the almost overwhelming funniness eventually yields to a tonal shift in the direction of ... well, what, really? At the end, the production is decisively no longer a comedy, but it is not yet a tragedy. As it is revealed here, our age calls to mind Hölderlin's assessment that “the tragic for us is that we are silently packed up in a container and taken away from the realm of the living, not that consumed by flames, we pay the penalty to the flames we could not tame.” Here the untamable fire of forbidden love gives way to the disquieting quiet of the silent containers in which we pack ourselves up.

In the discussion following the production I attended, Copper recounted the way she and Liska developed the concept and the language of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the nascent stage, the idea was to develop the language of the piece – its closest approximation to a script – by recording telephone conversations with a set of favorite interlocutors. Those on the other end of the line were to respond to the simple question, “What is love?” So many of the respondents answered this deceptively simple question by referring to Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers, however, that Liska and Copper decided to revise the guiding question. Now, the recorded conversations would capture people's attempts to recall, to recount, to remember the original of which the resulting play would be only nominally a copy. And the result refers to the original according to the logic of the childhood game ‘telephone’: lapses in memory produce creative distortions and creative interpolations that reveal much more about us than they reveal about what went on back then in ... was it Verona?

Indeed, the lapses in memory provide much of the comic and critical substance, and are acknowledged with a telling regularity in the on-stage monologues that recapitulate and interpret the recorded responses. One respondent, played with a manic but earnest wit by Gridley, wilts at the prospect of trying to recall anything of *Romeo and Juliet*, saying that her memory has been erased and replaced by some mental version of TV snow. The generalized

cultural amnesia must in some sense be cause for concern, but it is also cause to reflect on what, exactly, we did with cultural objects when our memories were not so saturated with internet-era white noise. Another of Gridley's character's, as if offering an excuse for allowing her cultural memory to go slack, remarks that nobody goes to cocktail parties anymore and wonders where people do go nowadays to show they are smart: “Do they talk about Hamlet in chatrooms?” Rejecting the highbrow cocktail party and the highbrow chatroom alike, a character played by Johanson strays far afield from Shakespeare toward talk of Anna Nicole Smith, 9/11, and Osama bin Laden. Although Johanson's presentation captures the floundering incoherence of someone trying to get his bearings in unfamiliar terrain, in the end we learn that the departure of these rambles from any pretense to cultural knowledge is precisely the point. We talk about things like *Romeo and Juliet*, this fellow argues, for the same reason that we talk about pop-cultural nonsense or the daily headlines: we need something to talk about.

We certainly do need something to talk about, something to give shape to the world we share in common, and the literary canon may have once served this role. But this production refuses the false distinction between an antiquarian nostalgia for the canon, on the one hand, and media saturated oblivion, on the other. Rather, in staging the constitutive lapses in cultural memory, this *Romeo and Juliet* engages with and in some sense retrieves the canonical one while transforming it for comic and critical effect. Part of the critical force certainly lies in the performance of our cultural and historical amnesia, but the void thereby opened up must be filled in with something, and the respondents are by no means taciturn. After all, we need something to talk about.

What do we talk about when we've lost our bearings in the world and its manifold histories and heritages? In this case, sex. In the various attempts to retell the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's subtle and uncertain allusions to sex are exploded with a striking consistency; the implicit is explicated, the unsaid said. Romeo's brooding is taken as a euphemistic cover for his “jerking off,” Romeo has a “raging hard-on,” to Romeo's man-whorishness one character counterpoises Juliet's sluttishness. And, of course, “they do it,” as more than one character seems to need to affirm. All of this is very funny, but for me it also provoked a moment of self-reflection as I noticed how often I do the same thing with texts. Just as the fire of *Romeo and Juliet*'s love is forbidden, there is also a kind poetic taboo in Shakespeare's text that allows for innuendo while barring explicit talk of sex from rising too far to the surface, and this makes *Romeo and Juliet*'s professions of love all the more enthralling. We, however, seem to be unwilling or unable to let the unsaid remain unsaid, and this seems symptomatic of the fact that we are no longer consumed by flames.

The tone shifts in what we might call the second act, as Gridley and Johanson join each other on stage for the first time in the performance. Whereas the primarily comedic first act takes place in monologue, the more dialogical second act becomes subdued and reflective as the characters talk about sex



and love and, paradoxically, the narcissism of the spian ambition. Whereas the comedic monologues evinced a certain obsession with conflating love and sex, or with reducing the former to the latter, the argument advanced in dialogue attempts to separate the two; the actor can let sex be nothing more than what it is as long as she or he can count on being loved by the audience. The ambivalence and uncertainty with which Gridley and Johanson profess their desire to be loved by their audience, however, marks a wavering threshold between an explanation of artistic ambition and a justification of the loneliness its achievement entails. Because the fires of forbidden love do not consume us, we can pack ourselves up in the containers of our own projects and thereby take ourselves away from the realm of the living. The age revealed here is one that forbids almost nothing, in which the sky portends nothing and lovers are not star-crossed but are merely stars, endlessly circling one another without really touching.

The uneasy disquiet of the second act yields, in a postscript, to meditative quiet as the lights are extinguished and Gridley and Johanson perform the canonical-to-the-point-of-cliché balcony scene in the dark. The intentional over-pronunciation and mispronunciation that characterizes the first two acts (in which ‘poison’ sounds like ‘posion’ and the accent falls with a thud on the second syllable of ‘balcony’) gives way to plainspoken verse, and the previous comic hyperbole disappears. One is tempted to see this as a nostalgic return. Whereas those responding to the question “What is love?” could only do so by turning to Shakespeare and those turning to Shakespeare could only do so in the mode of creative forgetfulness, the performance ends by giving the Bard the last word. Just as the first two acts creatively distort this canonical text to produce a genuinely contemporary work, however, the return at the end to a straightforward presentation of Shakespeare's poetry gives new life to words so often forgotten. In the hands of the Nature Theater of Oklahoma this epilogue does not imply a return to the fires of forbidden love and to the penalty they must exact for lack of payment. Such a return would be obscene in our age, as reactionary voices are raised with increasing ferocity to divide licit from illicit love and to thereby determine which lovers may be sacrificed. Here, instead, we hear in these words so often heard and so often forgotten a profession of love beyond the petty but nonetheless draconian contingencies conspiring to make love forbidden. Beyond tragic sacrifice as well as isolated indifference, we are compelled to step out of our containers, to return to the land of the living, and to let a new kind of fire burn brightly.

-- Jeffrey D. Gower

