

The Movie

Romeo + Juliet

Director: Baz Luhrmann (1996 – 120 mins.)

Starring: Leonardo DiCaprio, Clare Danes

1. Summary

A contemporary retelling of the classic story of Romeo and Juliet, set in a modern-day city of Verona Beach. The Montagues and Capulets are two feuding families whose children meet and fall in love. Romeo and Juliet are Shakespeare's "star-crossed" lovers; the movie follows their tragic love affair.

2. Questions about the Movie

1. "Although Luhrmann courageously sticks with the prose, it's spoken as a language. It works, as there is the unwritten assumption that the audience are already familiar with the text and if not, will get the gist of it. This leaves Luhrmann free to stun his audience with the visuals." (Sandi Chaitram, *BBC1 Films on line*, updated May 4, 2001) Think back to the opening of the movie and the two versions of the prologue – one spoken by a TV newscaster and the other delivered like a music video. Why do you think the director repeats the chorus?
2. "To see the gang toughs in modern dress and then hear them spit out their threats and quarrels in Elizabethan English makes absolute sense. It plays a bit like *West Side Story* meets *Priscilla, Queen*

of the Desert. The film has been organized visually to make the dialogue (and the action) clear to anyone not familiar with the play. *Romeo & Juliet* is jammed with little eye-catching jokes and plays-on-words. Throw in a soundtrack that includes such out-there choices as "Young Hearts Run Free" and "When Doves Cry" and you get a sort of gobsmacking sight and sound experience... *Romeo & Juliet* is also very sexy and...surprisingly sorrowful. Golly – we laughed, we cried. That would seem to be exactly what Shakespeare intended." (Liz Braun, *Toronto Sun*, November 1, 1996) It has been said that if Shakespeare were writing today, he would be writing television dramas like *Six Feet Under* or *The Gilmore Girls* or *Joan of Arcadia* as well as sit-coms like *Will and Grace*. Why (or why not) does it make sense to say that Luhrmann's adaptation is something that a contemporary Shakespeare would have been happy to have written?

3. "No doubt the most aggressively modern, assertively trendy adaptations of Shakespeare ever filmed, this overwhelmingly of-the-moment version of one of literature's most enduring tragic love stories can serve as a litmus test for any viewer's willingness to accept extreme stylistic

attitudinizing as a substitute for the virtues of traditional storytelling." (Todd McCarthy, *Variety*, October 28–November 3, 1996) Is the critic praising or damning the movie? How far do you agree with him?

3. The Relationship of the Movie to the Theme of the Exercise

1. The First Week is not the easiest to get through – it is very intense and leads us down the path of self-awareness. How much self-awareness do Romeo and Juliet achieve in the course of the movie? Who is the more mature of the two – the more self-aware?
2. The First Week helps us see the illusions of the illusion we hold to be the self – as the exercise tells us. Where in the movie do any of the principal characters come to see the illusion they hold to be their selves?
3. Through the First Week we have learned to deconstruct our false selves by
 - self-questioning
 - imaginative reconstructing of ourselves as exposed to love
 - growing self-acceptance of ourselves.

Which characters help Romeo and Juliet work through such a deconstruction until they come to true knowledge of themselves?

4. The Relationship of the Movie to One's Self in the Exercise

1. Some people find facing up to themselves to be sheer desolation; others find it to be a relief. In the movie, Romeo and Juliet – and their parents – each react in a different way to this process. How do you react – now, at the end of the First Week – to this facing up to yourself?
2. The Exercise reminds us that we often experience the fear of what is other to ourselves as threatening or overwhelming. We know that this happened to Romeo and Juliet – and the movie makes it clear just how this happens. What "other" is the most challenging for you as you come to the end of the First Week?
3. With acceptance of self comes a liberation of energies and the consolation of being loved and accepted beyond ourselves. Romeo and Juliet each have this need, and try as they might, their tragedy is not to reach that. At the end of this First Week, how have you found yourself being loved and accepted beyond yourself?