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The Comédie-Française's *Roméo et Juliette*

Directed by Éric Ruf

Comédie-Française, Salle Richelieu

Performance date: June 30, 2018

Reviewed by SEAN LAWRENCE

Director Éric Ruf claims in the program notes that *Romeo and Juliet* has become a self-sustaining myth, “souvent très loin de la réalité complexe de la pièce de Shakespeare” (“often far from the complex reality of Shakespeare’s play”). This production was first mounted in 2015, when it became the first production by the Comédie-Française since 1954. The circumstance of having no living production history in his company enabled Ruf to look to the story anew. In choosing to set the play in interwar Italy, Ruf claims to locate it in both an unreal and a contemporary setting, allowing the audience to avoid “une intention manifeste” (“a clear intention”) in favor of allowing themselves to be carried along by the narrative. This is neither a conventional production, nor one explicating a thesis. Indeed, Ruf refuses even to treat the play as consistently tragic: “Ce n’est pas l’oeuvre d’un Shakespeare assagi et univoque mais celle de l’auteur du *Songe* et de *Macbeth* mêlés” (“It’s not the work of a mature and unambiguous Shakespeare, but of the author of *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and of *Macbeth* combined”).

The fact of translation no doubt aids Ruf’s attempt to read the play afresh. This production largely follows Victor Hugo’s time-honored French text, albeit with some changes. I fail to remember the cast retaining Hugo’s lame attempt to translate Mercutio’s famous pun on becoming a “grave man,” but it would not have been very memorable if they had. On the other hand, they became more literal than Hugo in translating Capulet’s reference to Peter as a “merry whoreson” with “fils d’une pute” in place of Hugo’s “plaisant coquin.” The English phrase usually disappears into casual banter, whereas the vulgarity of the French translation drew audible gasps. A defamiliarization of the story accompanies a defamiliarization of the script. Working in French, Ruf is able to break with traditions of production that might prove overpowering in the anglophone world, eliminating the balcony, understating the feud, and cutting much of the last scene, including the reconciliation of the families. Instead, a final and extra-canonical chorus enters after Juliette’s suicide, partly to deliver some of the Prince’s final lines, but also jarringly to wish the audience a nice afternoon.

The opening chorus is also modified, in this case by the addition of a reminder for cell phones to be turned off. Both are delivered by Bakary Sangare’s Frère Jean, a role much enhanced, in fact to the point of dividing Frère Laurent – played by Serge Bagdassarian – into two characters by transferring many of his lines to his near-constant companion. Their first appearance together comes

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across as a sort of Laurel and Hardy routine, opening smaller and smaller boxes to reveal the flower of which Friar Lawrence speaks in Shakespeare's play, then accidentally spreading its allegedly toxic pollen on the front rows. This bit of stage business reduces Shakespeare's most famous presentation of the *pharmakon*, a poison which is also a cure, to slapstick. True to Ruf's conception of the play as tragicomedy, the company indulges comedic possibilities usually ignored.

On the other hand, the production by no means reduces the play to farce, instead using comedy to reinforce the tragedy, if only by contrast. The banter between Peter and the musicians is retained, but with a clearly traumatized Pierre brandishing a knife and offering physical harm, rather than merely joking about a dagger. Preparing for her death, Suliane Brahim's Juliette strips naked and collapses, sobbing, in fetal position on the mostly bare stage, before rallying to don her wedding dress, and then, in a brief return to comedy, realizing that she has nearly forgotten the Friars' sleeping draught. Juliette deflates her famous so-called balcony scene with what seem like hiccups, but this also makes her touchingly vulnerable. I have never seen Juliette's loneliness and isolation so powerfully conveyed as in this production's performance of the scene where her mother reveals plans to assassinate Roméo. The irony of her double meanings drew laughter, but also measured the distance between Juliette and the other women in her life: Lady Capulet and Juliette echo each other's words, while inhabiting different mental worlds. Ruf's production indulges moments of comedy, even of slapstick, but the tragedy remains powerfully intact despite or even because of them.

Ruf also breaks with the tradition, which he dates from *Westside Story*, of depicting all characters as partisans of one of the families. On the contrary, Christian Lacroix declares in the program notes that as costume designer he attempted to give each character a distinctive style. The stylishness of the characters contrasts with a drab stage, consisting of a few panels hung from the ceiling, basic furniture and some dated taps and sinks. The characters are elaborately clothed even in death. Ruf bases the Capulet tomb on the catacombs of Palermo, where the dead are interred standing "dans leurs habits du dimanche" ("in their Sunday clothes"). Juliette finds herself trapped in the funerary garb which holds her to the wall. This might symbolize her entrapment and isolation within her own tragedy, but in any case mercifully spares her witnessing the death of Roméo at her feet.

The strength of the company expresses itself in the individuation of even relatively minor roles. At the performance I attended the role of Tybalt was taken by Christian Gonon, an actor old enough to have played the duke of Venice in a production of *Othello* in 2014. As a result, Capulet's rhetorical "vous voulez faire homme?" ("you'll be the man?") becomes particularly cutting. This Tybalt is a middle-aged man treated incongruously and insultingly as a boy. Conversely, Bruno Raffaelli's Capulet seems explosively frustrated at his inability to get anyone to take him seriously, needing to bully Tybalt, ordering his wife out of the room with a silent but aggressive gesture after promising Juliette to Paris, and exploding in rage at Juliette's refusal of the marriage, after cradling her paternally a few minutes earlier in the scene. On the other hand, he has the good humor to don a

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frilly apron and accept the laughter of his family while preparing the wedding feast. Claude Mathieu as the Nurse (“la Nourrice”) carries herself with far more dignity than in most productions though still, of course, proving chronically incapable of a straight answer. Jérémy Lopez portrays Roméo as an anti-hero, which is original, if no more memorable than most anti-heros. Even Alexandre Schorderet’s Pierre (Peter), has a definite character, collapsing unto a chair, cradling a radio and quietly weeping while the rest of the household loudly bewails the death of Juliette, then expressing his pain in violent threats towards the musicians. This production is about individuals, not factions.

To those of us trained to regard reverence to the original text as misguided literalism, Ruf’s approach may appear naïve. Perhaps more surprisingly for those of us trained to associate “French theory” with a foregrounding of politics and questioning of the so-called bourgeois individual, this performance, on the most important stage in the francophone world, neglects the most overtly political element of the play in order to resurrect the individuality of each of the roles. Because of these decisions, the production proves both strikingly original and surprisingly moving.

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