

ACTORS' ROUNDTABLE

**Acting Shakespeare:
A Roundtable Discussion
with Artists From the
Utah Shakespearean Festival's
2005 Production of *Romeo and Juliet***

Michael Flachmann
Utah Shakespearean Festival Dramaturg

Featuring: Paul Hurley (Romeo), Tiffany Scott (Juliet), Ben Reigel (Tybalt), Leslie Brott (Nurse), John Tillotson (Friar Lawrence), and Ashley Smith (Mercutio)

Flachmann: Good morning, and welcome to the third annual Actors' Roundtable Discussion at the Wooden O Symposium. My name is Michael Flachmann, and I'm Company Dramaturg here at the Tony-Award-winning Utah Shakespearean Festival. Today we have with us six actors from our extremely popular summer production of *Romeo and Juliet*, which was directed by Kate Buckley. Isn't it a wonderful show? [applause]

I'd like to start with Paul Hurley, who plays Romeo, and get each of you to talk about your roles just a little bit. In particular, I'm intrigued with the extent to which you as character feel responsible for the play's fatal conclusion. Paul?

Hurley: I don't know how responsible Romeo is for the tragedy in the play. I think there's a lot of bad luck that falls upon these two lovers. If all the events went smoothly, this play would end happily. There's a lot of miscommunication, however, and a great deal of misfortune that prevents the two from being alive at the conclusion. The tension in the production, I think, comes from the fact that every time we go see the play, we think that maybe this time things will work out. If the production is done well, we hope the letter will get to Romeo or perhaps Juliet will wake up just before he takes the poison. The tragedy really comes from the two factions warring against each other and from the fact that the deaths of Romeo and Juliet could be the catalyst that eventually

mends the quarrel between the two families. It could have been an entirely different play if everything had fallen into place properly.

Flachmann: Thanks, Paul. Ben, does Tybalt's alleged hotheadedness play a role in any of this?

Reigel: Yes, I think, maybe a little. In a lot of productions I've seen, Tybalt has had more responsibility for the tragedy than he does in this production. When you play a part, you start to identify with the character, and you begin to make excuses for him. I, of course, don't feel responsible for the end of play. That's pretty much out of my hands.

Flachmann: That's because you're dead, right? [laughter]

Reigel: Right, I'm on the slab. [laughter] I think in this production that Mercutio bears a bigger responsibility than in most. He really pushes for all these guys to go to the dance. Granted, I overreact at the party, but when I look at the situation from Tybalt's point of view, Romeo's presence there is a major insult to the entire family. I don't know what he's doing there. Then I write him a letter, which doesn't get answered, and he doesn't respond to it because, in our production at least, Mercutio intercepts the letter. And so, I think I have been insulted again by Romeo. Not only did he show up at the party, but he also didn't acknowledge my letter. That's why I go out looking for him. He does his best to apologize, which might have defused the situation, but then Mercutio forces me to fight. He doesn't really leave me much choice. Tybalt is not a nice guy by any means. He's like so many characters in this play: young people reacting too quickly, whether it concerns love, family honor, or whatever the flashpoint is at any particular moment. Tybalt has one reaction to everything, which is, "Give me my sword!" I actually think Romeo is the bad guy. [laughter] He shares a decent amount of responsibility, especially in his impetuosity. Romeo is as much a hothead as anyone in this play. He just expresses it in different ways.

Flachmann: I love it! So far, nobody is accepting much responsibility here. [laughter] Tiffany, Juliet is a very mature fourteen-year-old. Do you bear any guilt for what goes on in the play?

Scott: I don't believe so. [laughter] I think that much of the tragedy comes from this long-standing hatred between the families, the feud that's been going on for longer than any of us have been around. That's mostly what the tragedy stems from, and also, as Paul mentioned, from the bad timing, with the letter not reaching Romeo in time. I would say that Romeo and Juliet see past all the hatred. That's the wonderful thing about these two characters:

They can see beyond the tragic feud that is happening between the two families and are able to connect on a very personal, human level despite their fundamental differences. So I am not going to accept any of the blame either.

Flachmann: Thank you, Tiffany. Leslie, any guilt on the part of the Nurse?

Brott: Definitely. I lay so much of it at the feet of the culture, especially the code of honor, where insults must be answered violently. But it's also a culture that encloses women and treats them as objects. Dad is doing a really good job taking care of Juliet within this culture, marrying her to a lovely gentleman.

As the Nurse, I'm very shortsighted because I only need to deal with the moment. The Nurse is totally pragmatic. Later in the play, when Romeo is banished, I'm thrilled that the friar gets the problem all sorted out. I say, "O, what learning is. I could have stayed here all night to hear good counsel," because he thinks further down the road than I do. Later I say, "Since the case so stands as now it doth, I think it best you marry with the county," because in this world, banishment was a real problem. Romeo wasn't coming back. Juliet needs to accept this because I can't even conceive of her going outside the family compound for any reason other than Mass. And she would have gone to a private Mass in her home, most likely, rather than going out into public.

Juliet lacks the mechanics, as I do, of how to function in the outside world. I think the Nurse's pragmatism that makes her myopic is to blame for much of the tragedy. She makes the best choices she can in the moment, but she sees at the end of the play how her cultural shortsightedness helped create the tragic conclusion. So I take partial responsibility, but I don't take all of it.

Flachmann: Thank you, Leslie. John, how does the friar fit into all this?

Tillotson: It would be hard for me not to say that I bear some responsibility [laughter], but you need to remember that we have two warring factions. If it weren't for their hatred, my intervention wouldn't have to take place. I get implicated in the ultimate tragedy when I try to become peacemaker. I point the finger at everybody, including the Prince at the end. He's the one who banishes Romeo. Everybody is guilty to some degree. If I have guilt, it is only because I was trying to solve the problem.

Flachmann: Ashley, to what extent is Mercutio culpable?

Smith: Mercutio is certainly the catalyst for the tragic action of the play midway through the story. Imagine if there were no Mercutio in the script and therefore no one for Tybalt to kill

accidentally. Then there would be no reason for Romeo to kill Tybalt, for which he is ultimately banished by the Prince. The banishment, in fact, is the crucial action that propels the title characters to their ultimate doom. In order for us to empathize with Romeo's vengeful murder of Tybalt, Tybalt must first kill someone who is loved not only by Romeo, but also by the audience. It's this empathy that allows us to accept Romeo's actions and follow the play as it turns 180 degrees from comedy to tragedy.

Flachmann: Great point. I know Kate Buckley felt strongly that you guys don't know at the beginning of the play that you're trapped in a tragedy. There have been a lot of very interesting comments by audience members about how the first half of the play seems much more like a comedy or a romance, while the second half takes on much darker overtones. Does that present some challenges and complexities in the playing of it?

Tillotson: Yes, absolutely. A lot of references to death have been removed from the first half of the play through the director's cuts. It's not until somebody gets hurt that we really have a problem. Even the first big fight, although it's fairly vicious, is far from deadly, and then the play segues into a party scene and becomes much more festive.

Brott: The play has to function as a comedy in the first half so the audience will be invested in everything working out for the best. Otherwise, you see it all coming, and it's downhill from there to the bone yard. [laughter] That's why the prologue, which is not in the First Folio, has been removed from the play. Kate didn't use the prologue because it makes all the action passive voice, and the audience isn't really involved in the outcome.

Even after the death of Mercutio, we are still in romance-land at the top of part two, with all this positive, loving energy from Juliet, and then my character comes in with the bad news. Sometimes it's very difficult for the audience to turn the corner there. They have been trained to see my character in the first half of the play as overly dramatic, and the Nurse is definitely the diva of her own opera. But when Tiffany sits next to me on stage, we start to go the other way in the play. Sometimes, it's like steering a truck with a really crummy turning radius as we're trying to get that scene to change direction.

Flachmann: That must be a major acting challenge, Tiffany, to come on stage at the top of part two extremely happy and then have the scene turn tragic so rapidly.

Scott: That's right. I don't know the information that the audience knows when I come on for the second half, so one of

the play's ironies is that I'm allowed to dwell in the romance world for a little longer while everyone else is in tragic mode. It does provide an acting challenge to shift gears so quickly when the Nurse brings the news of Tybalt's death and Romeo's banishment. But the scene is written so beautifully: Juliet goes from excitement and anticipation of her wedding night, to fear that her husband has killed himself, to shock and anger that he has murdered her cousin, and to grief over Romeo's banishment. There's a lot in that brief scene for me to sink my teeth into.

Flachmann: The fight really turns things around, don't you think? It's staged in a comic way at the beginning, and then it turns deadly serious. Can you talk about that a little bit, Ben? How does the fight choreography fit into that moment?

Reigel: I think that's a challenge, not only in this production but in most productions I've seen. These two guys want to show off, they want to one-up each other, but they certainly aren't out to kill each other.

Flachmann: Do you agree, Ashley?

Smith: Yes, the fight starts out playfully, with each person wanting to embarrass his opponent. Mercutio quickly shows himself to be the better fighter because he's less concerned with form and more interested in the practicality of scoring points. But Tybalt doesn't like being humiliated, and he becomes more aggressive as the fight goes on. When Romeo steps in to part the fighters, Tybalt accidentally kills Mercutio. The fight has to start out lightly, because the action of the play up to this point has been romantic comedy. The loss of control in the fight is where the plot turns serious. Mercutio's last breath is the beginning of the tragedy.

Flachmann: Paul, you've really got three constituencies involved in making the fight scenes in a production like this: the characters themselves, the fight choreographer, and the director. How did that partnership work for this particular production? Did Chris Villa [the fight director] come in and choreograph the whole thing, or did the actors and the director have a lot of input into the process?

Hurley: For the Romeo fight with Tybalt, we choreographed that in about three minutes, and Kate loved it. That fight just happened very naturally. There was less story that had to be told in that fight. It's pretty clear: Good angry guy kills bad angry guy. The Mercutio fight had more story underneath it. We choreographed it fairly organically, and then we showed it to Kate, who would say what she liked and what she didn't like. It was a very collaborative process.

Reigel: When we got sidetracked a little in the fight, Kate would always bring the focus back to Romeo. This is still the story of Romeo and Juliet, she would say, so what is Romeo doing when you guys are fighting? We trimmed it down, which was something I resisted at first, of course, because instead of lines in this play, I have fights. [laughter] As far as making the fight playful, the crowd onstage is a big help with that. When we were first working on it, that's what was missing; as we started adding the crowd into it, their reactions helped clue the real audience into how they are supposed to feel about it.

Tillotson: Actually, I think the entrance of the friar signals that the play is going to shift from comedy to tragedy. He comes in and starts speaking about the contrast between life and death and good and evil, and none of those topics has been introduced prior to that moment in the play. I'm also the last major character (with the exception of the apothecary) who comes into the play fairly late—in our production, about one-third of the way in, forty minutes after the show has begun.

Flachmann: So, you are the most important character, then? [laughter]

Brott: Well, you see, it's a play all about this Nurse. [laughter]

Tillotson: I *am* the most important character. [laughter] My effect on the audience has been different lately because the evening has been getting darker earlier. O, here comes this serious guy. He's in dark clothes. There's a story about Alec Guinness being offered a role, and he said that he would do it if he could come in as if he were death, with a scythe. I love the image of that, but it does kind of run counter to what our director was trying to accomplish!

Flachmann: I wonder if we could talk about parents and surrogate parents in the play.

Brott: Sure. Historically, in the culture, I would have been the parent. The Nurse, or what we would think of as the nanny these days, did the parenting, and Juliet would have bonded to me as an infant because I was the person who breastfed her. Lady Capulet has a very large household to run, a position that she would need to maintain in the home with Lord Capulet, a merchant.

One of the many nice things about our production is that our Lady Capulet really cares about Juliet; so often you see the role disconnected from her daughter. Our twenty-first century view of children is that they are the icons of our attention, which was not how the culture functioned during the Italian Renaissance. Juliet's parents are doing what they are supposed to do: finding an excellent marriage for her.

Tillotson: I think my relationship with Romeo is a little different; it's more of a teacher-student bond.

Brott: You have a more mature relationship with Romeo than I have with Juliet, don't you?

Tillotson: Yes. I may have known him since he was a little kid, but our interaction has been more formal. I solve problems for him.

Brott: I try to do that for Juliet, too, but in a different way. When I say, "Romeo is a dishclout to Paris," I don't really believe that. I know the words wound her, and they make me seem disloyal, but the real message is at the very end of the speech. The gold is usually at the conclusion of the speech. When I say, "Your first is dead or 'twere as good he were," I don't see any way around this. That is the cultural reality. Romeo is not coming back. She asks me if I speak from my heart, and I say, "From my soul, too," because I have worked it out in my head that God will forgive her.

Flachmann: Tiffany, your take on that?

Scott: I believe Juliet sees the Nurse's suggestion to marry Paris as the ultimate betrayal, which I think wounds her deeply—so much so, in fact, that she vows to no longer keep counsel with the Nurse. At that point, Juliet is on her own. When she deliberately contradicts her parents and tells them she is not going to wed Paris, her behavior is terribly disobedient. She is so strong-willed with very deep convictions, and she is willing to make this incredible sacrifice for love.

Flachmann: That's awfully brave of you at that moment in the play to disobey your parents.

Scott: Yes, and Lord Capulet tells her that he's going to kick her out of the house and disown her. She can't be a member of the family anymore if she doesn't marry Paris. She is determined to be true to Romeo in the face of all this. She's very courageous and very strong in her convictions.

Flachmann: That's a pretty terrifying moment in the play. Phil Hubbard [Lord Capulet] is a wonderful teddy bear of a guy, but he is very frightening in that scene because he's a big guy on stage, and he gets awfully angry.

Scott: He does, and it's suitable, believable anger, too, which is very scary.

Flachmann: Right. I want to bring it back to Paul, if I may, and anybody else who wants to respond to this. Can you talk a little bit about speaking the verse, about the challenges and rewards of dealing with Shakespeare's poetry on stage?

Hurley: Since this is one of Shakespeare's earlier plays, the

verse is a bit easier to speak. There are very few full stops that happen midline, which basically means the lines run all the way through, and so the verse is more regular and predictable. Because of this rhythmic quality, the play drives the plot forward with more intensity and passion. When you look at the Folio text, you realize that Shakespeare hasn't broken the play down into acts or scenes. It's just one long, breathless rush from beginning to end. So when you are speaking the verse, you have to be especially conscious of always driving through each thought until you get to the end of it. You need to do all the acting on the lines and with the text. If you take too much time, especially in the second half of the script, that's when the play can really bog down.

Smith: The verse always has to keep moving. If you're going to put a little pause at the end of a verse line, it has to be treated not as a stop, but as a springboard to the next line. Actors have to understand what they're saying first and how to phrase the language so the meaning is clear; then they can take it up to speed. Pace is extremely important in Shakespeare, but many actors don't appreciate this fact. Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed at the speed of thought. You must think as you speak. If you can do this, the audience will never get ahead of you, which can be deadly.

Flachmann: We had some good sessions earlier in the week in our Wooden O Symposium about using acting "sides" during Shakespeare's time and trusting the flexibility of punctuation in the plays. I'm interested in how free Kate Buckley allowed you to be in interpreting the punctuation, putting in pauses, and making the text flow from one line to another.

Hurley: Yes, we had a fair amount of latitude in that regard.

Brott: Shakespeare had been dead for seven years when the 1623 First Folio was printed, so his script isn't like Shaw's, where we can say, "This is the definitive text." In addition, compositors had great control over the way the text was printed. There are a lot of times in the First Folio where actors could make a huge emotional choice about the direction the character is going based on a semicolon or a question mark or an exclamation mark. As a matter of fact, most compositors' boxes of type carried many more exclamation marks than question marks. When actors interpret the Folio punctuation, we also pay attention to capitalization, though a letter is often capitalized because the compositor ran out of lower-case type.

As an actor, I'm never slavishly devoted to the Folio, which contains so many idiosyncrasies. For example, the Nurse's first

big speech about the earthquake and Juliet's age is written in prose in the Folio, but in other early editions it scans as verse with ten syllables per line.

Flachmann: Speaking about memorable monologues in the play, Ashley, you do such a wonderful job with the Queen Mab speech. How do you think it helps further the plot?

Smith: I've often seen actors play the Queen Mab speech as a "show-off" piece, a way for Mercutio to convince the audience how fantastical and mercurial he is. When it's delivered that way, it always appears to exist outside the plot, stopping the action and boring the audience. The clue to its purpose lies at the end of the speech. I see it principally as a means of coaxing Romeo to go to Capulet's party.

In order to convince Romeo to ignore his foreboding, Mercutio invents the story of Queen Mab, a fairy who makes certain types of people have certain types of dreams. As Mercutio loses control near the end of the speech, Romeo calms him by saying, "Peace, thou talk'st of nothing." Mercutio then drives his original point home, explaining, "True, I talk of dreams!" Only then does Romeo give in and agree to go to the party. The Queen Mab speech has many facets, but it's primarily a device to get Romeo to the home of his enemy so he can ultimately discover his true love.

Flachmann: You guys are speaking today, as I'm sure you know, to a group of teachers, educators, and students. Do you have any advice for us about how we ought to approach Shakespeare in the classroom?

Tillotson: It's not as difficult as it seems . . . except when I'm working on it. [laughter]

Flachmann: Thank you, John. Tiffany?

Scott: I think you should always read it out loud, which makes the language far more powerful and more accessible to those who are hearing it.

Flachmann: Ben?

Reigel: I certainly agree. I had the wonderful advantage of having parents who are in the business, so I grew up watching Shakespeare from a very early age. It was never meant to be read like literature. It was meant to be seen, to be experienced. I'm a big advocate of watching even a bad production. We were supposed to do *Pericles* at a theater I was working at a few years ago, and that was one of the few shows in the canon that I didn't know. My father was going to be playing the lead, and he didn't know it either, so we both tried to read it. He's a twenty-five year veteran of doing every lead part in Shakespeare, and he couldn't make sense

out of it, so we rented a very bad BBC version of it, which helped us understand what the play was about. I think more kids would get into Shakespeare if they got to see it before they had to read it, as opposed to the other way around.

Flachmann: Leslie?

Brott: Absolutely right! Try to maintain as much joy in the classroom as possible. There might be someone like me out there. I'm from a little, tiny town in northern California, where I'm sure people would rather have their eyes gouged out with sticks than read *The Taming of the Shrew* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in class, but my freshman English teacher was so enthusiastic that you couldn't help but sense his enjoyment of it, which planted a seed in me.

I would try to get students to read it aloud. I've been acting Shakespeare for years, and the first time I face it, I usually have to read it about fifteen or twenty times. I always read it out loud, but at home in preparation for the first rehearsal, I try to read it at least a dozen times because I get so panicky at the first read-through. These plays are meant to be spoken. When you just read it on the page, it's like looking at a symphonic score and not listening to the actual music.

Flachmann: Thanks, Leslie. Paul, any advice for us?

Hurley: I was one of those kids who hated Shakespeare in high school. We read *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*. I never really understood any of them until I was about twenty-one years old and I spent some time in London and got to see lots of Shakespeare productions. This was the first time when the world of that language opened up to me. There are lots of films to see and recordings to listen to. During the Renaissance, people never went to *see* a play; they went to *hear* a play. You've got to really listen to these great scripts to understand them fully.

Flachmann: How about the BBC Shakespeare video productions. Do you like them?

Brott: The BBC is state supported. British actors pay British taxes. They can do a wonderful job of it because of all the support they get.

Tillotson: I have a problem with our public television not supporting American actors. In the last couple of seasons, we have seen *Kiss Me Kate* filmed in London; we have seen *Oklahoma* filmed in London. We are not seeing enough American productions filmed in America. Our public television and our government are not supporting American actors to produce American productions of these classic plays. That's all I have to say.

Flachmann: Amen! Although I feel strongly that the work being done here at the Utah Shakespearean Festival and in other great American theaters is some of the best Shakespeare in the world right now, and I'm really proud of what you guys do. On another topic entirely, what would Romeo and Juliet be doing ten years down the road if they had survived the tragedy?

Hurley: Two boys, a girl, and a dog. [laughter]

Scott: I think it all goes back to a question we often hear in discussions about this production. Is it *love* or *lust* between Romeo and Juliet? I think it has to be love. When they first meet, they complete a sonnet together, which betrays a kind of synergy between the two. The wonderful thing about Juliet is that she is able to match wits with Romeo from the beginning. In that first meeting, you can see that the two have true love for each other, a union of souls. So I do believe that they would have had a long and happy life together were it not for the tragic events that occur.

Flachmann: Tiffany, just to refine the question a bit, don't you really teach Romeo how to be a lover? He's certainly "romantic" at the beginning of the balcony scene, but does he really know how to love someone like you?

Scott: Yes, in the balcony scene, she's not willing to hear all those empty vows, those superficial words. She wants Romeo to court her honestly.

Flachmann: Paul, did you want to respond? She leaves you so unsatisfied in that scene. [laughter]

Hurley: One of the last things they say to each other really helps us understand the direction of the play. She asks, "Thinkest thou we shall ever meet again?" and his response is, "I doubt it not, and all these woes shall serve for sweet discourses in our time to come." That is, we'll talk about this when we are old and recounting crazy things we did in our youth. I love that prescient moment when the two of them envision a possibility of being together in their ripe old age.

Flachmann: Were you all exposed to this play when you were young? And if so, how did that early experience with the script help prepare you for the roles you are playing in this particular production?

Reigel: My exposure to the play was actually very early. This was the first part I ever wanted to play. I saw my father play Tybalt when I was six. I really wanted to do the sword fights.

Tillotson: I am fortunate this summer to be doing two plays that I was exposed to as a child. The first Shakespeare play that I remember seeing was *Hamlet* at the Old Globe when I was maybe

thirteen years old. I think these early experiences with Shakespeare give all of us a common bond.

Brott: I definitely was into the romance of this play. I mean Zefferelli's production hit me like a ton of bricks. My bedroom had posters of Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey. I wanted their relationship to work out because I saw the movie at a time when I had just started to notice boys. Wow, they were great. I felt that big rush of emotion. The performances Zefferelli got out of these young actors and the way he cut the movie was so beautiful to look at, and the soundtrack was overwhelming. I was totally struck by the romance of the play. I still am, because who doesn't want to fall in love again that way? And yeah, I still want it to work out. And why shouldn't it? Why does life have to be mired down in tragedy and ambiguity?

I've made a lot of sacrifices in my life just to support my relationship with Shakespeare, Shaw, Williams, and O'Neill, and I've always felt it was worth it. There's nothing more wonderful for me than to hear Tiffany say, "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." All my sacrifices are worth it to hear those beautiful lines every night.

Flachmann: And on that inspiring note, I just want to say what a great privilege it's been to be able to talk to you actors about your lives and your craft. A session like this really rounds out the Wooden O Symposium because we see the whole other side of Shakespeare's plays, the performance aspect, which brings to vibrant, exciting life much of the scholarship we are doing. I hope the audience understands that everyone who works on these plays conducts important research, and these wonderful actors are just as dedicated to their craft as we are to ours as scholars and teachers. Thank you very much for being here this morning.
[applause]