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Star-Cross'd Lovers in the Age of AIDS: The Intermediality of Rudolf Nureyev's *Romeo and Juliet*

Although 'intermediality' is a relatively new term to enter the critical lexicon, ballet has always been a highly intermedial art in a number of senses. For a start, its 'meaning' is generated through the interplay of a number of different codes. Unlike some forms of modern dance, where the kinesthetic experience is foregrounded and often detached from aural or visual media, ballet has traditionally relied heavily upon the music, set, lighting and costumes to reinforce the messages transmitted by the choreography. Secondly, many ballets take as their starting point texts that already exist in other media, a verbal text, typically, which has been transformed into a musical score; the choreography therefore becomes a kind of intersemiotic translation of those. Finally, the ballet, like other kinds of performance, unfolds in time, and can therefore only be fixed for analysis with recourse to other media; hence, the study of it is not usually undertaken directly, but rather by means of written and photographic records (in the case of older works) and today, using the modern technological resources of video and DVD. All of these of course introduce an additional dimension of mediation into our experience of the total work.

Rudolf Nureyev's *Romeo and Juliet*, first produced in 1977 and filmed in 1995, is no exception. Based simultaneously upon Prokofiev's score and Shakespeare's play, the 'meaning' of the ballet emerges from the interplay of choreography, music, set, lighting and

costume, which interact in multiple ways, at times reinforcing each other, at other times undermining or subverting the dominant narrative. Moreover, all sorts of complex genre dialogues are contained within each of these dimensions. The choreography, for example, while still clearly identifiable as ballet, also draws upon other dance-forms (folk, court dances, modern dance and the American musical) as well as other kinds of performance that may not even be considered as dance at all (such as mime, circus, naturalistic acting, and even the stylised ritualistic gestures of the various youth subcultures that have been such a feature of urban life since the sixties). Similarly, Ezio Frigerio's sets, based upon authentic Renaissance drawings of architecture and interiors, have been stylized differently in the various productions¹ to bring them into line with contemporary tastes; while many of the more static tableaux (themselves involving multiple media) clearly make reference to the work of the painter Goya.

We can also see an influence of the cinema upon Nureyev's staging, in his choreographic imitation of devices such as *freeze-frame*, *slow motion* and *cross-dissolve*. In the final part of Act II Sc. III, for example, (the passage usually protagonised by Lady Capulet following the death of Tybalt), the characters all freeze while Juliet executes a wild dance of anger and grief and confused love, a dramatic suspension of realism that effectively emphasises the psychological dimension being enacted. In Act III Sc. II, when the ghosts of Mercutio and Tybalt, representing life and death respectively, struggle over Juliet, the dancers move as if in slow motion, thus signalling that this is to

1 There were in fact several versions of this ballet. The most important were: the 1977 production by the London Festival Ballet; the 1980 version for La Scala, Milan; the 1984 version for the Paris Opera Ballet, revived in 1991 at the Palais Garnier; and the 1995 updating for the vast stage of the Bastille Opera House. This was the version that was filmed.

be understood as existing in the realm of imagination. Then there is the scene in which Romeo awakens out of his dream in Mantua to discover that it is not Juliet but Benvolio that is tugging at his arm – a deft theatrical equivalent of the cross-dissolve technique in film. Another cinematic device used in this production is the decentralisation of the action into *multiple simultaneous frames*, achieved essentially through the creative use of lighting. This involves the division of the darkened stage into two or more illuminated cells in which different scenes are playing, sometimes to give the impression of other imagined or narrated worlds competing with the 'real' one, such as in Act III Sc. II, when Friar Laurence gives Juliet the potion: a scene of Romeo and Tybalt fighting lights up, followed by another of Juliet herself awakening on a bed, marked by the dreamy ethereal music of Prokofiev's potion theme.

All of these of course illustrate a strong focus upon the psychological domain, which brings Nureyev's ballet closer not only to the world of film, but also to Shakespeare (who of course revealed his characters' inner worlds through soliloquy) and Prokofiev (who used the emotional power of music to build up complex psychological portraits). Indeed, we can see in the devices listed above a clear attempt to recreate in visual form aspects that were depicted verbally and musically in those texts.

Let us begin our exploration of the ballet's intermediality by looking at the debt it owes to the texts that preceded it, namely Prokofiev's musical score, and the text upon which that, in its turn, had been based, namely Shakespeare's famous play about the star cross'd lovers of Verona.

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When Nureyev first decided to stage his own version of *Romeo and Juliet*, in 1977, his aim was, by all accounts, to strip 'all traces of

Victorian sentiment' from the play and return it to Shakespeare.² This was no doubt partly a reaction to the mawkishness that had tended to characterise many earlier productions of the work; but it also clearly derived from Nureyev's own feeling that the world depicted in the play had a great deal in common with his own world:

I am convinced that Renaissance Verona and Elizabethan London, cultures divided between old superstitions and the desire for a new world, were both highly sexual and violent – similar to our own age.³

His version, therefore, attempts to incorporate as much historical realism as possible, whilst using this to explore and comment upon contemporary issues, an enterprise which has yielded some very interesting results, as we shall see.

The final ballet, however, owes as much to Prokofiev as it does to Shakespeare, and critics are divided as to whether the musical or the verbal text has been most influential. Let us examine each in turn.

Nureyev and Prokofiev

Prokofiev's score for *Romeo and Juliet* (composed in 1935) was conceived in the spirit of the romantic ballet, where the music is not only a rhythmic support for dance, but also provides a kind of soundtrack, aiding characterisation and following the development of the plot. The work consists of fifty-two short episodes, presented in al-

2 Alexander Bland, *Observer Review* June 5 (1977). 'Alexander Bland' was the pseudonym used by Nureyev's friends Nigel and Maude Gosling.

3 Nureyev, cited in the programme of the Paris Opera's 1984 production of the ballet.

most the same order as in Shakespeare's play. Narrative structure is created musically through the use of Leitmotif, a technique developed by Wagner for opera, which involves the allocation of musical themes to characters and to dramatic ideas, basic melodies that are then altered (rhythmically, harmonically, melodically and through orchestration) to reflect shifting interactions and emotional states. Most of the characters are identified by at least one portrait theme, and there are also abstract themes like Love, Death and Strife.

Nureyev's staging of *Romeo and Juliet* is, in the end, very faithful to Prokofiev's score. It largely follows the composer's basic sequence of episodes, with just a few repetitions to enable the staging of additional scenes that had not initially been contemplated in the music. The only significant structural alteration is the displacement of the episode that had originally been designed to represent the Prince's wrath (No. 7 'The Duke's Order', an intensely discordant passage, characterised by dramatic crescendos and diminuendos) to the beginning, where it is clearly being mobilised as a kind of prologue to the work as a whole. This, however is a highly significant move. Nureyev seems to be responding to some feeling of suppressed violence inherent in the musical semiotic,⁴ and accompanies the passage with unequivocal images of doom clearly designed to suggest the presence of an ominous Fate, overseeing all the action.

His characterisation also seems to be based upon the musical portraits suggested by Prokofiev's leitmotifs rather than directly upon

4 For a detailed exploration of the way meaning is created musically in this musical score see: Karen Bennett, "Star-cross'd Lovers: Shakespeare and Prokofiev's 'pas-de-deux' in *Romeo and Juliet*," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 32.4 (2003), 311–347. Prokofiev may originally have intended to use Episode 7 for some more cataclysmic purpose, given the extreme nature of the musical message, and his labelling of it as 'The Duke's Order' may have been a hasty attempt to diffuse fatalistic interpretations of the work in the light of official Soviet ideology.

Shakespeare. Romeo, for example, is presented initially as a rather foolish character, simultaneously bawdy and effete, who only achieves dignity and maturity after falling in love; Juliet is something of a young tomboy, headstrong and energetic, the antithesis of the graceful romantic heroine of more traditional productions; while Mercutio and Tybalt are kinesthetically contrasted in a way that must have been suggested by the music (the former is relaxed and cheeky to the point of vulgarity, and the latter physically taut with rage and easily baited, a dimension that is emphasised visually during their encounter with the use of bullfighting symbolism). The only character to have undergone any significant alteration in the hands of the choreographer is Friar Laurence, who is dark and imposing, handling a skull on the altar during the wedding as if presiding over some satanic ritual. As we shall see, this ominous dimension is part of a dark subtext introduced by Nureyev himself into the work and which achieved its greatest expression in the 1995 video, produced after his death. I will return to this later.

Friar Laurence is, however, is the only character that has been significantly altered in the ballet and most of the characterisation seems to have developed directly out of Prokofiev's leitmotifs. Indeed, Patricia Ruanne, Nureyev's first Juliet, explains that some of the more emotionally expressive scenes were created *ad libitum* by the original dancers in response to the music, and as such may be understood as a direct translation into movement of emotions and character traits perceived by them to be present in Prokofiev's score.⁵

5 B. Bissell, "Patricia Ruanne: A Conversation with a Ballet Répétiteur," *Dance Advance* 2 (2003).

Nureyev and Shakespeare

Nureyev's intentions to be as faithful as possible to Shakespeare in this ballet led him to undertake an unprecedented amount of research in preparation for his production, studying not only the original text, but also Shakespeare's sources, critical works about the play and details of Renaissance life. The consequences of this research activity may be seen on many levels of the ballet, ranging from the costumes and set to the inclusion of additional motifs (a plague procession, a beggar etc) designed to enhance historical realism. He also went to great lengths to include as much as possible of the original text in his ballet, rehabilitating scenes that would normally have been cut. These include the one where Friar John is accosted on the road to Mantua; Romeo's dream while at Mantua, and the arrival of Benvolio (Balthasar in the play, of course) bringing news of Juliet's death. As these represent additions not contemplated by Prokofiev's libretto, it was necessary to re-use music from earlier parts of the score; we have, therefore, repeats of some of the earlier musical episodes, which of course introduce an element of nostalgia.

Nureyev was also quite ingenious in his attempts to reproduce some of the most abstract speeches in visual or kinesthetic form. The Queen Mab speech, for example, was achieved by incorporating mime into the dance. At one point, Mercutio uses the red Capulet cloak (that is to be a Montague disguise at the ball) as if it were a pair of wings and darts about the stage like an insect; while the dreams of the lawyers, parsons, soldiers, maids etc are enacted in his romps with the other Montague boys with the aid of party hats.

Another motif from Shakespeare's text which has been specifically activated in this ballet is the notion of the Wheel of Fortune, a potent symbol in Elizabethan England. In *Romeo and Juliet*, it seems to play a particularly important role, since in Shakespeare's version

of the play, the tragedy results less from the actions of a flawed individual than from the work of some cosmic force that is entirely out of the characters' control. Indeed, the very structure of the play, the fact that it could have developed into a romantic comedy up until the death of Mercutio, as Susan Snyder has pointed out,⁶ also seems to enact the operations of the Wheel of Fortune, since, according to this vision of the universe, a king could be reduced to a beggar overnight in a totally random and arbitrary way.

In this ballet, the Wheel of Fortune is represented iconically in the form of a circle dance performed by the guests at the Capulet ball (actually an authentic court dance from the Renaissance period). The guests organise themselves into two concentric rings, which rotate ever faster around a female figure (Rosaline, in fact), who is raised in the air, blindfold, and holding a pair of cymbals, which she clashes at intervals. The figures on the outer ring of the circle (which include Romeo, Mercutio, Benvolio, Tybalt and Paris) are also blindfold, and as they whirl around, they come into contact with each other, as if thrown together by chance.

To this extent, therefore, Nureyev's version of the story is very faithful to Shakespeare. However, in the ballet, references to the cosmic dimension are not limited to representations of the medieval Wheel of Fortune. Elsewhere, he seems to go beyond Shakespeare to some other, much more primitive conception of fate, which has repercussions on all levels of the drama and may influence our reading the ballet as a whole.

6 S. Snyder, "The Comic Matrix of Romeo and Juliet" [1979] in N. Taylor and B. Loughrey (eds.), *Shakespeare's Early Tragedies* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

Fate and Fury

The sense of doom that pervades the video version of Nureyev's *Romeo and Juliet*⁷ is overwhelming. The very set suggests a Fate that is cosmic in proportion, all encompassing, and from which there is no escape: an overpowering sky framing all the action like a manifestation of glowering malevolence and before which all the human figures appear tiny and insignificant; the gloomy lighting, which mutates between ominous blue and dull orange, but never properly manages to dispel the shadows; and the bleak emptiness of the stage, across which the actors crawl like ants. There is also an emphasis on façades, which are pushed apart or breached to indicate the unsubstantiality of human constructions and decorated with sinister images such as the bronze carvings of screaming faces, like the masks of Greek Tragedy, adorning the wall of the Capulet tomb.

A similar effect is achieved in the realm of sound, as I have already suggested, with the displacement of Prokofiev's Episode 7, 'The Duke's Order' to the beginning, where its jarring discords and dramatic crescendos effectively set the tone of the whole work. Significantly, Nureyev accompanied this music with images so powerful that they unequivocally label the work not as the tale of conflict between two households, nor as a love story, but rather as tragedy in the Greek mould, in which the outcome is preordained, and human beings are tiny insignificant creatures at the mercy of some vast cosmic power.

As the first discordant chords of 'The Duke's Order' rise from the depths, several bent cloaked figures appear in the shadows at the side of the stage, and claw their way across the front. As they move into the half-light, we see that they are bald, and wearing nothing beneath

7 *Rudolf Nureyev's 'Romeo and Juliet'*, performed by the Paris Opera Ballet (Warner Music Vision/NVC Arts), 1997 [1995].

their cloaks except for loincloths. They appear to be playing dice. Then one of the figures raises his fist into the air in a gesture of powerful defiance, and proceeds to push apart the heavy walls that line the back of the stage, revealing the naked blue sky behind, with only the silhouette of a statue of a horseman on the horizon. A black cloak flutters to the ground. Then, from the back righthand corner a shadowy procession appears, of bowed figures, slowly leading a cart. The procession snakes around the statue and passes in front of the stage before disappearing into the wings on the opposite side, and as it passes, we discern that the cart is piled high with bodies, and the figures accompanying it are mourners in medieval dress, the women veiled and weeping. This image clearly prefigures the deaths that will take place later in the play, and therefore may be read as a kind of omen. However, it goes far beyond the conventional symbol of the funeral. This is no stately hearse bearing highborn victims in dignity to the family tomb; it is an image straight out of Goya, of plague victims, hastily piled into a rustic cart on their way to burials in mass graves.

Nureyev had originally become fascinated by the Goya drawings in the Hermitage Gallery in Moscow, and for this ballet he studied them, determining how they had achieved their effects so that he could recreate his dancers as paintings in his ballet.⁸ In fact, the artist may well have provided inspiration not only for the general aura of desolation that pervades the whole work, but also for many of the concrete scenes and motifs that Nureyev introduced into his version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Goya drew many processions, bullfights, wild carnival scenes with masked figures and harlequins, games of Blindman's Buff, images of plague victims, beggars, and inquisition scenes, and all of these have found their way into the ballet, suggesting the presence of a disquieting subtext that takes the notion of tragedy far beyond the social or romantic planes.

8 Diane Solway, *Nureyev: His Life* (London: Phoenix, 1998) p. 416.

Let us more closely at those bald cloaked dice-playing figures that open the ballet. These figures also return at the very end, which would at first sight seem to indicate that they are intended as a kind of Chorus, framing the action and commenting upon it like the Shakespearian prologue and epilogue. However they also seem to actively participate in the tragedy, indeed to *cause* it in some way. They are of course playing dice, which links them inextricably to representations of Chance or Fortune; and the raised fist of the leader before pushing apart the walls is a gesture not only of power but also of triumph, suggesting some kind of sadistic revelling in the misfortunes that are about to take place.

There are other portents of doom in this ballet. Many of these are relayed through the set and props (such as the skull on Friar Laurence's altar and the screaming mask carved into the wall of the Capulet tomb), but others involve the insertion of additional dramatic episodes not explicitly contemplated by either Shakespeare or Prokofiev. One of the most marked is at the end of Act I Sc. III, when the Montague boys are on their way to the ball; before running off to join the others, Romeo tosses a coin to a beggar, who promptly keels over and dies. Then, at the beginning of Act III Sc. I, we have a specific enactment of the motif of Death as Juliet's bridegroom, which also functions as a kind of premonition: the figure of Death appears in Juliet's bedroom and, after dancing with her stiff immobile body in a ghostly pas-de-deux, lays her on the bed and lies on top of her, covering them both with his dark red cloak.

The accumulation of all these portents indicates a conception of the tragedy that goes far beyond psychological or social interpretations to a vision that is perhaps more Classical in its scope, involving a universe that relentless in its fury and which man is powerless to avoid. Why Nureyev should have opted for such a profoundly negative vision may have something to do with social context in which the ballet was produced and the circumstances of his own life.

Historical Context of Production

The era in which the ballet was first created could perhaps be best described as the aftermath of the sixties youth revolution, in which Rudolf Nureyev had himself been an enthusiastic protagonist. By the late seventies, all the certainties – social, moral and aesthetic – that had motivated the previous generation had been overturned. The human rights movements had undermined the traditional social hierarchies; feminism and the gay lobby had challenged conventional attitudes to gender; and the individual personality had been shown to be susceptible to manipulation by psychotropic substances and therapy. There was a merry abandonment of the rigid moral values that had motivated previous generations, with gleeful experimentation of all forms of transgression, ranging from free love to drugs and alternative religions; and there was also democratisation in the arts, with traditionally high-brow activities (such as ballet and ‘classical’ music) forced to take account of the vital currents that were emerging in popular culture.

This work, first produced in 1977, may well have tapped into some deep feeling of social unease that was only just beginning to come to the surface. For by this time, the exuberance that had energised the sixties was wearing a little thin. Not only were the original protagonists of the youth revolution (including Nureyev himself) somewhat older by now, they were probably becoming aware that many of the promises of that euphoric time had failed to be delivered. Transgression, which by nature is reactive, is not easily sustained as a *modus vivendi*; and it was natural that, after the old paradigm had been overturned, there would be a period of despair and disillusionment at least till some alternative system were found to take its place. Sexual ‘liberation’, in particular, was, for many veterans, a great disappointment, failing to deliver the expected ecstasy; and of course, there had already begun to be the first signs that total ‘freedom’ in this sphere

would bring new dangers of which the original love children had been completely unaware, the initial manifestations of a mysterious disease that seemed to target the sexually promiscuous, particularly those that preferred the company of their own sex.

Much of the imagery used in Nureyev's ballet suggests a preoccupation with these concerns. The bullfight and the carnival, for example, while making use of Goya's themes, as we have seen, have also long featured in gay iconography (the homosexual fascination with the bullfight has of course to do not only with the bull as symbol of masculinity, but also with the phallic associations of the knife and the act of stabbing; the Carnival, on the other hand, has always offered an opportunity for cross-dressing and other kinds of social/sexual transgression). These significances are, I believe, activated in the ballet by their proximity to a whole series of other such references to the homosexual world, which I believe form a coherent subtext running through this work.

Let us go back to those bald figures at the beginning and end of the play. While, as we have suggested, they seem designed to evoke the Chorus of a Greek tragedy, with possible connotations of Fates or Furies, they are not female, as their Greek counterparts would have been, but male. Moreover, they are bald, naked but for a leather (?) loincloth and cloak, and very muscular, and strike postures of dominance. Surely, to the modern mind, such a group of male figures together evokes first and foremost a stereotype of homosexual sadomasochism.

There are other allusions. The male figures that enthusiastically participate in the 'Dance in the Morning' are attired in what appear to be natty sailorboy suits, and their hip-swinging, thigh-slapping style of dancing is surely designed to evoke the sailor's hornpipe.⁹

9 The sailor has been a gay icon since long before Jean-Paul Gautier popularised the image in his perfume, *Le Mâle*; we only have to think of Genet's play *Querelle*, later made into a film by Fassbinder.

The romps between the Montague boys (in Act I Sc. II and Act II Sc. I, for example) are decidedly homosexually-tinged; and Romeo is something of a 'pretty boy' at first, with an effete style of dancing that verges on the camp – indeed there are several moments when he assumes the woman's role in dances with his friends.

There is also evidence that Nureyev initially wanted to cast Juliet as a boy. Patricia Ruanne, the first ballerina to play Juliet in Nureyev's production, claims that he was obsessed with this idea, and that she in fact only got the part because he could not find a boy who would dance on pointes.¹⁰ His reason was ostensibly historical realism, since of course female figures would always have been played by boys in Shakespeare's own time; however, in the light of the other homosexual elements that I have identified, it seems more likely to me that he was wanting to use this ballet to explore a theme that was important to him personally, and one which was also becoming increasingly topical in the late '70s and '80s.

Although Nureyev never officially labelled himself as homosexual, and the popular imagination liked to link him romantically to his dancing partner Margot Fonteyn, it became clear, following his diagnosis of AIDS in 1984 and subsequent death from AIDS-related illness, that he had long been involved in the homosexual subculture, and indeed had led a highly promiscuous lifestyle, a situation that was fostered of course by his personal charisma and fame. It is, therefore, no surprise that that he should have chosen to punctuate his ballet with plague images – the macabre procession at the beginning and, in the 1977 version, the quarantined town – metaphors for death and social exclusion that were beginning to gain a new significance in the context in which he was operating.

The references to doom, therefore, become intelligible as the musings of a dying man upon his own fate, an attempt to try to

10 Bissell (2003).

understand just how this situation had come about, just what it entailed. Beneath the rich tapestry of symbols, the interplay of cultural references, lie a series of anguished questions: What is the meaning of this? Why me? Was it Chance – a toss of the dice, a spin of the wheel? Or am I being punished for some transgression? If so, by whom? For what?

By 1984, the year the ballet was being restaged for the Paris Opera and when Nureyev himself was diagnosed as HIV-positive, AIDS was hitting the headlines all over the world. Those early news accounts, characterised as they were by ignorance and prejudice, presented the disease as a selective plague afflicting above all 'social deviants' such as homosexuals and drug addicts; consequently, a reactionary discourse of guilt and retribution developed around the whole subject of the disease, branding those social groups with a stigma that they had not known since the 1950s.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Nureyev should have chosen Tragedy, the dramatic form that grew out of a scapegoating ritual, for his exploration of this theme. For this ballet is not just about Fortune or Fate; it is also about public responses to transgression and shame. In this regard, then, those cloaked figures at the beginning and end of the ballet may indeed be seen as Furies, the embodiment of the community and its primitive desires for revenge, who would not only rid the city of the transgressor, but also project onto him its own collective guilt, so that it may itself be purified and its values confirmed.

With a cunning use of framing devices, Nureyev also succeeds in implicating the real life audience in his rite. For this particular version of *Romeo and Juliet* has left the illusory world of bourgeois theatre behind and reverted to its Greek origins as a ritual, something that performs a concrete action in the real world. The prologue figures are outside the domain of fiction; like the audience in the auditorium, they deconstruct the illusion and comment on it, thereby

intruding into the plane of the 'real'. As the scenery is pushed apart, the boundaries between life and art blur. We find ourselves not only in Renaissance Verona, but also in the shadowy subworld of London's gay community, as it struggles to come to terms with a scourge that threatens not only to put an end to the carnival but also to unleash a backlash of rage and hatred no less intense than that which overwhelmed medieval Europe during the years of the Inquisition. And in this grim scenario, it is we, the bourgeois audience, that are the judges, the representatives of our community's morality, smugly observing the suffering of these transgressors, so that our own values may be confirmed and the boundaries of our group re-established.

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This intermediality of Nureyev's *Romeo and Juliet* therefore goes far beyond the dimensions indicated at the beginning of this article, which have been common to the artform for almost a century. In addition to its multiple codes and intertextuality, it also crosses boundaries between genres and genders, thus offering an ascerbic comment upon the ultimate relativivity of some of the perceptual categories that have made part of our culture's social and aesthetic framework for centuries. In doing so, the star-cross'd lovers transcend the very boundary that separates art from life – perhaps the ultimate form of intermediality that there is.