

A full transcript of our exclusive interview with Professor Carol Chillington Rutter



I am Carol Chillington Rutter. I am Professor of Shakespeare and Performance Studies at the University of Warwick.

The Play

Well, I think there's a massive clue in the prologue, where the play starts.

*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.*

We're in a city, a walled city. People are living cheek by jowl with each other. Verona: an Italian city. Two houses, two households, so families are involved in this story. The dignity of those two households means that whatever is between them is raised to a kind of fever pitch. But this feud, this ancient feud, has been going on for so long that people don't even know what it's about. We never hear in the play what the feud is about.

Being a city play, this is also a play that is about indoors and outdoors. This is a play that has the boys, as it were, on the streets, whereas the women are largely indoors. When we see Juliet finally, she is inside with her mother and her nurse. All the scenes that she is in are indoor scenes, until she's allowed to go out to confession to Friar Laurence's cell. But it's a play about insides and outsides, these two households, and everything they represent in terms of Verona and being surrounded by walls that are ancient walls.

It's also about heat. Shakespeare sets this at a very deliberate and marked time in the calendar. In that conversation, that first conversation between Juliet, the nurse, and her mother, the mother asks the nurse "how old is Juliet?" and the nurse says: "when is it Lammastide?" Lammastide is 1st August. And Juliet's birthday is the eve of Lammastide. So Juliet's birthday is 31st July. This play is set a fortnight and odd days before her birthday, so she's still 13, coming up to her 14th birthday in a fortnight's time, but that means that this play is set in the dog days of July. In the heat of July, where the nights are short and the days are long and boys are on the streets and get up to a lot of heated trouble.

So Shakespeare's very clear about that but he also puts the pressure on the play as if it were choreographing it cinematographically filming this play across four days. So it starts on the Sunday morning, with Sampson and Gregory out on the street. The Capulet



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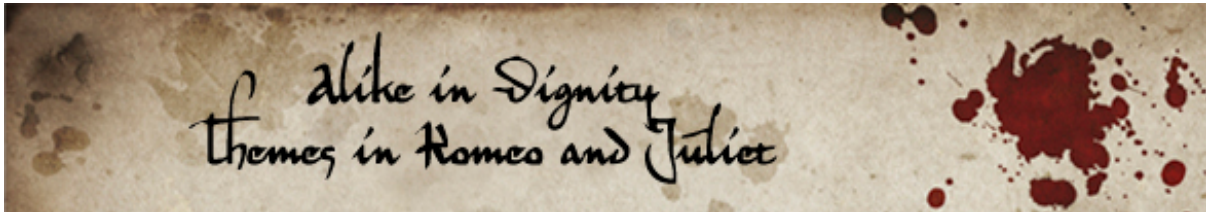
ball is on Sunday night. We travel through Monday morning when the nurse goes out on the streets to find Romeo, because early on Monday morning Romeo and Juliet have had the balcony scene and Romeo has promised to meet her the following day. They do, they get married. Then he meets Tybalt in the street on Monday afternoon and there's the street fight where Tybalt is killed, Mercutio is killed and Romeo is banished. That happens on Monday and off he goes. They have their night together. Tuesday morning they say farewell to one another on the balcony. Off he goes, in comes Mother saying your father has arranged for you to marry Paris. That's going to happen on Thursday – no, it can't. Now that new wedding is going to happen, on Wednesday morning Juliet is found dead. Wednesday night, Romeo comes to get her out of the tomb. On Thursday morning, the families all gather in the tomb to see all the young people dead. So, a play that is set relentlessly across four days. And people keep talking about the clocks chiming and the bells sounding and it's morning, it's afternoon, it's evening and so on and so on. So a lot of pressure in terms of the story it's telling about these quick, bright things that are going to come to death, like lightning.

We reckon that he wrote this play around 1595. By 1595 he has written four comedies, four histories (the three *Henry Vs* plus *Richard III*), he's written *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew*. He has a lot of interesting material under his belt. In 1595 he writes a pair of plays, almost together, companion plays: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. And they're companion plays because they both talk about swift, bright things coming to confusion. About parents who want to manage their children's lives for the best ends, of recalcitrant daughters who want to run away from their fathers who are pledging their lives, the wrong kind of suitor to the arms of the right kind of suitor, of impetuous lads who are prepared to fight it out in the woods, and ultimately of deaths that happen because of terrible mistakes. It's almost as though *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with the marriage of the four lovers at the end, is the comic version of *Romeo and Juliet*. And the story of *Romeo and Juliet* is told inside *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through the story of Pyramus and Thisbe; two lovers do die because of a tragic mistake.

This is a new play. Shakespeare's writing from a source; there is a poetic source by Arthur Brooke, which is a very, very, long poem and tells essentially all of what is in Shakespeare. Of course, what Shakespeare does wonderfully is invent off details of the Brooke poem. One of those great details, of course, is Mercutio, who has just sort of a name check in the poem and Shakespeare creates this astonishing character, who is funny and satirical and subversive and very laddish and pushes Romeo in the play to extraordinary lengths and then dying of course sets the seal on the problem of the play as whether Romeo is going to go towards love or whether he is going to go towards the feud, towards the combat. So that's a very, very, interesting development out of this long poem, which people might have known. I've read it. It doesn't bounce along at the pace that Shakespeare's play does.



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Two Households

What this play articulates from the beginning is there are two households alike in dignity, so let's say these are two gangs. These two gangs are at each other all the time and at any point, words can produce violence. And out of that violence can come death. That means that Verona is dangerous and ungovernable, which is a problem for the Prince. It means the patriarchs, like Montague and Capulet, have a problem because they're trying to control the young men, the high testosterone-fuelled young men in their households. And what you also have to do is protect your daughters. So Juliet is going to be protected, she is going to be kept indoors. I have a very soft spot for Capulet before he starts beating on his daughter. He wants the best for Juliet, and in planning a wedding for her with the County Paris, he's planning he's imagined the best thing that could happen for his daughter. Therefore, when she refuses, of course he's going to fly into a terrible rage. But he is as irascible and as high-tempered as the young men; he doesn't pause to consider, he doesn't consult. He issues an action which, again, he can't draw back from because people tend to put themselves into places where there is no place of conciliation. And, of course, the children are leading secret lives. In a way, the play is kind of built on this double. And this double is a split idea about masculinity, as so often in Shakespeare. Shakespeare is interested in how young men become grown ups. The typical routes: you go to war. Well, that's the Capulets and the Montagues. That will stand in as a kind of proxy battleground. Or you fall in love. And in this play the person who is, as it were, let's just say, the inventor of what it might be to be in love, is young Juliet, who stands on her balcony and says "oh Romeo, why couldn't you be someone else besides Romeo? Why couldn't you have been Keith, or Steve, or somebody? Why do you have to be a part of all of that stuff?" And, bless him, Romeo is captured for the imaginative space that Juliet represents to him. And falling in love, he forgets all of that stuff that's about that kind of battle because he is in this space of making sonnets, of making poetry, of making wonder. When he meets Juliet, he sees wonder! "O she doth teach the torches to burn brightly." He has never seen anything like this in his life. And she looks at him, he looks at her, and that thing called love happens. The problem, of course, in falling in love, and falling in love in the way Juliet falls in love, because Juliet doesn't say "let's meet at the bus stop", Juliet says "let's get married. If you're serious about this, let's get married, tomorrow," and they do.

For her, the experience of sexuality, which, of course, is what she's talking about in her big speeches, about "I have bought the mansion of a love but not yet possess'd it." Her urgency is about the consummation of her love; to be fully, physically, in love with this man. In order to do that, for her, she has to be married. Because physical love is contained inside that formula and that formal ritual that is marriage. And that's part of



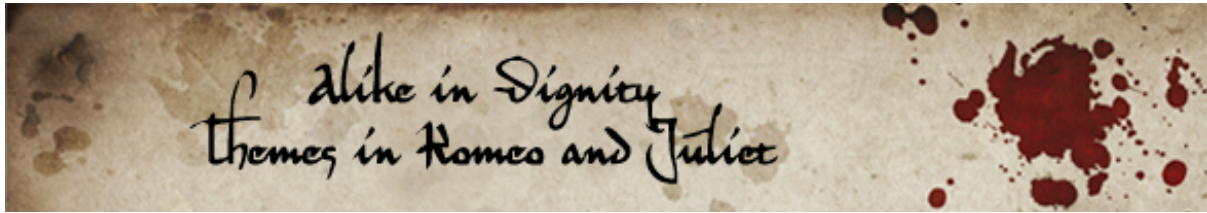
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being inside the households, about fulfilling the obligations of the households; to be married.

Having brought Romeo, as it were, over to her side, that is, of the love interest of the play, all that lad stuff just kind of drops away from Romeo. He sees Mercutio and Benvolio in the morning and they do a bit more sparring in language, and Mercutio is like: "oh, now you're Romeo again! You've forgotten that Rosaline person that you were mooning about." then in comes the nurse and Romeo sets up the wedding that's going to happen in a couple of hours' time. He goes off and he meets Juliet in Friar Laurence's cell and they're married. Meanwhile, Tybalt, who is still raging about the insult that happened at the ball the previous night, comes down on the street looking for Romeo, bumps into Mercutio and Benvolio. Mercutio, again, does this kind of sparring with Tybalt and Tybalt basically says: "ah, well, here comes Romeo, I've had enough of you." In comes Romeo, the new-married boy, absolutely overwhelmed in this wonderful thing that he has done. The Montagues and the Capulets are now related to each other. Tybalt challenges him, calls him, insults him and Romeo says: "it's okay. You have no idea why I should love you." And Tybalt, of course, is not expecting that, and so raises the ante and Romeo simply, in an emollient way, just brushes it aside, which, of course, enrages Mercutio. "Why is my best friend Romeo acting like a woos? Why is he behaving like a girl?" Enter Mercutio and Tybalt. Tybalt and Mercutio go hammer and tongs. Romeo tries to stop the fight and in coming between them, Tybalt puts his sword in and hits him. Mercutio laughs about it and says "it's not as big as a church, it's not as wide as a door; it's enough" and he's dead. And at that point, when Mercutio faces him and says: "why, why did you come between us?" Romeo's answer is: "I thought all for the best." Now, that for me is the definition of tragedy. "I thought all for the best." He did the best thing he knew: try to stop the fight. Tybalt doesn't know that he's married to Juliet. Mercutio doesn't know that he's related to Tybalt. Why should he fight with a kinsman? It's a terrible, terrible mistake that has happened, but the moment that Benvolio comes in and says: "Mercutio's dead", the instant response to that is "oh, Juliet. You have made me effeminate." That is, "loving you has turned me into a girl." And then the rage hits his eyes he sees red and after Tybalt he goes and of course there's no way back. Mercutio's dead. Tybalt's dead. Romeo's banished. But that movement between the boy culture of violence and the girl culture of love leading to a new family of marriage, is part of the tension of this play, and of course the marriage that is made is concealed; it's a secret marriage, so they can't come out with the truth. If they could, then the whole thing could have been stopped in Act One.



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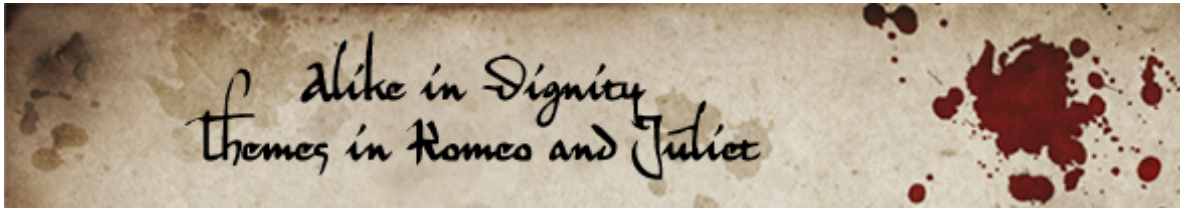


Sex

I think that really it's like looking at all of Shakespeare's love comedies; these are all plays about sexuality. This is about adolescent sexuality. Our culture, while we recognise on one side that sexuality is something that young people do, we're also very coy about talking about it in the terms in which these plays present these ideas. When Juliet is thinking about what she imagines is going to be her wedding night, so she's married Romeo in the afternoon, she goes home, he goes out on the street, she's waiting, she's counting the moment until they're going to be in bed with each other. "Gallop apace you fiery footed steeds – I want it to be there, I want it to be there, come night, come night, give me my Romeo." That urgency about sexuality and about her love that is going to be fulfilled in that sexuality is something that is also put in her terms against something that is wonderful. She says: "let me play a losing match to win." A losing match to win, and what she's going to lose, what they're both going to lose, is, as she says, "a stainless pair of maidenheads". They are both virgins and tonight they're going to play a match where both of them are going to lose their virginity in order to win something that is called marriage. Again, we have a hard time conceptualising the loss of virginity in those terms nowadays because we've cheapened our 'double-sense' of virginities, that boys are virgins too. Girls are virgins but girls' bodies represent that loss physically on that body through the penetration of their maidenhead. And I think we have a hard time of–, maybe we have divorced sexuality. Maybe we have come to see sexuality as so much a process as opposed to a big process, a big idea of what it means to be in love. Maybe we've separated being in love and sexuality. For Juliet, these two things are really very close together. And when Romeo finally gets it at the ball, when he finally sees a woman who plants in him both his desire and his sense of love that is going to lead to family, he brings the two ideas together as well.



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Language

I think one has to get, first of all, the divisions. You can see Capulet and Montague. That I think is really interesting. I also think you need to get the sense that this is an enclosed place, a city. In England we used to have many, many, walled cities, the way there are still many walled cities in Italy. We lost our walls. But if one can get a sense of these people not being able to get out, of being inside that town. I think one has to, with an ensemble, embrace the language. This is a play that constantly using wit, wordplay, as a form of aggro. So I was thinking of, say, a workshop, an activity of people pushing each other and creating a crowd that is pushing against each other. The language is doing that, all the time, using double entendre, two words that could mean two separate things to each other, using that as a form of aggression, embracing that. The complications of that wit and the moving on through what look like, and, in fact, are, tedious sweeps of a row, a row, a Romeo, a pink, a shoe, a button, a carnation, and they're playing with each other but they're playing with each other in a very masculine way. And that playing with each other in wit is also then duplicated in the beautiful speeches that are creating the love story.

This is a play that is built on an oxymoron. An oxymoron is two things that should be opposite, that come together. A simple oxymoron is bittersweet. Romeo uses a whole lot of them at the beginning of the play: "oh, brawling love" or "loving hate". How can you both have loving hate? Or indeed in the prologue "where civil blood makes civil hands unclean". How can you have civil blood on civil hands? That makes them uncivil, doesn't it? Well, civil there is being used in a very witty way to project two ideas about the city and how people behave in the city. But when you start murdering each other, the civility of the city, which is still there because the blood is of the city, makes you uncivil. This is a civil society that is behaving in an uncivilised way.

Now, "oh she doth teach the torches to burn brightly", that's also an oxymoron. How is it possible that this woman can also be that? And playing upon the impossibility of the oxymoron. Another oxymoron: Capulet and Montague. It's impossible to think of her as Juliet Montague. That's an oxymoron. How can Romeo be married to a Capulet? That's an oxymoron. And pursuing the way that oxymorons are made good in the play is part of the process of what Shakespeare is exploring.

The parents arrive in the tomb later on and they look at the bodies. They are puzzled because they look at Juliet and say: "hang on, she's got a dagger in her. That dagger should be over there in that body. She's bleeding anew? She's dead, how is this possible?" And seeing that whole frame of the death, of being a bizarre reformulation – they can't process it. But what do they do at the end? These two old men finally decide



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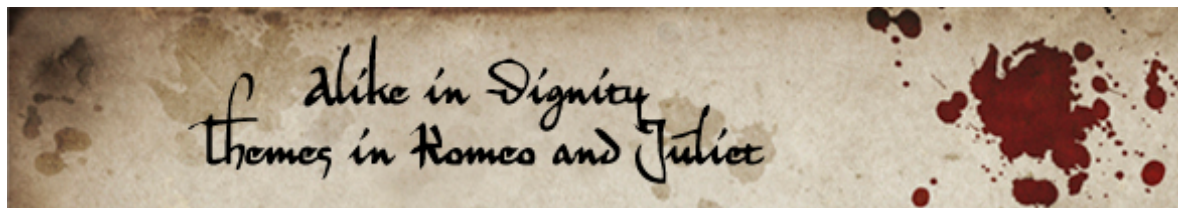
that it's time to lay apart the grudge and to take their children and turn them into icons of reconciliation, so that Juliet is going to be raised in gold as a statue in the marketplace. And you might stand back from that and say: "Too much, too late. Too much, too late. I don't want my daughter as a statue in gold. I would much rather have my daughter as Juliet Montague rather than the golden statue in the marketplace."

I think that one really interesting way of looking at the language of this play is to track through the light and dark, the morning, the night-time. Every time Romeo looks at Juliet, he sees light. "Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn brightly." When he sees her in the tomb, he looks at the body, and he doesn't realise that the body looks as it does is because she's still alive, but he sees the tomb, which is this charnel house full of the dead of the house of Capulet. He sees this not as a place of darkness, but her body makes it a feasting presence full of light. Now, one of the things that she just seems to carry with her is this idea of the light and lightness. When she arrives at Friar Laurence's cell, and she comes running in, Friar Laurence says: "So light a foot will ne'er wear out the stones." There she is, she's just lightness.

But she's also the one, of course, at the moment of having to screw her courage to the sticking place and take the potion to proxy her own death, she has to decide whether she's going to do that and what motivations Friar Laurence might have in giving her the potion. Is it actually poison? Is he trying to get rid of her to get rid of an inconvenient problem? She has to have courage to go into the darkness, to 'die', symbolically to 'die' by closing down her whole body through this potion that he's given her. She has to make that choice. She makes it alone. And in making it alone she decides that she will go into the dark in order to redeem the light. But, of course, by then Romeo has heard about her death. Benvolio got there, to Mantua, having seen what he saw, and having told Romeo what he saw, Romeo immediately goes to the apothecary, buys some poison, and decides he's going to see his bride one last time, and knocks back the potion before Juliet has time to wake up.

The banter is violent and I would not want to, at any point, underplay the violence of the language in this play. What they're talking about in the opening section is about killing women. And one of them says: "what do you mean, cut off their heads?" "Ah, well, cut off the heads of the maidens - cut off the maidenheads of the women." That's rape that they're talking about. So, on the one hand this play has an aura that is about it, with wonderfully high romantic speech-making and love-making between Romeo and Juliet. But at the same time the other side of the play has to do with this violence, of getting at each other, of sparring, of pushing. I think that's one thing that one could explore and it's not a lot different from the kind of 'laddishness' that we see on playgrounds, at bus stops today, where our 'laddishness' today now involves young girls being 'ladettes', a kind of pushing. Being an adolescent, of course, is pushing boundaries. But at what point, in those expressions of pushing, does pushing lead to death? Death cannot be redeemed. Death cannot be saved. Death means you're gone. And you can't get it back. Up until that point, everything can be pulled back, but the moment that the sword comes out, that the stiletto comes out, that the knife comes out, and people are killed, then there's no pulling back.





Time

The one person in the play who asks people to think about things is Friar Laurence. But at the same time, Friar Laurence himself comes up with snap decisions, snap ideas: “we can solve this by doing such, let’s do this, off we go”. On the one hand, the time pressure is putting the feeling of pressure on decisions being made, without pause for thought. That’s all built into the patriarchal structure of the play, I think, because if you’re given an order by a father, you must respond to that order, you don’t have time for consultation.

The other way, I think, that the time signature of the play is really interesting is the numbers of rituals that Shakespeare performs in the play. So, a big moment of Capulet’s ball, where he builds up the scene from one person standing on stage to people entering, to more people entering, to this great extravaganza of the ball, and then the ball fading away so that the nurse and Juliet are the last ones who are left on stage, saying: “who was that boy over there,” as a clever way to get Romeo’s name.

So the build-up of this wonderful ball, the performance of the ball, to the moment where Tybalt, the fiery Tybalt hears the voice of a Montague and wants to go in the middle of the ball hammer and tongs with his enemy. And old Capulet says: “no. You won’t interrupt the ball. No, boy, leave him alone. He’s a nice lad, leave him alone.” And out of that kind of rumble, these two young people come together and touch hands. It’s an extraordinary moment where time stops. So there’s this great kind of movement of the ball around them and time stops when those hands meet, and they talk about being pilgrims and kissing, slowing down. And Shakespeare takes that rhythm over and over and over again.

In the first scene of the play where two servants are on the street, yacking. Two other servants of the other household, yacking. They’re servants. And within five minutes you have the entire city at war with each other out of “do you bite your thumb at me, sir?”, “No sir, but I bite my thumb”, “Do you quarrel, sir?” and it’s a lot of argy bargy, aggro, aggro, that eventually, over the movement of that scene, the trajectory of that scene, has brought the Prince onto the street. So over and over and over again in this play, Shakespeare has that structure, if you will, of building from the one person/two people on the stage to this extraordinary confusion in terms of the fight or order in terms of the dance, and back down to one person at the end, reflecting on what they’ve seen. The entire city, in both of those scenes, is involved.

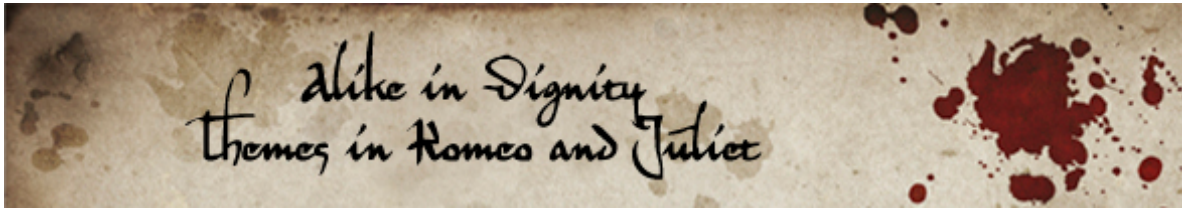
It happens again in building up the wedding for Juliet, supposedly in Act Four, when we know that she has drunk the potion and is lying in the bed inside the curtains, dead, and



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that they're going to discover that. But the whole trajectory of building up the wedding, building and building and building, bringing in the cooks, bringing in the musicians, bringing in Paris, who arrives at Morning Song to discover Juliet dead and then again winding up with one person left on stage, with Peter sending the musicians away.





Humour

The humour of the play is built in precisely to the double trajectory of the play because warfare is very funny and love is also very funny. The two people who are most responsible, I think, for the substantial comedy of the play are Mercutio, who is taking the mickey out of all of this boy stuff all the time and taking the mickey out of love, and the nurse, who is constantly talking in terms that demystify love, that turn the wonder of something that is about the earth into something very basic, taking romance and turning it back into sex. This nurse has been with Juliet since she was born and nursed her. The nurse knows everything about Juliet and the nurse is constantly, because of her failure in sophistication of language, making language mistakes that are very, very funny.

But the nurse is also, in some respects, the greatest traitor in the play. At the moment when Juliet needs the old people, the old people betray her. And the most significant betrayal is the nurse. At the moment when Juliet's mother is sent to Juliet, her Father is really concerned about the amount of tears she's shedding for Tybalt. What he doesn't realise, of course, is that she's actually shedding the tears for Romeo, the man who has been banished. Yes, she's sad about Tybalt, but she's also very glad that Tybalt is dead because Tybalt would have killed Romeo. So her tears are for her exiled Romeo. Her Father makes a big mistake, interprets those tears for Tybalt, and decides that he's got to do something to protect his daughter from her grief. Paris, who all this time just wants to marry Juliet, has tried through the play just to get a look-in to woo Juliet. Father says: "she's too young, no, no." And then at the point when he's trying to do something about Juliet's grief he says: "come on, I'll tell you what. We'll have a wedding. I'll give you what you want." And this will pull Juliet out of her mourning and turn her into a bride. That will be a great way of dealing with two wonderful issues at the same time. Her mother doesn't realise, of course, that Romeo is just out the window, in comes the mother and says: "you have a careful Father, daughter." You should pay attention to that word. "You have a careful Father, daughter." He has spent his life caring for Juliet. And now he tries to manage the best thing for her future, a great marriage with the County Paris, so she's going to be catapulted into the aristocracy of Verona. What could be better for young Juliet? Well, of course, nobody knows that Juliet is married. So in comes Mother and says: "you're getting married, he's arranged it for you." Juliet says: "I'm not doing that." And Mother says: "oh, wait a second." Now one of the funniest speeches of the play; in comes Dad, who says: "right, this is going to happen on Thursday" and she says no! And Father says: "what are you talking about? Take me with you, wife, take me with you, I don't understand what's going on here." Juliet says: "Dad, I can't do this, I'm not going to marry Paris," and then he erupts. He explodes. In the



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same way that the servants explode on the street, that the boys explode in the mutiny, and kill each other, Dad explodes and he issues the ultimatum.

Fathers do this all over Shakespeare. When fathers have the patriarchal button pressed, they explode. And he says: "fettle your fine joints to get to Saint Peter's church on Thursday, or I'll put you on a hurdle and drag you there." Now, a hurdle is that instrument of public humiliation that was reserved for whores. So he's threatens to tie her to a hurdle, put her at the back of a horse's tail, and drag her church and insist that she marry Paris? Woah, woah, woah, this is really dangerous.

And poor Juliet – what can she possibly do? Exit parents. She appeals to her mother, and her mother basically says: "I have nothing else to say to you, that's it. Do what your father says, or you're done, kid." Off she goes, and Juliet turns to her nurse and says: "what do I do?" And the nurse, at that point, capitulates, and betrays her. The nurse basically now figures out that: "well, now Romeo being exiled, he's sort of dead, so you could marry the County. That's what I think. Oh, he's such a nice lad. Oh, he's so much handsomer. Oh, he's got so much more wealth." What she's doing, of course, is blasphemous. She is proposing to Juliet that she become a bigamist, that she violates the sanctity of her oath, that she puts her soul in danger. And Juliet listens to the nurse and says: "is that your counsel?" The nurse says: "Yes. Oh, Romeo's a dishclout compared to Paris." And Juliet says: "thank you. You have consoled me much." Off goes the nurse and Juliet says: "you piece of wickedness." She then knows that the only person she can go to is Friar Laurence, and takes with her to Friar Laurence an instrument to kill herself; "there's no way out of this, I'm dying." And how is that resolved from that moment?

But, interestingly, in the same way that Romeo said "but I thought all for the best," Daddy Capulet also thinks "all for the best" in trying to arrange this marriage, the nurse thinks "all for the best" in advising her, and, of course, Friar Laurence thinks "all for the best" in giving her a way out that is not death but a proxy death.

Parents betray their children in this play and, of course, children don't trust their parents in this play. And perhaps that's because of the cultural references and maybe ultimately what this play suggests to us is that, generationally, we should be talking to each other more. Cultures, gangs, instead of fighting with each other, should be talking with each other more. We should not have to raise ourselves in gold statues to commemorate a past that was tragic. We should be talking to each other more in this place called the city.

