

Matthew Bourne's
ROMEO+
JULIET
Music by PROKOFIEV

THEMES

THEME 1 – UNFORBIDDEN LOVE

Romeo and Juliet's all-consuming love for one another becomes the catalyst for them putting not only themselves, but also those around them, in significant jeopardy.

In the original storyline, Romeo and Juliet's love is forbidden because they come from two different families entrenched in a long-standing feud – the Capulets and the Montagues. In Matthew's production, their love is off limits because of the segregation of males and females at the Verona Institute of which they are both inmates. Any emotion or feeling is discouraged in the Institute and we only see the inmates lose their inhibitions when they are left to their own devices in Act One of the social organised by Rev. Laurence, the Institute chaplain. In Act Three Romeo and Juliet are also kept in solitary confinement away from each other.



In an environment in which young people are under close scrutiny and robbed of basic freedoms, Romeo and Juliet's need for one another becomes uncompromising.

Matthew explores the realms of forbidden love in other ways too, including through homophobic assaults metered out by the brutal guard, Tybalt, against Mercutio and his boyfriend, Balthasar. Note being, in Shakespeare's play there is no romantic entanglement between Mercutio and Balthasar though there are other parallels, such as Mercutio's energetic, flamboyant and reckless personality and the conflict he has with Tybalt - his mean-spirited aggressor with whom he instigates many fights.

Even Rev. Laurence is restricted in the amount of pastoral love and care she can afford the vulnerable young people in her care, due to the 'will' of the Institute and the powerful characters that run it.

Romeo's parents, Senator and Brie Montague, (Lord and Lady Montague in the original) exhibit a concerning lack of parental love, too. They are cold and business-like in their dealings with him – a contributing factor that could be why Romeo falls so fast and hard for Juliet.

Brutish and unflinching, Tybalt later suffers a personal break-down as he realises the object of his obsession (Juliet) is in love with Romeo. Whilst he dishes out punishment towards anyone developing what he sees as 'unallowable' relationships, we see that in many ways Tybalt is also experiencing the pain of forbidden and, in his case, unrequited love.

Romeo and Juliet portrays love not as the gentle 'flowers and teddy bears' kind that it is so regularly featured in tales of young lovers, but as a chaos-inducing, grief-inciting force that supersedes everything else.

There are no winners in this story of dashed hopes and broken hearts.

What to look out for...

- + Senator and Brie Montague's unemotional 'goodbye' as they hand Romeo over to the care of the Institute

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- + The moment Romeo first spots Juliet, as she performs a mournful solo following her abuse at the hands of her aggressor, Tybalt
- + The deep love and tenderness that is exhibited by Romeo and Juliet in their duet, as they steal precious moments alone
- + The frustration that Rev. Laurence feels at the lack of tenderness, kindness and love that is allowed within the Institute and how she takes the brave step to reunite Romeo and Juliet after Romeo is taken into solitary confinement
- + Tybalt's persecution of Mercutio and Balthasar
- + Juliet and Romeo's anguish and remorse as they realise that their love and their unflinching pursuit of it, has deteriorated even further the treatment of the Institute residents and that they are (in-part) responsible for the deaths of both Mercutio and Tybalt

THEME 2 – POWER

The almost omnipotent presence of the Verona Institute itself is perhaps the most powerful presence in Matthew Bourne's *Romeo and Juliet*. Designer, Lez Brotherston, immediately signifies to the audience that this is a place of restriction and control through the use of austere metal structures, bright lights and barred doors.



Whilst in Shakespeare's play the situation of their births confined Romeo and Juliet and forbade their love, in Matthew's version they are separated by a generalised segregation of genders in a stark humourless regime within the Institute. The inmates are kept in-check by unfeeling Nurses, Guards and Orderlies; all overseen by the money-hungry Governor Escalus.

Power is imposed both by the environment in which the young inmates are confined, as well as by the adults that 'look after them'. All of whom, other than the kindly Rev. Bernadette Laurence, are guilty of serious abuses of power. Tybalt is the guiltiest of them all and exhibits sickening persistence in his pursuit of Juliet.

Within the group of inmates powerful characters begin to emerge and often without them realising it. Mercutio, Balthasar and Benvolio form a playful, energetic and risk-taking trio – who spur the others on. They push back against rules and regulations and give hope to the other residents – as well as offering a welcome distraction to the monotony with their light-hearted antics.

Juliet is also a powerful player. Her selflessness and protection of the younger, more vulnerable residents wins her kudos and respect; and in return they expose themselves to potential punishment in order to help her. The fatal assault on Tybalt is very much powered by Juliet, albeit with the encouragement and support of her friends.

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The tireless pursuit of money by those in positions of influence has always been one of the dirtiest sources of power. When Romeo is due to be forced out of the Institute, in Act Three, he pretends that he has lost his mind, to avoid leaving Juliet. Terrified at how caring for their 'disturbed' son will impact their lives as public figures, Senator and Mrs Montague, throw money at the problem until the Governor acquiesces and Romeo's liberty is sold-off once more.

What to look out for...

- + How the set design conveys a sense of power to the audience, and how its structure physically impacts the freedom of movement by characters in the show
- + The intoxicating effect that Mercutio, Balthasar and Benvolio have on those around them (in particular with Rev. Laurence) and how they break boundaries with their powerful sense of self and big personalities
- + Consider the continual abuse of power that Tybalt exerts on all the inmates, but most notably Juliet. How does this contribute to the gradual grounding down of the residents' mental health?
- + How is Juliet viewed by her contemporaries and what does her doughty, yet delicate persona encourage in those around her?
- + The various abuses of power and status executed by Senator and Brie Montague.

THEME 3 – OPPRESSION

Oppression can be described as the 'prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority' and is at the very heart of Matthew Bourne's *Romeo and Juliet*. Authority is demanded by the adults within the Institute, not through respect but through the gradual disintegration of the young people's spirit and the removal of their essential freedoms. Every waking (and to some extent sleeping) moment of their day is regimented. What they can, and cannot do, is continually dictated to them and without opportunity for self-expression or volition.

The inmates are medicated into states of increasing stupor to dilute their behaviours and to enable the adults to regain full control of them - a sickening exploitation of their basic rights that eats at the very centre of their humanity. Emotions are controlled like levers via a cocktail of mind-numbing tasks that the inmates are forced to complete, coupled with heavily administered mood-control drugs.

This restriction of what the young people do, and even what they feel, sets in motion a dangerous undercurrent of resentment, anger and frustration that eventually rises up in retaliation.



In Shakespeare's original play, one of the key sources of oppression comes from the patriarchal structure within the story. One in which the female characters are unable to act on their desires without suffering dire consequences. In many ways, Juliet's fate was decided the day she fell in love with Romeo since her father would not accept disobedience to his will. The notion of his daughter falling for 'a Montague' was to him worth risking his daughter's happiness, and indeed very existence, over.

In Matthew's version, the Verona Institute is representative of the conforms that modern society inflicts on its citizens. It illustrates the persecution, segregation and unacceptable treatment of individuals that wish to live differently; and causes us to think about how truly open and accepting we are today.

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There is a sense, through the gradual demise of the Institute's greatest aggressor, Tybalt, that the oppressive society which they are so hell-bent on maintaining serves no-one. A lesson perhaps in the futility of victimisation and discrimination.

What to look out for...

- + The various ways in which the mental health of the Institute inmates is impacted by the behaviour of the adults
- + How the 'will of the Institute' also impacts the mental health of some of the key members of staff there – namely Rev. Laurence and Tybalt
- + The way in which the repressive regime and the depressive structuring of each day is represented by the choreography of the ensemble pieces within the show (for example, Act One Scene One)
- + The harassment of Mercutio and Balthasar by Tybalt; and what this may tell us about Tybalt's own vulnerabilities (which for the most part is masked by aggression and a sickening sense of superiority)

THEME 4 – DESIRE & SEXUAL LONGING

Desire is seen in many forms within Matthew Bourne's *Romeo and Juliet*, including the desire for freedom, autonomy, affection, respect and power.

The characters exhibit their specific desires through their actions and interactions with others. Rev. Laurence shows her desire to enable more compassionate support of the young people, for example, through her obvious frustration at the limitations imposed by the guards and her plucky attempts to thwart them.

Tybalt desperately desires closeness and intimacy with another person – something he goes about obtaining in a forceful, repugnant way through his assiduous hounding of Juliet. It's only after his emotional meltdown, at the beginning of Act Two, that we understand his behaviour masks his own insecurities, loneliness and unmet yearnings.

The desire for power vibrates through every portion of the storyline. With characters wrestling one another, and even themselves, for absolute control and dominance.

The desire for freedom is exemplified in the choreography, the set and the actions of the characters. The monotony of life at the Verona Institute is juxtaposed with the intense, almost surreal love affair between two of its residents. Something that seems to offer the other inmates escapism from their tortured minds; as they distract themselves with eager fascination for Romeo and Juliet and 'live their love' vicariously.



The seemingly other-worldly nature of Romeo and Juliet's romance is reflected in Act One, Scene Five when (supported by the other dancers) they drift towards and apart from one another, gliding weightlessly through space in a mid-air duet.

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Shakespeare's original story and Matthew's brand-new portrayal of it are both full of sexual longing. Though whereas Shakespeare had to be much subtler in his portrayal of the carnal obsessions and exploits of his characters, so as not to offend his audiences, Matthew's version is much more overt.

In Shakespeare's text, sexual intercourse is alluded to by Mercutio when he dismisses love as 'foolish' and likens it to a fool trying to 'hide his bauble in a hole' (a bauble being a stick with bells on carried by a professional fool such as a court jester.) Mercutio's somewhat cynical view of love is that it is really just sexual desire.

In Matthew's version, Mercutio is playful and laissez-faire. And, whilst he is certainly passionate about Balthasar, he does not seem as intensely pre-occupied about their partnership as Romeo does about Juliet.

The intense focus on sexual longing and intimacy, both within the original play and Matthew's modernised version of it, is in some ways rooted in the immaturity of the main characters. Shakespeare's Juliet is 13 – with Romeo some years her senior (most sources suggest between 18 and 23 years old). The exact ages of Romeo and Juliet within Matthew's production is unknown, though they are determined as older young people/young adults – probably between the ages of 16 and 20 years.

It is this youthfulness that helps us to appreciate the intoxication between Romeo and Juliet. And indeed, in Matthew's version this is also true for Mercutio and Balthasar. These are young people potentially experiencing lust and carnal desire for the first time - full to the brim with emotions and sensations.

In both versions of the story, the young people are at the mercy of their own impulses and the adults are deeply uncomfortable with it. So much so that they will do everything they can to put an end to it through separation in the Institution, which only increases the lust and the implication of the idea that by keeping the men and women separate and the conformed nature of their activity and movement, the authority is attempting to conform the inmates back to traditional, heteronormative gender roles and behaviour.

What to look out for...

- + The moment Tybalt's vulnerabilities are revealed and how the inmates' reaction to his breakdown further fuels his anger and malice
- + What happens when the male and female inmates are left unsupervised for a period of time, during their 'social' event – look at how the dancing changes from cordial, formal and robot-like, to erotic, carnal and animal-like
- + Romeo and Juliet's intimate encounter with one another in Romeo's 'cell' after he is taken into solitary confinement
- + The choreography of the 'dream-sequence' duet between Romeo and Juliet in Act One Scene Five; and in particular, how the decision to raise the main characters off the floor and into the air changed the quality of this scene