William Shakespeare's
Romeo and Juliet
directed by Shana Cooper
As part of Yale Rep’s educational initiative WILL POWER!, we are pleased to offer this Study Guide to accompany our production of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Shana Cooper.

Romeo’s Wall: An Introduction to *Romeo and Juliet’s* Social Network ............................................................... 1
Watching with Your Ears: Staging Conventions in Shakespeare’s Time ................................................................. 2
Marriage is Serious Business .................................................................................................................................... 4
Shakespeare as Adaptor/Adapting Shakespeare ..................................................................................................... 5
Finding the Essence of *Romeo and Juliet*:
Shana Cooper on Directing Shakespeare’s Classic Play ........................................................................................ 9
Blood Wedding: The Unexpected Tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* ........................................................................ 12
An Actor’s Notebook: Understanding the Text ..................................................................................................... 13
In Fair Verona: The Allure of Italy ....................................................................................................................... 16
The Major Role of *Romeo and Juliet’s* Minor Characters .................................................................................. 18
Before and After: Questions and Activities .................................................................................................... 20
Resources ........................................................................................................................................ 21

All quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* come from the Arden Shakespeare: Second Series, reprinted in 2006.

This guide is yours—feel free to keep notes, doodle, and write throughout!
Today, Romeo and Juliet might have used social networking to keep up-to-date on what's hot in Verona. Here, we take Shakespeare's language and imagine how it might play out on Romeo's wall.

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**ABOUT**

Today, Romeo and Juliet might have used social networking to keep up-to-date on what's hot in Verona. Here, we take Shakespeare's language and imagine how it might play out on Romeo's wall. If Romeo and Juliet had modern technology, how would their story change?

| Romeo is friends with Juliet Capulet. |
| Friar Laurence wrote on Romeo's wall: | So smile the heavens upon this holy act. |
| Nurse wrote on Romeo's wall: | My young lady bid me enquire you out. |
| Romeo: | Bid her devise some means to come to shrift this afternoon. |
| Nurse: | This afternoon? She shall be there. |
| Friar Laurence wrote on Romeo's wall: | They stumble that run fast. |
| Juliet wrote on Romeo's wall: | What o'clock tomorrow shall I send to thee? |
| Romeo: | By the hour of nine. |
| Juliet wrote on Romeo's wall: | Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? |
| Romeo: | Call me but love, and I'll be new baptis'd. Henceforth I never will be Romeo. |
| Romeo is friends with Nurse. |
| Romeo wrote on Nurse's wall: | What is Juliet's mother? |
| Nurse: | Her mother is the lady of the house. |
| Romeo: | Is she a Capulet? |
| Romeo is friends with Nurse. |
| Romeo attended Capulet's Ball. |

**ABOUT**

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| Romeo | =(
| Benvolio: | What sadness lengthens Romeo's hours? |
| Romeo: | Not having that which, having, makes them short. |
| Benvolio: | In love? |
| Romeo: | Out. |
| Benvolio: | Of love? |
| Romeo: | Out of her favour where I am in love. |
| Prince: | If you ever disturb our streets again, your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace. |
| Lady Montague: | Romeo, right glad am I that you were not at this fray. |
| Romeo is friends with Rosaline. |

**ABOUT**

If Romeo and Juliet had modern technology, how would their story change?

| Benvolio | likes this.
We can easily visualize Romeo and Juliet's balcony scene in our minds: the young Romeo in a moonlit orchard, gazing at the beautiful Juliet as she leans against the railing, lost in sweet whispers of love. Maybe we hear soft, romantic music as in Franco Zeffirelli's famous film version.

However, if we look at how the play would have been staged in 1590s London, we end up with a vastly different picture. Along with many of Shakespeare's other plays, Romeo and Juliet was first performed in a theatre built without a roof. The night scene took place under the sun (or, even worse, in the rain). Actors spoke loudly to be heard. Vendors noisily hawked fruit and nuts inside the theatre, and outside, a lively entertainment district bustled. (So lively, in fact, that all this “entertainment” occurred south of the Thames River, away from the more respectable heart of the city.) Adding to the cacophony, theatregoers cheered and booed as though watching a modern wrestling match.

As if that were not enough to ruin the illusion, a boy actor in his mid-teens played Juliet. During this period, the law forbade women from acting on the stage. Elizabethan seating conventions were also different from our own. If an important ambassador was attending the play that day, the managers would have reserved the best seat in the house for their distinguished guest—on the balcony sitting right behind Juliet!

With such distractions, could the Elizabethans feel the romance blooming between the young lovers at all? The answer may not be what you think. These conditions didn’t discourage Shakespeare because he knew his audience was filled with incredibly good listeners. (In fact, the English word audience comes from the Latin verb audire: “to hear.”) Shakespeare’s plays teem with vivid imagery and sensory details that help the audience imagine the scene. Think about how many times the words night and moon recur in the balcony scene. Using language rather than visual realism, the playwright paints images directly in people’s minds. Of course, the emphasis on listening doesn’t mean that Elizabethan playgoers didn’t enjoy visual extravagance and intense action as well. Shakespeare inserts no fewer than three swordfights and one dance scene in Romeo and Juliet to please his audience’s eyes. But still, the audience had to keep their ears perked if they wanted to enjoy the play fully.
Since only a few props and pieces of movable furniture adorned the bare Elizabethan stage, the various outdoor and indoor settings in Shakespeare’s plays occupied more or less the same set. Aside from descriptions written into the language, the events of the scene and the interaction of the actors define the location. For example, whenever the Capulets and Montagues appear on stage together, we know these sworn enemies are in an open, public space, such as the streets of Verona. In contrast, Friar Laurence’s cell and Juliet’s bedchamber serve as important private locations where secrets can be disclosed.

Today, it is unusual for plays to be presented on a bare stage. (There are exceptions, such as Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre in London, which tries to recreate the theatre conditions of Shakespeare’s day as much as possible.) Technology allows us actually to create each setting with relative ease. However, the modern director faces a new set of problems that arise from our more visually oriented way of watching theatre. Are the vivid descriptions in Shakespeare’s language still necessary when we can realize them on stage? If there is a realistic set, how can we keep the play from slowing down when it moves from one location to another in a turn of the page? These are some of the problems that a modern director must solve in order to bring Shakespeare’s poetry to life. Even when you’re just reading the play for yourself, it’s fun and helpful to think: What would your staging of Romeo and Juliet look like?

—KEE-YOON NAHM

—Kee-yoon NaHm

**WATCHING WITH YOUR EARS: STAGING CONVENTIONS IN SHAKESPEARE’S TIME**

**Groundlings stood here, in the pit. Cheapest way to see the show.**

**Main acting space**

**These boxes allowed audience members with deeper pockets to see...and be seen.**

**Front of the tiring house. Note the two doors for entrances and exits.**
From today’s perspective, it is hard to believe that Juliet was still a teenager when she secretly married Romeo. But actually, her age would have equally shocked Shakespeare’s audience. Women got married around the age of twenty in Elizabethan times—much older than the adolescent Juliet. Her father, although later eager to see his young daughter wed, initially hesitates when Paris approaches him. He asks the eager suitor to wait “two more summers” for Juliet to mature.

Yet Capulet and Paris discuss the wedding without ever asking Juliet what she thinks about him or even if she is interested in marriage. In this way, love and marriage for the Elizabethans completely differed from what they are today. The idea of marrying someone out of love was virtually unheard of. Rather, society regarded marriage as generally a practical matter between two families in the interest of wealth and social status. The bride’s family often paid a dowry to the groom’s as compensation for the financial responsibility of taking her into his household. Sometimes, parents drew up contracts of betrothal while their children were still young. Marriages were brokered through business negotiation and never a matter of personal choice. The fate of a family could rest on whom the daughter married. Even the kindly Friar Laurence thinks of marriage in practical terms; he agrees to wed Romeo and Juliet because he thinks it might stop the families’ feud.

Londoners may have regarded Romeo and Juliet’s intense love as romantic folly, something that could only happen in a faraway country and would inevitably end tragically. In real life, marriage was an important matter that couldn’t be decided on feelings alone. Many foreign kings and princes wooed Queen Elizabeth, who regarded her marriage strictly as a matter of national diplomacy. (She remained single throughout her life, guaranteeing England’s independence within European politics.) Under such circumstances it is easy to see why obedience to one’s father was enforced on children, especially daughters, during this time.

But Shakespeare played with the fantasy of marrying for love and created many female characters who actively take marriage into their own hands. Aside from our daring Juliet, characters such as Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* and Desdemona in *Othello* secretly elope with men they love against their fathers’ plans. And though these fathers—Capulet, Shylock, and Brabantio—rage and storm with righteous anger, Shakespeare clearly wants us to root for the young lovers. The literature of this period abounded with youths falling deeply in love and defying their parents. Love counted among the most common themes in literature, heavily influenced by the passionate poems and lustful stories of Italian writers such as Petrarch and Boccaccio which many Englishmen read. Shakespeare must have brought to life something that every spectator who had to succumb to reality secretly dreamt of—that might be why his plays were so popular.

—Kee-yoon NaHm
Shakespeare as **ADAPTOR/ADAPTING** Shakespeare

We know the story of *Romeo and Juliet* so well that it can be difficult to imagine its life before Shakespeare’s play. But Shakespeare was a master adaptor. He sourced stories for his work from everything around him: the ancient Greek and Roman worlds he probably read about in his school books, folk tales and stories he’d heard, as well as current newsworthy events like tempests and shipwrecks. Even when writing about English kings and queens, Shakespeare’s history plays were plays first, historical records second. Shakespeare always adapted texts: his very first play, *The Comedy of Errors*, which was written a year or two before *Romeo and Juliet*, is an adaptation of Plautus’s (a Roman playwright born in 254 BCE) play called *The Menaechmi*.

The trail of *Romeo and Juliet* can be traced far back in time. One of Shakespeare’s earliest sources is probably the story of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, written in Latin in 8 CE by the Roman poet, Ovid, from the 15th book of his *Metamorphoses*. So influential was the tale that Shakespeare also used *Pyramus and Thisbe* in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as the play-within-a-play that Bottom and the mechanicals perform for the Duke’s wedding. Besides telling a story of forbidden love, *Pyramus and Thisbe* contains elements that are found in *Romeo and Juliet*: lovers pulled apart by family hatred, a garden wall where lovers meet (a barrier between lovers much like Juliet’s balcony), and a tragic double-suicide finale.

The story eventually found its way into many *novelle italiane* (collected Italian short novels), two of which contain all-too-familiar details. Luigi da Porta’s 1530 version, *A Story Newly Found of Two Noble Lovers*, shares many similarities with Shakespeare’s play: feuding families named Montecchi and Capelletti; Verona as setting; a masked ball; and characters called Marcuccio, Friar Lorenzo, and Thebaldo. But there’s a striking difference: Giulietta wakes before Romeo dies in the tomb, speaks to him, and then commits suicide by holding her breath. A couple of decades later, in 1554, an Italian monk and scholar named Matteo Bandello published another version of the story in his *novelle*. Again, its details would inspire the Bard, especially the sequence directly after the ball: Bandello’s Romeo only learns Julietta’s name as he leaves, and a Nurse reveals Romeo’s identity to Julietta. In da Porta’s work, Giulietta asks the Friar for poison, which he substitutes with a sleeping potion; in Bandello, Julietta wants to disguise herself as a boy and run away with Romeo, but the Friar suggests the sleeping potion instead. Julietta then fears what will happen after she imbibes the potion.
Bandello’s *novelle* was later translated into French by Pierre Boaistuau, and it is from here that the first version in English, Arthur Brooke’s *Romeus and Juliet*, appears in 1562. While Brooke’s differed little from Boaistuau’s, the Englishman added his own touches, notably an homage to the famous English love story, *Troilus and Criseyde* by Geoffrey Chaucer. He also emphasizes the morality of the play. The lovers’ tempestuous behavior, as well as their lack of respect for their parents, leads to their demise. Brooke’s poem begins with the following laying out of his argument:

*Love hath inflamed twain by sudden sight,*  
*And both do grant the thing that both desire.*  
*They wed in shrift by counsel of a friar.*  
*Young Romeus climbs fair Juliet’s bower by night.*  
*Three months he doth enjoy his chief delight.*  
*By Tybalt’s rage provoked unto ire,*  
*He payeth death to Tybalt for his hire.*  
*A banished man he ‘scape by secret flight.*  
*New marriage is offered to his wife.*  
*She drinks a drink that seems to reave her breath:*  
*They bury her that sleeping yet hath life.*  
*Her husband hears the tidings of her death.*  
*He drinks his bane. And she with Romeus’ knife,*  
*When she awakes, herself, alas! She slayeth.*

But the lives of these two characters did not end in 1596 with Shakespeare’s play. Not long after Shakespeare’s heyday, the English theatres went dark during Cromwell’s rule. During the Restoration, a period that began in England in 1660 when Charles II was restored to the throne, playwrights often turned back to Shakespeare’s work. Thomas Otway’s 1679 play *Caius Marius* became one of the first adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. Adding a more political emphasis to the story, Otway moves it to Rome, changing Romeo’s name to Young Marius and Juliet’s to Lavinia. Otway’s tomb scene diverges from his source text. After Lavinia wakes to find Marius dead, she then has to watch Marius’s father kill her own father. Rage, not simply despair, fuels her suicide.

*Romeo and Juliet* regained popularity during the 18th century. In 1748, actor and theatre manager David Garrick produced his own adaptation, which played for hundreds of performances. Garrick removed most of the rhyme from the verse, as well as a lot of the bawdry and puns. He also returned to Bandello’s version of the story, creating a scene between Romeo and Juliet in the tomb before she dies. This version of the play remained dominant until the early 19th century. Then, in 1845, an American actress named Charlotte Cushman returned to Shakespeare’s text, acting the role of Romeo to great acclaim. This was a trend at the time—the role of Romeo being played by women—and Cushman’s performance changed the way audiences thought about the character by making him more youthful and emotional.
By the 19th century, the play inspired arts other than the theatre. In 1880 Tchaikovsky, a Russian Romantic composer well known for his ballets *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*, wrote *Romeo and Juliet: Overture Fantasia*, which musically explores the themes and emotional journey of the story. Prokofiev’s intensely romantic ballet version, *Op. 64, Act 1: Love Dance*, has been used in numerous films and plays since its 1935 debut. Although the choreography matches Shakespeare’s story, Prokofiev originally wanted to give the tale a happy ending, so that his dancers could perform together at the end. *Romeo and Juliet* also appears in Charles Dickens’s 1838 novel *Nicholas Nickleby*, when the title character, Nicholas, meets a family theatre troupe led by Vincent Crummles, and assists with their production of a diluted version of the play.

In the 20th century, Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, and Leonard Bernstein adapted the play into the musical (and later film) *West Side Story*. With a setting moved to 1950s New York City, the musical tells the story of two lovers, Tony and Maria, from families that are members of opposing street gangs of different ethnic backgrounds. The urban setting and emphasis on gang culture draw out the inherent violence and danger of the story. Since *West Side Story*, the play has been set—or adapted—to contemplate real-life sources of ethnic conflict or bloody rivalries, giving the play a social dimension.

Two other film adaptations have significantly influenced how we think of and stage *Romeo and Juliet* today. The first is Franco Zeffirelli’s 1968 film version. Zeffirelli’s revered production at London’s Old Vic Theatre, on which his film was based, had realistically depicted the streets of Verona on stage. Most importantly, Zeffirelli cast young actors in the title roles, bringing a new sense of youthfulness and vigor to the play (remember that Juliet is supposed to be a young teen and Romeo slightly older). The second is Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 film *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. Luhrmann updates the play’s setting: Verona becomes Verona Beach, a gritty, urban environment seething with violence. It pays tribute to popular culture, MTV, and music video-style editing, advertising, and television journalism—all within garish, moneyed cityscapes.

Two years later, in 1998, *Romeo and Juliet* madness was still in the air. Another film, *Shakespeare in Love*, imagines that a star-cross’d romance in Shakespeare’s life inspired the writing of the tale. In the behind-the-scenes drama, William Shakespeare falls in love with a noblewoman, Viola de Lessops, who is already engaged to a man of her social standing. As burgeoning playwright Will attempts to write a farce called *Romeo and Ethel the Pirate’s Daughter*, his secret affair with Viola—who dresses as a boy and plays the role of Romeo—turns the comedy into a tragedy.
Shakespeare’s play also exists in our world in less literal ways. Think of Bella and Edward in the Twilight Saga, who share a number of characteristics with Romeo and Juliet: their love is torn apart by feuding families—Edward is a vampire, whereas Bella has been aligned with Jacob and the wolves. Bella also has to almost die and return (similar to Juliet’s sleeping potion) in order for her to reunite with her true love. Gabriella and Troy in High School Musical are pulled apart by her devotion to academics and his devotion to sports. The famous lovers have even made their way into pop music: Taylor Swift’s song Love Story is all about re-imagining the story with a happy ending.

In 2010 alone, three new appropriations of the Romeo and Juliet story appeared. The Royal Shakespeare Company in England created a piece called Such Tweet Sorrow, which reduced the play into tweet-sized snippets that were played out in real time by actors on Twitter. In the recent film, Letters to Juliet, a young American woman traveling in Verona stumbles upon the house where Juliet Capulet supposedly lived and gets involved answering questions in letters that people leave for her. The play has also inspired non-fiction. The documentary When Romeo Met Juliet follows a production of the play that, by casting students from an inner-city public school as the Montagues and students from a private, Catholic school as the Capulets helped each group better understand one another.

What is clear from this small sample of sources, versions, adaptations, rewritings and appropriations is that the essential elements that make up Romeo and Juliet have captured the human imagination for thousands of years. But no one has captured that elemental love better than William Shakespeare. Each subsequent generation has kept Shakespeare’s play alive in varying forms, as it continually rediscovers in every era how the story of these two lovers can help make sense of the never-ending cycle of love and hate, of the violence and passion of human existence.

—KATE ATTWELL
By the time the curtain rises on opening night, a director has already spent months—maybe even years—building the production. She must carefully study the script, audition actors for the roles, and work with her creative team to design the set, costumes, sound, and lights—all before ever stepping foot into a rehearsal room. Director Shana Cooper has been spending a lot of time with the Bard lately. This past summer, her company, new theater house, developed A Midsummer Night’s Dream in the Brooklyn Lyceum. In 2011, she’ll direct Yale Rep’s production of Romeo and Juliet and then helm Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s production of Love’s Labor’s Lost and The Taming of the Shrew at the California Shakespeare Theater. Late last fall, Yale Rep’s literary manager Amy Boratko sat down with Shana to talk about her thoughts on the play and the process of creating this production of Romeo and Juliet.

AMY BORATKO: When did you first read Romeo and Juliet?

SHANA COOPER: I read it in high school, but I saw a production at Oregon Shakespeare Festival first. It’s extraordinary how this play has become a part of our culture’s mythology. We already know who Romeo and Juliet are before we even read the play. Those two characters have become synonymous with “true love.”

AB: How is the play different from that popular idea we all have of Romeo and Juliet?

SC: In Shakespeare’s plays, the prologue, often delivered by the Chorus, describes the popular idea of the play’s protagonist, but the play itself reveals the truth about that character. In the prologue of Romeo and Juliet, we learn that two households are feuding and two star-crossed lovers take their lives. That’s the sound bite that has gone down in history. The story that Shakespeare goes on to tell is that it’s in ourselves—not in the stars—how we determine our futures. The choices we make either to perpetuate or overcome the mistakes of the past are what shape the course of our lives. Take Romeo: he repeatedly chooses love in the play, but in his confrontation with Tybalt, he chooses force instead.

AB: Romeo’s choice to kill Tybalt pushes the play into tragedy.

SC: Yes, at that point, the tragedy becomes inevitable. Once force is unleashed, it is followed by an avalanche of fear and violence. What deepens the tragedy is that the suffering could have been avoided had the characters made different choices. The violence in Verona has been handed down from generation to generation: it’s an ancient enmity. But it’s also inexplicable: Shakespeare never tells us what causes the hate between the Capulets and the Montagues. What we do see in the play is the story of how Romeo and Juliet’s love begins and how it evolves. The play shows us the extremity of human passions—both the deep hate and the pure love. It’s then in the hands of the characters whether they continue a history of terrible destruction or choose a path toward love.
**AB:** How to you think about the characters of Romeo and Juliet as you audition actors for the roles?

**SC:** Shakespeare has written complicated—and often contradictory—characters. For Romeo, it’s important to find an actor who can reveal the extremities in the character’s personality. Romeo makes a dramatic transformation: he changes from a boy who’s in love with the idea of love, infatuated with Rosaline, to an extraordinary young man. After he finds a miraculous love in Juliet, his language changes—we see vivid imagination in his poetry. Then, when he faces Tybalt, we see his capacity for violence, his capacity to become a murderer. We are all capable of that range of emotions, but it’s rare to see such a young person experience so much in such a short period of time. It’s the same with Juliet. We see her grow from a girl into a woman. However Juliet has the courage to choose Romeo and choose love in the face of great opposition. After the Nurse tells her to marry Paris, she realizes that she’s on her own, and she finds the fortitude to persevere. Somehow it’s like she’s a sixteen-year-old girl, a twenty-eight-year-old woman, and a forty-year-old all at once. All in the body of a teenager.

**AB:** As you work with your scenic, costume, sound, and lighting designers to create the production, what do you think this Verona and its citizens will look like?

**SC:** I didn’t approach thinking about the set by picturing the world around the characters. I started by imagining how the characters express themselves. I think about that expression in terms of both language and movement. One of my priorities is to create a physical language—of gestures and movement—that is as deep and expressive as Shakespeare’s language. As my designers and I imagine the set and costumes, I hope to create a performance space that supports that physicality and will allow the audience to focus on the actors and the human passions at stake in this play. I think of this production having a contemporary landscape, but it’s also an epic landscape. There’s imagery in the play about the sea, the stars, and the night sky, and we should feel that vastness. There’s a heat to the world that comes from its Italian setting. There’s a harshness and brutality to this world, too: dangerous city streets; a tomb; a wild, masked party. It’s a city that has been in the midst of a conflict for as long as anyone there can remember. We also need to have the essential elements to tell this story; for example, there’s got to be a balcony of some kind.
AB: Once you start rehearsals with the actors on Romeo and Juliet, how will you work with them to develop the physical language of the production?

SC: During the rehearsal process, I ask my company to prepare “essence pieces.” Each actor creates a solo performance piece that, to them, expresses the play’s essence. The only rule is that you can’t use language. As we work on the play, we will be sitting around the table—doing text work, scansion, figuring out what the words mean, learning about the characters’ relationships—and we will break up that time with sharing these essence pieces. There’s a way in which we can understand a text more deeply through our bodies—before we even understand it intellectually. And the great thing about Romeo and Juliet is that the play is about human impulses. The essence pieces will help the company build a vocabulary of movement and gestures. Often, physical gestures are more universal than Shakespeare’s vocabulary and will help the audience experience the story in a deep, visceral way.

AB: And it’s also a play that has a great deal of physical violence in it.

SC: I’m thinking a lot right now about how violence saturates the play. Shakespeare begins the play with brawling boys and then continues to push the violence to the extreme. I am interested in the different ways violence manifests itself in this community. The Prince breaks up the brawl and denounces the violence, but he also threatens more violence. In the home, we see Capulet, who has been charming and charismatic, treat Juliet brutally. We should see how the characters can become almost primal.

AB: What do you hope audiences will learn from seeing this range of human emotions and passions?

SC: I want all of the young people who come to see the show to think about how this story personally relates to their own lives. It’s a play that has a lot to say about growing up in a modern world and the challenges and temptations all young people face. The choices this generation of teenagers makes will affect not only their own lives but their communities. What does it take to remain faithful to whatever drives you, whatever you love? The play is timeless. Violence and conflict flare up in communities all over the world, and there’s a way that we continue to perpetuate our mistakes and continue this lineage of violence.

AB: What advice would you give someone who’s seeing Shakespeare performed in the theatre for the first time?

SC: Shakespeare is one of the greatest storytellers of all time. There is something beautiful and poetic about how his characters interact. There’s sometimes an expectation or a pressure that you need to work, to strain, to understand every syllable—that makes watching Shakespeare a chore. Instead, try to be present in the moment, in the theatre, and see what you understand on a human level. Shakespeare’s first audiences hadn’t read the script in advance—they just experienced it.
Tragic drama has cast its gloomy spell on theatre audiences for over 2500 years; for almost as long, playwrights, philosophers, and critics have struggled to define just what makes a “tragedy.” Aristotle, who first tackled the question during the fourth century BCE, declares tragedy to be the imitation of a serious action of a certain magnitude, complete in itself and capable of arousing pity and fear. For Hegel, a German philosopher writing during the early 19th century, tragedy results from the collision between two equally valid ethical ideas. More recently, Arthur Miller asserted the “common man’s” claim to tragic status. Yet these disparate writers agree on at least one point: tragedy is never a private matter. Sophocles’ Creon attempts to restore order to Thebes after a devastating civil war, but only succeeds in destroying his own family. Willy Loman’s downfall in Death of a Salesman exemplifies the fate of all those trapped inside capitalism’s iron cage. Tragic protagonists fall prey to toxic forces corroding society at large.

A comparable malaise afflicts fair Verona: the Montagues’ and Capulets’ long-running feud is literally draining the city of life. And yet, if one sets aside the prologue, Romeo and Juliet’s opening scenes offer few premonitions of doom. Indeed, Shakespeare fills the play’s first two acts with figures and situations standard to the Western comic tradition: clever servants, bawdy jokes, lovesick youth, and parental blocking figures. The second act culminates with comedy’s traditional dénouement: the young lovers marry despite all obstacles. Romeo and Juliet diverges from Shakespeare’s other tragedies, which presage catastrophe from the very beginning. The witches who accost Macbeth clearly bode no good; neither does the murdered king’s ghost harassing Hamlet’s jittery guardsmen.

Shakespeare establishes Romeo and Juliet’s comic framework only to explode it. By abruptly changing genres mid-play, he underscores the off-kilter nature of Veronese society. Immediately after Friar Laurence leads Romeo and Juliet off to be married, Tybalt kills Mercutio, unleashing an inexorable deluge of violence. The play’s initial lightheartedness makes this lurch toward tragedy all the more unnerving. Romeo and Juliet denies us the anticipation of disaster; here, tragedy is a celebration aborted, a laugh choked off by wails. Comedy traditionally concludes with the promise of new life, symbolized through central couple’s union. Striking down youth rather than age, the Montagues’ and Capulets’ heedless pursuit of vengeance upends the natural order and annihilates the reassuring affirmation of Act Two’s comic conclusion. Romeo and Juliet closes with a far more attenuated token of hope: old enemies joining hands over their children’s graves.

—MONICA ACHEN
So how does an actor approach Shakespeare’s text? Understanding just a little bit about how Shakespeare’s verse functions can help us access the language and make its meaning clearer. There are clues hidden right inside the text, directions from Shakespeare himself that can guide the actor’s speaking and interpretation of his lines.

The form that Shakespeare’s verse is written in is called iambic pentameter. There are five iambic feet per line, and each foot is made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable:

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daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM
```

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1 2 3 4 5
```

but SOFt what LIGHt through YOnder WIndow BREAkS

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As an actor, it can be useful to tap out this rhythm while reading the lines, and you’ll see how they are marked on the script.

Of course, as with all rules, there are a number of exceptions. Here are a couple of common ones: the first is called a feminine ending, which occurs when a line has more than the usual ten syllables:

**As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaVEN**

daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM da

The second is a trochee, or trochaic inversion, which is found when instead of the rhythm sounding “daDUM,” the foot is reversed, the stress falling on the first syllable, as in this line from Mercutio’s speech:

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/ - - / - / - / - / - /
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**NOW is the winter of our discontent (Richard III)**

DUM da daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM

With that in mind, let’s take a look at Mercutio’s speech from Act 1, Scene 4:
O then I see Queen Mab hath been with you. She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes in shape no bigger than an agate stone. On the forefinger of an alderman, drawn with a team of little atoms, over men's noses as they lie asleep. Her chariot is an empty hazel nut, made by the joiner squirrel or old grub. Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers, her wagon-spokes made of long spinners' legs, the cover of the wings of grasshoppers, her traces of the smallest spider's web, her collars of the moonshine's wat'ry beams, her whip of cricket's bone, the lash of film, her waggoner a small grey-coated gnat, not half so big as a round little worm, prick'd from the lazy finger of a maid; and in the state she gallops night by night through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love.
A Spondee (two stressed syllables) at the beginning can sharply change the rhythm and mood of the scene, and draw the focus for the speech to come.

B Queen Mab—Celtic/Irish fairy, this is the first time she is mentioned in English literature. "She is the fairies' midwife"—this doesn't mean that she is the midwife for the fairies, but rather she brings dreams to people (she delivers dreams).

C Interesting—in the first Quarto, Romeo replies to "Oh then I see Queen Mab hath been with you," with a question, "Queen Mab, what's she?"—so the rest of the speech can be seen as genuine explanation.

D Agate—A type of stone used to make a seal ring. Often a tiny figure would be carved into the stone.

E Alderman—A member of the town council (would have worn the seal ring).

F Atomi—Atoms, or simply, tiny beings.

G Joiner squirrel: a joiner is like a carpenter, but they make pieces of wood that fit (join) together. Grub: insect that digs—so these two together have built her chariot.

H Wagon-spokes = spinner's legs (spinner: a spider or a daddy-long legs)

I Traces are the leather straps/ropes that are used to connect the horse to the carriage (Queen Mab's are delicate and tiny, and made of spider webs).

J Lash—used to drive the horse forward. Film—very fine silk (gossamer).

K "the lazy finger of a maid"—this is referring to an old joke which said that worms live in the fingers of lazy maids!

L "Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love": Mab brings dreams that are relevant to the dreamer. Lovers dream of love, soldiers dream of war, etc.

—Kate Attwell
When you think of Italy, what comes to mind? Listening to a handsome gondolier croon as you wind your way through the canals of Venice? Shopping for the latest in high fashion from today’s top designers in Milan? Taking a passeggiata (evening stroll) through the narrow streets and historic piazzas of Rome?

To Shakespeare’s English audiences, Italy held a similar exotic appeal. On the one hand—because the Renaissance first sprouted there—Italy was at the forefront of European learning, art, and fashion, arousing English curiosity. On the other hand, its location on the temperate Mediterranean Sea and its rich history well back to ancient times made it the ideal setting for romance and intrigue.

It’s no wonder then that Shakespeare set so many of his plays in Italy, including Romeo and Juliet, which takes place in the northern Italian town of Verona, a centuries-old, bustling mercantile community.

Although we don’t know for sure if Shakespeare ever visited Italy himself, we do know that he learned much about its culture and people by reading English translations of Italian novelle (short novels). In fact, the basic story of Romeo and Juliet—a story some claimed really happened in the year 1302—was a popular subject for novelle, inspiring at least two English adaptations that Shakespeare almost certainly consulted in writing his famous lovers’ tragedy in 1594–1595.

Besides using Italian source material, Shakespeare’s text achieves an enhanced sense of Veronese local color. The playwright alludes to the fussy precision of the sword-fighting and à la mode fashions that Elizabethan audiences automatically associated with Italian culture. Romeo’s friend Mercutio hits on both when he makes fun of Juliet’s cousin Tybalt in Act 2, Scene 4: “O, he’s the courageous captain of compliments: he fights as you sing pricksong [sheet music], keeps time, distance and proportion. He rests his minim [half-note] rests, one, two, and the third in your bosom: the very butcher of a silk button—a duelist, a duelist, a gentleman of the very first house [fencing school] . . . . Ah, the immortal passado....the punto reverso, the hay [three fencing moves]!”

The musical references in Mercutio’s speech—“pricksong,” “minim rests,” “keeps time”—in addition to the play’s multiple sonnets, sestinas, couplets, and other deliberate poetic forms—evoke aural associations between the musicality of the play’s language and the vocal music being composed in Italy around the same time. It has even been suggested that the lamentation scene in Juliet’s bedroom (Act 4, Scene 5), which in the play’s first print edition contained the stage direction “All at once cry out and ring their hands,” was Shakespeare’s attempt to write vocal counterpoint (simultaneous singing of different, but thematically related, melodies) in the style of Claudio Monteverdi, an Italian contemporary of Shakespeare, who created modern opera.

ABOVE: DUELING TECHNIQUES FROM VINCENZO SAVIOLO, HIS PRACTISE, 1595.
Finally, because Italy's climate is so much warmer than England's, the English believed that Italians' veins flowed with warmer blood. Therefore, they were naturally prone to strong emotions like passion and hate. Shakespeare plays with this idea directly when Juliet describes Romeo as her “only love sprung from [her] only hate.” Not only does this hot “Latin temperament” explain how it is possible for Romeo and Juliet to fall into such deep love in so short a time, but also how the bitter feud between the Capulets and Montagues has been able to continue for generations on end.

In fact, visitors to Verona can still visit what are purportedly “Giulietta’s balcony” and “Giulietta’s tomb,” as well as Romeo’s house, which was once owned by the real-life Montecchi (Montague) family.

—BRIAN VALENCE
Shakespeare’s “star-crossed lovers” are literature’s best known couple; their names synonymous with romantic passion. Yet, from a friendly friar to their feuding families, it’s the minor characters of the play who shape *Romeo and Juliet’s* tragic destiny. They raise the stakes, lighten the mood, and miss life-changing cues. Filling many dramatic functions, these supporting characters are both vivid and vital.

**BLOCKING FIGURES**
A blocking figure is a character who impedes the union of a play’s central couple. While Shakespeare wasn’t the first to use this dramatic device (which dates back to ancient Greek comedy), he created memorable blocking figures in *Romeo and Juliet*: the county Paris, and Lord and Lady Capulet. Lady Capulet may praise the nobly born Paris as a “precious book of love” (1.3.87), but Juliet would rather die than marry anyone other than Romeo. Enraged at his daughter’s defiance, crying “Out, you baggage!” (3.5.156), Lord Capulet regrets his unyielding strictness too late.

**CONFIDANTES AND MESSENGERS**
Trusted with the secret of Romeo and Juliet’s love, sage Friar Laurence and the prattling Nurse serve as a matching pair of confidantes. As Juliet pleads, after Romeo kills Tybalt “Hast thou not a word of joy?/Some comfort, Nurse!” (3.5.211-212). The confidante can also take a more active role as a messenger or go-between. After the Nurse helps arrange for Romeo and Juliet to marry, Friar Laurence conducts the secret wedding ceremony. Ironically, it’s a messenger who ultimately dooms the lovers. Delayed by an ill-timed quarantine, Friar John fails to tell Romeo that his beloved is merely dozing in the Capulet tomb.
FOILS
Using dramatic contrast, playwrights often define one character through a foil, or opposite personality type. Although Romeo and Mercutio are close friends, Romeo’s idealistic nature is worlds apart from his pal’s mercurial mockeries. While Romeo yearns for Juliet, Mercutio scorns love as a lustful delusion, born of the “fairies’ midwife” Queen Mab. She “gallops night by night/Through lovers’ brains, and then they dream of love” (1.4.70-71). Similarly, Shakespeare uses Rosaline as Juliet’s foil. Rosaline’s beauty may be “starved with her severity” (1.1.217), but Juliet is a warmly impetuous young woman, confessing to Romeo on her balcony that she is already “too fond” (2.2.98).

Using minor characters, Shakespeare builds *Romeo and Juliet* into a world of thematic contrasts. The rich and the poor, the young and the old, lovers and clowns, dreamers and fighters: all mingle colorfully in Shakespeare’s dramatic medley.

—MAYA CANTU

COMIC RELIEF
In his tragedies, Shakespeare uses minor characters for pacing, tonal variety, and comic relief: think of *Hamlet*’s gravedigger and the drunken Porter in *Macbeth*. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Peter, an illiterate Capulet servant, is another tragic clown. Charged with delivering invitations for Capulet’s ball, Peter asks Romeo, “God, gi’ good e’en; i pray, sir, can you read?” (1.2.57), unleashing a chain of verbal blunders. Peter is also a figure of comic irony; his ignorance unwittingly enlightens Romeo. As Romeo reads the guest list aloud to Peter, he discovers that Rosaline will be among the “fair assembly” (1.2.73) of Capulet’s party. Despite being “of the house of Montague” (1.2.81-82), Romeo decides momentously to attend the ball, where he will find a love better than Rosaline.

The Men of Verona

COSTUME SKETCHES BY ROMEO AND JULIET’S COSTUME DESIGNER, LEON DOBKOWSKI, DRA ’11.
BEFORE

1. In her interview on page 10, director Shana Cooper refers to how Romeo’s language changes after he meets Juliet. Compare his language, focusing on the imagery he uses, before and after he finds the “miracle” of Juliet’s love.

2. Sometimes directors choose to cut one or more characters in Shakespeare’s plays. If you were directing a production of Romeo and Juliet, and you had to trim the cast list, which characters wouldn’t make the cut? What implications would your choices have on the story? Refer to “The Major Role of Minor Characters” on pages 18–19 for guidance.

3. Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev set Romeo and Juliet to music in their adaptations of the tale (see article, pages 5–8). Listen to their musical takes of the play. How does each composer capture the emotional journey and story of the play through music? Does one composer better accomplish his aims?

AFTER

1. Director Shana Cooper incorporates movement into her productions (see page 11). How did the actors use their bodies to tell the story of the play? Compare a few characters—i.e., Romeo, Mercutio, and Tybalt—and discuss how their physical characteristics helped show differences between the characters.

2. Most audience members come to productions of Romeo and Juliet having read the play or seen one of the famous film versions of it (see interview, page 9, and “Shakespeare as Adaptor/Adapting Shakespeare,” pages 5–8). What were your expectations of the play? Now, think about the production. How did the actors, set, costumes, and lighting design either meet or challenge those expectations?

3. What “ancient grudges” exist in your community? With your class, or in small groups, talk about what choices have you made in the past to perpetuate these grudges. What choices can you make to overcome these grudges?

NOTES HERE
RESOURCES

Scholars have been writing about the Bard for a few centuries now, so there's no dearth of resources on his life and works. Here is a starting point to kick off your further study.

BOOKS


WEBSITES
NEA Shakespeare in American Communities
shakespeareinamericancommunities.com

Folger Shakespeare Library
folger.edu

In Search of Shakespeare: Shakespeare in the Classroom
pbs.org/shakespeare/educators

Royal Shakespeare Company
rsc.org.uk/education

Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet
shakespeare.palomar.edu

STUDY GUIDES
National Theatre, London
www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/40325/past-productions/resources-to-download.html

Shakespeare Theatre Company, DC
www.shakespearetheatre.org/_pdf/first_folio/romeo_and_juliet_entire.pdf

Canada National Arts Centre
www2.nac-cna.ca/theatre/1011/romeo-juliet/studyguide
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