

# ROMEO & JULIET, REINVENTED JUST AS WE SHOULD EXPECT

• *By Byron Woods* •



Why do artists and audiences return — again and again — to plays now more than four centuries old? The question is particularly pertinent for *Romeo and Juliet*. Scholar Jill Levenson notes that it has inspired both the largest and most diverse collection of adaptations of any of William Shakespeare's works. The famous tale of "star-cross'd lovers" has been transformed into more than 20 operas, 10 ballets, 23 films, innumerable theatrical adaptations including a legendary Broadway musical — and the new work you're about to experience tonight.

It is entirely fitting that Grant Llewellyn, Music Director of the North Carolina Symphony, and Carl Forsman, a faculty member, stage director, and former Dean of Drama at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, have created a fusion of genres in this musical and theatrical retelling. Shakespeare's text itself was a groundbreaking synthesis, one of the first works to prove that romance was a subject appropriate for tragedy. It's also easy to forget the degree to which the script integrated tragedy with comedy. Researchers have identified at least 175 jokes scattered through the text, reinforcing the conclusion that, until its third act, *Romeo and Juliet* is primarily a romantic comedy. "Like any romance, it has to start as a comedy," Forsman notes. "The classic line is that Mercutio's the star of a comedy, and then he dies. Shakespeare had to kill him off because he was taking over the play and making it too much fun."

The Symphony's production of *Romeo and Juliet* is also a fusion of genres, marrying words from the end of the 1500s with music composed during the 19th and 20th centuries. In fact, this is no departure from the artistic process Shakespeare employed while writing *Romeo and Juliet* — lest we forget, the play is largely a dramatization of Arthur Brooke's earlier epic poem, *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, and the source materials for that work extend from the partially autobiographical writings of Italian soldier Luigi da Porto and poet Masuccio Salernitano, back to Dante, Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

In each of those texts, an artist has looked back at a work that came before, seeking something new — a new insight, a new interpretation — in something old. For Llewellyn and Forsman, it is the prospect of a compelling new genre in performance that drives them on.

"Grant often says that we're creating a new art form," Forsman notes. "And I do think there's truth to that, as grandiose as it may sound. We're

trying to make something that is neither a concert nor a play — something different than either of them." *Romeo and Juliet* is Llewellyn's second such endeavor with the North Carolina Symphony; his first project in the same vein of play-and-concert hybrid was the immensely successful production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2015, also conceived with Forsman.

So, how does one merge two fundamentally different art forms, simultaneously, on the same stage?

"The cheeky answer is, 'carefully,'" Forsman notes. "There are times when the music is telling the story, and times where the language is taking the show; moment by moment, you're choosing which takes the lead.

Grant and I get into a really fun dialogue about how that balance works: where the orchestra comes forward and where the language needs to be supported, trying to figure out where we need to be for whatever's happening in the storytelling."

That will be evident from the first moments of their creation, in which the music of Prokofiev supplants the text surrounding *Romeo and Juliet's* opening brawl. "We'll do all the storytelling Shakespeare does," Forsman says, "but we'll do it visually and musically."

Technical challenges are an inevitable part of such a collaboration. A gifted sound designer is crucial to the effort, to balance the actors' voices with their musical collaborators. Then comes the prospect of playing scenes on a stage 80 feet wide — but only 12 feet deep. "Wait until we've got 12 people sword fighting on that strip, within a few feet of priceless instruments," Forsman chuckles. "It's going to be incredible!"

As a director, Forsman returns to the theme of youth as he considers Shakespeare's text. "In so many ways, *Romeo and Juliet* is about the follies and dangers and risks and excitement

of being a young person," he says. Another aspect of our contemporary lives, the never-ceasing pressure of time, is also reflected in this ancient text. In Shakespeare's script, Romeo and Juliet meet, fall in love, and marry within 24 hours. Time pushes them, as disastrous events overtake and outstrip their relationship. Within four days, both are dead, victims of the violent immaturity in an immature culture.

Once again, we watch as old hatreds take their greatest toll on the young — a difficult lesson, and one that is sure to be repeated and retold through art in ever-evolving ways over the centuries that follow.



## PROLOGUE

*Two households, both alike in dignity,  
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,  
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.  
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;  
Whose misadventured piteous overthrow  
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.  
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,  
And the continuance of their parents' rage,  
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,  
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;  
The which if you with patient ears attend,  
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.*

