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Gender Roles

In a small black box theatre in Midtown, in an isolated bubble on the third floor of an apartment building on West 37th the sounds of the city become a distant hum and for a few short hours the off-off Broadway theatre is a minimalist Verona. The actors are on stage at all times, preparing and donning costume as the audience shuffles into the space, unsure if their chatter should subside. The cast is small and it is obvious that there would be double if not triple casting, some of it gender-blind. Despite my inclination towards a more traditional (not necessarily Original) Shakespearean casting, I was excited to see what would happen.

Romeo was typical in appearance: tall, thin, and blonde. So too, Benvolio was tall, with dirty blonde hair—objectively attractive. There was one major difference however, and that is that the actor playing Benvolio was a woman. She wonderfully created a male physicality to live within, which was both subtle and believable. It was a physicality that would help distinguish her Benvolio from her Lady Capulet. The convention of gender blind casting was established. The characters would be played as Shakespeare intended them to be, as male, whatever the actors' gender. It was clear that the casting choice was not a statement on gender or sexuality. It was about the actors in the company and their ability to play distinct characters.

Romeo and Juliet would stand alone being the only characters without a double, claiming the play as their story. Or so I thought. After her introductory scene Juliet

exited stage left and instead of sitting down to observe her compatriots play out the 'Queen Mab scene' she began to undress. Forgoing her flowing green skirt for a leather jacket and rapier, Juliet pinned her hair in a tight bun and leaped onto her Romeo's back and was thus transformed. This odd casting choice, to have the same actress play both Juliet and Mercutio, was new and unexpected.

Harold Bloom in his vast and venerable companion, *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human*, contends that, "Alas… the tragedy more frequently is surrendered to commissars of gender and power, who can thrash the patriarchy, including Shakespeare himself for victimizing Juliet," (Pg.87). However, one cannot ignore the society and mores that surround the characters. Society victimizes Juliet, while Shakespeare frees her from these social confines. This production could easily have slipped into a deconstructionist trap of gender and sexuality, had they played Mercutio or Benvolio as female characters. They decided not to and thus allowed the love story to emerge.

Despite a few glitches, this strange casting choice, heightened awareness of the play's story. There is a tendency in contemporary productions to deconstruct *Romeo and Juliet,* imbuing it with a potent cynicism that conveys that it is not true love, but youthful infatuation and lust, which engender the play's tragedy. Shakespeare, however, is not writing about gender politics and he could not care less for our societal desensitization towards love. *Romeo and Juliet* is not about any of those things. It *is* "…an uncompromising mutual love that perishes of its own idealism and intensity," (Bloom, pg. 89). This casting, as strange as it may sound, helped to tell this story about relationships and characters faced with unmitigated odds. And Juliet, not Romeo, is

bestowed with "…the most exalted declaration of romantic love in the language:" (Pg.91)

> *Juliet*: But to be frank and give it thee again;
> And yet I wish but for the thing I have.
> My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
> My love as deep: The more I give to thee
> The more I have, for both are infinite. (II.ii.131-35)

Shakespeare does anything but victimize Juliet. He takes a girl who has been demarcated by gender and social order and imbues her with the language and the love to surpass it. Refusing "victimization," she doesn't end up cold and forgotten like her mother; instead she creates her own path. It is not Romeo who proposes marriage; his wit and language are, in some ways, a response to hers (and Mercutio's). What this double casting made clear was the opposite of the contemporary ironic and cynical approach to the text. Having Romeo as the only non-double cast character did not make it 'his' play, rather it suggested the freedom given him by his gender - a freedom *Juliet* finds through love.

Juliet does something that had not been done before in Western Literature: She is defined on her own terms, through her love. Love is defining yourself, not through social standing or gender, but through the perspective of another. Romeo and Juliet do this sublimely. There was something about seeing Juliet transform into Mercutio, the antipathy to her rapturous belief in love, which helped to convey this notion.

> Mercutio is victimized by what is most central to the play and yet he dies without knowing what *Romeo and Juliet* is all about… To die as love's martyr… when you do not believe in the Religion of Love… is a grotesque irony that

> forshadows the dreadful ironies that will destroy Juliet and Romeo alike as the play concludes. (Pg. 97)

Mercutio lives for Wit and Juliet dies for Love.

It is likely that my experience at this production of *Romeo and Juliet*, generated by the casting choices, was unintentional. A theatrical experience is as much an individual as a collective experience. *Romeo and Juliet* was my first glimpse into love and theatre and thus informs how I read every production I see. I tend to go in disappointed by some over-conceptualized political piece, which uses this sublime text to serve a purpose other than its own story. This was not the case here. Despite casting that could easily have slipped into the realm of didactics, what I witnessed on stage that night was a rendition of the most tragic love story every written. Judgments aside.