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## Romeo+Juliet and Luhrmann's America

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### Abstract:

Bazz Luhrmann's adaptation of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" provides a transcendental space which is rich in perspectives. The movie Romeo+Juliet locates Shakespeare into a specific genre that responds to the contemporary social, political and cultural stereotypes of 90s America. Setting the movie in a modern urbane city of Mexico, Luhrman's Romeo + Juliet revived Shakespeare through the Post Structuralist's mode of articulating signs and signifiers whose significance is constituted by the cultural conventions, norms and beliefs that are shared by the members of the 1990s American society. The attempt of this paper is to explore Luhrmann's mode of articulating Shakespeare in his own society. Therefore it aims at exploring the social, political and cultural stereotypes in 90s American. It also attempts at addressing the core ideas of transposing the cultural and linguistic Elizabethan discourse into the American soil and how it responds to the realities of 90s America.

**Keywords: gang culture,transcendental, adaptation, poststructuralist, teen romance, consumerist culture,older generation, decadence**

Bazz Luhrman's William Shakespeare's Romeo +Juliet (1999) is a teen American movie which updates the bard in 90s American society. The movie reflects Shakespeare's poetic genius and his universal character by making him relevant to the social, political and cultural beliefs and practices of contemporary America. It shows the playwright's Elizabethan England and its cultural transposition to the realities of American society by blending Shakespeare's own language with the language of the 90s. The location of the shooting is in Mexico and it is set in a fictional Verona Beach, a place for drug addicts, prostitutes and rival gangs. The tragic plot of the star crossed lovers along with the rivalry of the feuding families and its gang cultures are unfurled from this fictional place. The post structuralist setting in the movie highlights the capitalistic culture of the 90s which also monitors the lives of the individuals. It also shows the youth culture and its decadent environment<sup>1</sup>. It also portrays the youth culture along with

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<sup>1</sup>. America experiences a sudden upsurge of power and development during or after the world wars and the Vietnam War of 1960s. The capitalist economy and the technological development however bring a complex understanding of human lives and values. The cut throat competition amongst the industrial class and bourgeoisie create hatred against each other. This social order affects the younger generation of the nation to a huge extent. Drugs, prostitution, gang warfare and crimes become a part of their lives. Romeo +Juliet shows this youth culture in 90s America.

violence and bloodshed which is reminiscent of the post 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and the Vietnam War of 1960s<sup>2</sup>This technique of using violence and bloodshed criticizes the nation's involvement in war and its imperial foreign policy. This also manifests the suspicions against the values of the older American generation which were engaged with war and their diminishing human values. By blending these realities of 90s, Baz Luhrmann adapts Shakespeare in his own taste and it successfully appeals to the American teen audience.

The movie opens with a newscaster reading Shakespeare's prologue. It is created in the form of a montage and this reflects the hard boiled tensions of violence between the Montagues and Capulets. It is also shown with newspaper headlines and journals highlighting the clashes of the rivals. The flashback images of death and firing create a real life image in the montage. The movement of the camera further reflects this chaotic environment on the Verona beach. The constant zooming in and out and its movement distorts the eyes of the viewers and create the impression of a real life reporting of the ongoing bloodshed amongst the gangs of Verona beach. The city is kept under the vigilance of a helicopter flying all over it. This also predates the future events of the plot and the whole movie is created with images of violence and death. The violent death of Mercutio and Tybalt, the clashes of the gangs and firings of police squads to stabilize mobs and the death of Romeo and Juliet are all created with filmic techniques which give a picture of daily life events in the gang culture of the city.

The postmodern setting is an important technique of connecting Shakespeare's Verona with the familiar realities of contemporary cities in America. It is a city of consumerism and its skyscrapers and corporate buildings shows the capitalist economy that represents it. It is also packed with advertisement and images which reflects its glamorous world of fashion. The director also uses Shakespearean idioms, names and images as advertisements. Ads such as Prospero's Finest Whiskey: The Stuff Dreams are made of, Out: Out Damn Spot Cleaners<sup>3</sup>enhance the consumerist culture in the city. These images are fused with advertisements which are familiar with the modern audience and represent the popular culture. This technique also represents the popular culture of Shakespeare. It also creates a visual familiarity by using original text with the modern advertisements and updates Shakespeare in the contemporary realities.

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<sup>2</sup>The American civil society and the youths were strongly against the Vietnam War and it appealed for peace and harmony. However, the war adversely affected their lives and the movie portrays violence and bloodshed which can be seen as psychological impact of wars in America society and criticizes it. Also the capitalist economy and decadent youths create gang culture in the nation. Violence and decadence became a defining character of their lives.

<sup>3</sup>. These advertisements are shown frequently in the movie and the corporate houses are covered with these advertisements

The core platform that reflects the capitalist culture of Verona is the two tall corporate buildings which rise high above the rest of the buildings. These two buildings stand opposite to each other with names of Montague and Capulet. They are the rival families who are well established in the city. Luhrmann uses both ethnic and economic lines to draw the feuds between the two families. And these feuds are shown through violence and bloodshed.

According to Sarah L. Lorentz,

“this version of Romeo and Juliet fast-forwards the play four hundred years to where it applies exactly: an inner city gang culture with a bizarre blend of wealth and barbarism.

If you think feuds and duels are gone, turn on the news in a large city. You'll shake your head and wonder why people do such mindless, violent things, and it's because they live in that same disordered, dysfunctional world of the Montagues and Capulets where honor and blood are inseparable. And the ranks of the feuders are growing daily, spreading from the big cities to towns everywhere in America.”<sup>4</sup>

The Montague and the Capulet are ruled by a social code of strong patriarchy and honor. They are harsh, hasty and violent. Their belief system is visceral; blood and honor are inseparable for them. Their rage, passion and grief are the daily routine of their lives. Their vile natures are shown in the gang culture of the city. Luhrmann makes an attempt to release Romeo and Juliet from the chaotic environment of this Verona. Their romantic venture is an attempt to liberate them from the violent and harsh environment. However, the decision made by the young lovers and their tragic death at the end of the movie is not a departure from their daily lives. The reckless, instinctive and passionate resolution is a part of their life and they are ruled by it. They are also portrayed as a part of the collectivity, their romantic venture and the attempt to liberate from it is a failure. They are Shakespeare's Italians with all heart and no brain. Therefore, Baz Luhrmann's revival of the bard strictly follows the bard. The feuds that the playwright wrote four hundred years back remains still relevant to contemporary America. And it is worth exploring the context of this feuds in the movie which is adapted from Shakespeare.

Romeo is a young 22 year old star of Hollywood Leonardo de Caprio. But he is not the innocent and immature youth of the play. The director in portraying him reveals the darker side of his character. He belongs to the typical gangs of the Montague whose fast cars and guns are flaunted in the city of Verona. Therefore he is a part of the corrupt, lawless and crime infested world. He wears Hawaiian shirts and spends more time on the beach where the Montague boys do nothing but fooling around and brawling. He uses drugs, cigarettes and carries guns with the name Montague marked on it. However he is different from the members of other gangs. He reads and writes poetry and the movie introduces him on the beach of the Verona writing poetry for his lady love Rosalyn. In this scene he is shown with the dilapidated Elizabethan stage on the

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<sup>4</sup>. Sarah L. Lorentz "Romeo and Juliet: The movie." *The English Journal* 87.3 (1998): 50-5. Web. Jstore.org. 12<sup>th</sup> April 2015 Print

beach writing his lovesick poems.<sup>5</sup> The intrigues of love and infatuation have no place in the world of the Montague gang. But he is an exception and Luhrmann shows his detachment from the other boys by making him a poet and a lover. But he is a frantic lover and acts rashly. Luhrmann strictly follows Shakespeare in portraying what it means to be young and passionate in his character. When he sees Juliet for the first time, he abandons his hasty infatuation with Rosalyn and falls in love with Juliet without knowing her.

In the play, Romeo and Juliet meet each other at the Capulet masked party. In the movie this masked ball is transformed as the Halloween party in the Capulet mansion. Luhrmann gives different dress codes and customs of the characters which are suited to their personalities. Romeo wears as an armored knight depicting his infatuation with the unrequited love for Rosalyn and his venture of searching his lady love. Juliet is given the custom of an angel and he sees her as the “Bright angel”<sup>6</sup>. Tybalt is portrayed as the devil with two horns projecting on his forehead. The lord and the lady of the Capulet mansion are costumed as Julius Caesar and Cleopatra<sup>7</sup>. With the custom of an angel and an armored knight, the director attempts at liberating the lovers from the world of Verona. According to Patricia Tatspaugh, “Costuming Romeo as a medieval knight and Juliet as an angel for Capulets fancy dress extravaganza, Luhrmann offers a bold visual statement”<sup>8</sup>. The lovers possess an inner stability and peace which is different from others. Their dresses convey the serene world which is portrayed with softer filmic frames and the lyrical tune of music.

One of the most important images that Luhrmann used in this movie is that of water. In almost of all the scenes water is present in some form or the other. In the Halloween party of the Capulets water is present in different forms. In the party, Romeo takes drugs given by Mercutio and he is shown with the hallucinating effects of it. The camera captures his hallucination by fusing together the constant zooming effects with the clamoring Halloween crowd. He is finally released from the drug induced hallucination by dipping his head in the tank. Water is present as a purifying agent here in this scene. He also leaves his mask in the same tank where he dips his head. After his release from hallucination, he is shown watching a fish tank that separates the adjoining dress rooms of the Capulets’s party<sup>9</sup>. He suddenly catches Juliet’s eyes and they see

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<sup>5</sup> . The location in Verona beach where a portrait of an old and shattered proscenium stage stands. It is Luhrmann’s set up to retain his proximity in adapting Shakespeare

<sup>6</sup> . Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet , Arden Edition,. Ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor.  
2006

<sup>7</sup> This is the technique of the director to revive the bard. In this adaptation he retains his adaptive authority and freedom and at the same time keeps Shakespeare at the centre of his concern. By giving these customs to the characters he maintains his proximity to Shakespeare

<sup>8</sup> . Russel Jackson. ed. The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film. 2<sup>nd</sup>ed Cambridge.  
2007. New York. p, (148)

<sup>9</sup> Capulet’s dress room which is especially designed for the Halloween party.

each other for the first time through the glasses of the fish tank. The angle of the camera captures both the faces which are partially hidden under the corrals and fish of the tank which also retains the play's original setting of making them see each other behind the gazes of the mask. The camera then shows their young, passionate and hasty bonding. The second meeting of the lovers also happens in a pool<sup>10</sup>. The scene is captured with Juliet on her balcony. She comes down from her balcony and confesses her love for Romeo and interchange the marriage vow. In the play the balcony acts as barrier that separates the lovers. But the movie shows them together breaking the obstacle in spite of all the difficulties and makes the bond. It breaks down the generational feud and conflicts between the two families. However, they are being gazed by the security camera and limit their free movements in the pool area. Luhrmann's lovers also break this barrier by submerging themselves in the water. This act of submerging baptizes them into new selves and a new order is established within their own world. The movie then shows the hasty marriage of the lovers and the violent clashes of Mercutio and Tybalt. After the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt, Romeo is vanished from the city.

The patriarch Lord Capulet forcefully instructs Juliet to marry Dave Parris but she doesn't compromise. After her suicidal attempt against the marriage, Friar Lawrence designs the seeming death of Juliet. The poison which induces her to sleep causing momentary loss of breath and pulse causes a significant turn to the plot. The letter sent by Father Lawrence about his design on the seeming death fails to reach Romeo on time<sup>11</sup>. The tragedy of the lovers finally unfolds when Romeo enters into the church where Juliet's body is kept with death rituals and ceremonies. The entry to the church is restricted and he forcefully enters it and this scene is shown with violence. Seeing his beloved's body, he finally drinks the deathly poison before Juliet wakes up from her long sleep and dies in her bosom. Juliet commits suicide by shooting herself. The original Dave Paris is not present in this scene and he never faces Romeo in his person throughout the movie.

Claire Dane's Juliet is a strong multifaceted character. Critics of the movie pay her an appreciative attention. She surpasses Romeo in maturity, complexity and insight. Although she is perceived as a shallow heroine who behaves without thinking, Luhrmann portrays her as independent, self-willed and courageous. She fights for her autonomy and independence and carves out a world of her own by detaching from the chaotic and hasty environment of the Capulet. Therefore she is not the mere victim of the "star crossed lovers" in the play but an independent strong woman who fights for her own identity and controls her life with her own choice. Luhrmann is loyal to Shakespeare in portraying her. His Juliet is modeled on the original play's Juliet. She is one of the youngest Shakespearean heroines and he shows her as a thirteen

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<sup>10</sup> . The swimming pool of the Capulet mansion where CCTV cameras are installed

<sup>11</sup> . The letter is written by father Lawrence to Romeo disclosing his plan for the reunion of the lovers

year old virgin in the film. In spite of her tender and young age she is aggressive and violent in the pursuit of her love.

Deny thy father and refuse thy name.

Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love  
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

.....

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.  
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.  
What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,  
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part  
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!  
What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other word would smell as sweet;

So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title.<sup>12</sup>

Luhrmann's Juliet speaks this Shakespearean Elizabethan language in his film also. Her innocent love possesses a strong essence that can discard the generational feuds and economic clashes between the two families. Its purity sees Romeo beyond his name and status and admires the beauty of the bond. Her maturity and ability to transcend the familial feuds also simulate in her a masculine character. She openly expresses herself without waiting for Romeo's advances and is more aggressive. With her above quotation, she tries to reverse the gender roles of marriage and asks him to sacrifice his status as a Montague. His name has to be rejected so that a new identity is formed in order to strengthen their bond. In this power structure she assumes an upper hand and tries to control him. She violently rejects her father's proposal of marrying Dave Paris as her future husband. She refuses to follow the patriarchal codes of the family and asserts her own choice over her father's authoritative control. She fights alone against the strong patriarchy bearing her father's threat and violence. After her father's violence and the forceful instructions of marrying Dave Paris, she protests against father Lawrence and threatens to shoot herself with a pistol. Father Lawrence accordingly designs the sleeping potion for her seeming death and promises her a reunion with her lover. Her suicide at the end of the movie is her last act of defiance and she favors death in a world where her likes and dislikes are controlled by the strong patriarchal codes.

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<sup>12</sup>Act 2 scene 2 p, no 1707 collected works of Shakespeare electronic copy. Released by Project Gutenberg in association with The World Library, Inc.

Luhrmann's Mercutio is given to Harold Perrineau and he is taken as the "Other" in the movie. He is the only black character in the Montague gangs and his character's portrayal echoes to the social issues of contemporary America. Racism is one of the most important factors behind the social unrest and instability in the nation. From the 1960s (after the racial segregation) American society experienced a culture of violence which hinders the peace and stability of the nation. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr and other civil right leaders causes racial disturbances that turns the social order of the nation into a different direction. There was an increase in violence and crime in all major cities and it causes a serious threat to the nation. Also, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century undergoes a process of slowing this racial segregation in northern American states and the number of crimes and murders decreased. Non segregation laws were passed and America experienced a wave of social assimilation. All these social realities are reflected in the movie. Mercutio is Romeo's best friend and the movie stresses their relationship as a strong bond. Romeo never engages in violence after the Balcony scene in the Capulet mansion. However, the death of Mercutio makes him an inconsolable mourner and kills Tybalt as a revenge for the death. Luhrmann also portrays him as an outsider and he acts as a scapegoat. It is worth to remember that in the Capulet Halloween party he is dressed as a drag queen and he entertains the crowd with his music. He wears miniskirt, bra in glittery white, red lipstick and high heels which make him different from other people in the party. The loudness of his music and its uncontrollable beat express black man's masculine power and sexuality.

The movie depicts religious images in different forms. The image of Christ is present in almost every scene. In Verona, a huge statue of Jesus separates the two big corporate houses of the feuding families. The images of Christ are also used as tattoos by the Capulets boys. The Montagues gangs wear Hawaiian shirt which bears the images of Christ. Juliet's room is also adorned by the statue of Christ and image of Mary. Father Lawrence is introduced with a tattoo of Christ on his back and along with his Hawaiian t-shirt. Therefore, Luhrmann's movie echoes a strong religious appeal. The huge statue of Jesus in Verona acts as an observer of events in the city and it separates the two tall corporate buildings of the feuding families ( Capulet and Montague) . However, this also suggests an unresponsive Christ, a mere observer who has nothing to do with the social, political and cultural realities of the city. The used of (Christ's) images as tattoos and in shirts also symbolize an abstract presence of Christ. It depicts the absence of religious values in the consumerist culture of Verona. The cut throat economic clashes and the immoral culture depict a death of spiritual values in the city. Also father Lawrence the shepherd of God in the city, fails to guide its people. He takes drugs and engages in collecting medicinal plants for different purposes. One also must remember that he himself produces the sleeping potion that induced the seeming death in Juliet. He allows the hasty marriage of the young lovers. He is also the part of the hasty and chaotic culture of Verona.

America has a long history of war. The consistent engagement with war hugely affected the civilians in all spheres of their lives. This brings them a new culture and their lives muddle



through dramatic transformations on social, political and cultural domains. It is worth mentioning the Second World War( 1939-1945), Vietnam War( 1959-1975) and Cold War to understand the discourse of violence and bloodshed in the movie. The longest war that America fought in its history is the Vietnam War involving the loss of millions of lives and properties. Continuing for almost a decade, it produced a tremendous impact on the lives of the Americans. According to social and cultural historians (post 1945), Vietnam War created a new society in America. It generated new transformative impacts and established wide ranging long term social, cultural and political order. The most significant impact is the creation of a new social order that redefines the individual's relationship to each other. This generates a new dimension of hatred, enmity and conflicts among friends and families. These changes fuse with the technological and economic development before and after the war producing an ambiguous understanding of human relationships and values. The cold war also ignited a more complex structure of human relationships and values in America. It created a new discourse of searching internal hatred and vengeance within its own society. The fear of a nuclear war also aggravated the instability of the social, political and cultural lives of the Americans. This state of flux and a chaotic America can be seen from the movie. The hard boiled tensions, rage, their passionate lives, violence and deaths among the Capulets and the Montagues can be seen as the psychological impact of war in America. The everyday clashes among the gangs, deep rooted hatred and vengeance, cut throat competition amongst them is a reflection of the impacts of war in their psyche. Therefore the impact of this war is visible as the collective memory that shapes the psyche of individuals in America.

The constant engagement with war and the ongoing deep rooted clashes raises social and political dissent which leads to the questioning of the values of the elder generation and their authority. The younger generation doubts the values and status of the elders and they started challenging their authoritative structure. This leads to the formation of youth culture in America which is also the target audience of Luhrmann's movie. According to Trevor Nunn, " the director (BazLuhrmann) achieve a completely personal vision that contained urgency and immediacy and anger and relevance, all of which really did address itself to a youthful audience which also responds"<sup>13</sup> Luhrmann's movie is shaped by this youth culture. The creation of Sycamore Grove is one of the most important locations to understand youth culture in the movie. It is shown as a dilapidated proscenium Elizabethan stage located as a gate that opens to the Verona sea beach. By creating this location, Luhrmann tries to remain close to Shakespeare. It is also the fighting ground for the gangs of Verona. (Mercutio and Tybalt taunt each other and

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<sup>13</sup>Shakespeare in the Cinema: A Film Directors' Symposium with Peter Brook, SirPeter Hall, Richard Loncraine, BazLuhrmann, Oliver Parker, Roman Polanski and Franco ZeffirelliCinéaste publisher, 24. 1 (1998): 48-55. Web. Jstore. Com. 12<sup>th</sup> March 2015

fought in this place and Mercutio succumbs to death which brings a turning point to the flow of the movie)

Romeo and Juliet always question the values of their parents. They try to escape from the harsh realities of Verona through their romantic ventures. They challenge the chaotic environment of the two families and look for a world of stability and harmony. Romeo distrusts the values of his parents. In the sycamore grove after the violent scuffle of Benvolio with the Capulet boys, his parents came to confirm his safety. However, his inner peace and harmony is disturbed by their mere presence. The camera in this scene focuses on his looks of anger and resentment and he immediately walks away after seeing them. He doesn't believe in the harsh realities of Verona and his parent's generational conflicts with the Capulets. The movie also doesn't show any sign of his intimate connection with them. This clearly suggests his departure from their world. He doesn't believe in their superfluous values and their care. Also one must remember that he is the only character who tries to stop the brawling fight of Tybalt and Mercutio. It is only after the death of Mercutio that he entertains violence and kills Tybalt. Juliet also challenges the authoritative patriarchy. She denies her father's proposal to marry Dave Paris. Her father's proposal is based on mutual understanding and it is for the welfare of both the families. However Juliet doesn't believe in his call and rejects the authoritative structure established by the conventional patriarchal social codes. She discards the aggressive and heroic values of her father and becomes disobedient. This shows Luhrmann's attempt of making youth as the target of his audience because of its potential to question the values of the older generations of America.

The inclusion of rap music, hip hop, ballads, rock and roll and disco performances in the movie is also a technique of showing youth culture. Music ranges from gospel to disco performances and it is Luhrmann's attempt at maintaining his loyalty to the strong lyrical impulse of Shakespeare<sup>14</sup>. The ballad "kissing you" by Des'ree is the title song of the movie and it is quite significant. The performance of this ballad is also accompanied by classical orchestral performance. The song with its harmonious rhythms and tune has strong appeal for peace and harmony and it serves as an antiwar anthem. Therefore this antiwar anthem brings a new light of hope and peace to the ongoing clashes between the Capulets and the Montagues. This brings a sense of duty and responsibility to the younger generation for its peace and stability. This antiwar aspirations urge a sense of forming new family at a faster rate through love and marriage. Des'ree's ballad binds Romeo and Juliet together and they fall in love without actually knowing who they are. The camera captures their first meeting with the symphonic rhythms of the music and it embraces every gestures and expression of the lovers. The focus of the camera is on the eye contact of the lovers and the lyrics and the rhythms of the ballad ensembles their movement. Therefore the ballad is especially meant for them and they are brought together in

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<sup>14</sup> The play's lyrical impulse are transposed as different genres of music in America. The movie has many songs which ranges from hip hop and rap to gospel songs.

spite of all the oddities in Verona.

Shakespeare's plot concludes with a sense of consoling the two feuding families. The epilogue confirms the city's stability and peace after the sacrificial deaths of the two lovers. However Luhrmann's movie deviates from the original play. Also the movie is set in a post-modernist society and a sense of resolution and peace in the disillusioned and chaotic environment of Verona sounds difficult. A clear cut solution for the long standing feuds of the two families doesn't fit to the post-modernist setting of the movie. Therefore Luhrmann's movie successfully locates to the post structuralist realities of the city by concluding with a sense of doubt. The epilogue is read by a newscaster who confirms that peace is established between the two families. But the movie never mention about the statue of the lovers for their remembrance of love (which is there in the play). The parents of the families never talk to each other and they are not shown together for any gatherings and public meetings. However they are shown once at the closing part of the movie.

The luxurious display of wealth and pompousness of the feuding families, gang culture and violence, superficial and hasty culture of the older generation of Verona along with their disobedient youth, decadent morality and religious symbols which are meaningless and its used as ornaments in the consumerist culture of the city give a real live picture of contemporary America. The creation of youth culture signifies a new social order which questions the old beliefs and traditions of the older generation. The need for peace after prolonged engagement with Second World War and Veitnam war of (1954-75) is expressed through the horizon of love which Romeo and Juliet carved in spite of all violent odds. It is also interesting to note that Shakespeare's Mercutio is portrayed as the "Other" and is acted by a black artist. The director with a skill hand manages to inculcate social and political tensions such as racism quite intricately by showing him as a drag queen and as a black. Therefore, the half Elizabethan and half American English that the character of Luhrmann speak centers on Shakespeare and shows the cultural and linguistic transposition that responds to the social, political and cultural realities of 90s America.

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