

## *The Italian Job: Franco Zeffirelli's Romeo and Juliet and the 1960s*

*Samuel Crowl*

Before the Beatles, before Carnaby Street, before the Royal Shakespeare Company, before the National Theatre, even before (by a month) John F. Kennedy was elected as the youngest president in American history, there was Franco Zeffirelli's 1960 stage production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Old Vic. His Italy-infused, youth-dominated production brought passion, energy, and light to a dreary London still not fully recovered from the aftershocks of the Second World War. In a Shakespearean view of social history, Zeffirelli's staged version of *Romeo and Juliet* helped initiate what came to be dubbed 'The Swinging Sixties'. His equally prophetic 1968 film adaptation marked an end to the decade and the romantic optimism it seemed to embody. The Old Vic production, after a rocky initial critical reception, was rescued by Kenneth Tynan and an audience of the young, whilst the film was the first Shakespeare box office smash hit, triumphing again through the young, who flocked – without prodding – to see it. But, by the end of 1968, all the early promise of the sixties had been extinguished, literally by the assassinations of President Kennedy, his brother Robert and Martin Luther King, Jr, and by the prolonged war in Vietnam that led to the mass alienation of the young in America and Europe.

Zeffirelli's stage and film productions of *Romeo and Juliet* took the measure of the decade, marking at once the rise of its ardent social energies and the demise of its early hopeful marriage of the two noble houses of stage and screen. Now, more than a half-century later, the long hindsight of our post-digital revolutionary gaze suggests that the pairing of ever-multiplying proletarian screens with canonical stage Shakespeare may be seen as star-crossed as Zeffirelli's stage and film productions now seem.

Zeffirelli's stage production featured several young British actors who came to prominence in the 1960s, many from the north of England with working-class backgrounds, and who brought fresh energies and perspectives to the profession. Judi Dench, Tom Courtenay and John Stride, all in

the *Romeo and Juliet* cast, joined Albert Finney, Alan Bates, Maggie Smith, Joan Plowright, Helen Mirren, Nicol Williamson and David Warner as actors who moved back and forth between work for the classical repertory theatre companies, the West End, television, the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre and, most significantly, the British New Wave films of Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz and John Schlesinger. These actors came to define the post-Gielgud, Olivier, Richardson, Ashcroft generation of actors who had dominated British theatre and film since the 1930s. Many, like Courtenay, Bates, Finney, and Plowright, played working-class heroes, and placed their indelible mark on such significant 1960s films as *The Entertainer* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1960), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (dir. Karel Reisz, 1960), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1962), *Billy Liar* (dir. John Schlesinger, 1963) and *Morgan* (dir. Karel Reisz, 1966).

Zeffirelli's production, like a riff on his name 'little breeze',<sup>1</sup> caught and then propelled the new cultural winds of the 1960s but, by the release of his film of the play in 1968, that soft, sweet little breeze had developed into a much more troubled social tempest captured by Bob Dylan's 1960s' defining anthem, 'Blowin' in the Wind'. Though an outsider to Shakespeare and British culture, Zeffirelli brought his own vivid theatrical imagination and Italian training to the task. He was a protégé of the great Luchino Visconti, one of the founders of the Italian neo-realism school of film of the late 1950s, and he followed Visconti from film to the theatre and opera, where he found his most satisfying and successful artistic home. Opera provided his ticket to London. In late 1959 he was invited by the Royal Opera House to direct a production of the double bill of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* and Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*. Particularly in the latter, Zeffirelli wanted to capture the 'pleasing freshness, explosive inventiveness, and passion' of Mascagni's opera, written when he was only 20.<sup>2</sup> Zeffirelli knew that the 'British have an instinctive yearning for Italy, for sunshine and the Mediterranean' and went on to comment 'we opened in a bleak London winter and the effect on the audience of the first ten minutes was as if they had been transported into a distant sunny land.'<sup>3</sup> The light-seeking tropism of the exchange

<sup>1</sup> Zeffirelli was an illegitimate child and, given Italian custom, could carry neither his father's nor his mother's name. As he recounts, 'my mother was fond of a Mozart aria in *Così fan tutte* which mentions the Zeffiretti, the little breezes . . . she apparently intended to name me Zeffiretti, but this was misspelled in the register and came out as . . . Zeffirelli.' *Zeffirelli: An Autobiography* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986), 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

between Italian opera and chilly British Shakespeare finds voice eventually in Zeffirelli's direction and Nino Rota's score for the film.

One of the audience members so transported was Michael Benthall, then the General Manager of the Old Vic, who invited the initially reluctant Zeffirelli to return to London to direct a production of *Romeo and Juliet* that captured 'the feel of Italy . . . something truly Mediterranean . . . sunlight on a fountain, wine and olives and garlic. New, different, real, young.'<sup>4</sup> Zeffirelli turned Benthall's vision of something 'truly Mediterranean' into his own 'dream of Italy' fashioned for Londoners longing for the hot sun and youthful passion.<sup>5</sup> Zeffirelli dared to give Londoners Italian Shakespeare where the action, the pace, the landscape, the music and the fights rivalled the speaking of the poetry. Zeffirelli had a bold and ambitious agenda – and it was not just to dazzle. In his programme note he introduced a cultural theme that would resonate throughout Europe for the next forty years, the creation of a common community:

Recollecting my reasons for accepting [Benthall's offer to direct *Romeo and Juliet*], I believe the decision was not dictated entirely by professional considerations but also for idealistic reasons beyond the limits of the theatre. I had worked in England presenting Italian works and the real satisfaction I took back to Italy was simply that I had helped a little towards the better understanding of its culture by the English. Now I have an even more interesting task – a combination of Italian feelings applied to a masterpiece of the classical English theatre which might prove, if successful, that times have changed in Europe and people of different backgrounds can easily work together to create a new European conscience.<sup>6</sup>

Zeffirelli's contribution was to interpret Shakespeare with 'Italian feelings', a mixture of the social realism he adapted from post-war Italian films and the heightened romance of Italian opera. *Romeo and Juliet* was perfect Shakespearean material for such an approach but the London daily newspaper critics were neither moved nor impressed. As was often the case with what seemed radical theatrical approaches to Shakespeare, Kenneth Tynan was the first established critic to see and give voice to the production's virtues in his prescient review in *The Observer*. For Tynan, 'Zeffirelli's production is a revelation, even perhaps a revolution.'<sup>7</sup> Tynan argued that

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.    <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>6</sup> Programme, Old Vic 1960 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, 5. Jill L. Levenson also uncovered this quotation but puts it to a much different use in her fine *Shakespeare in Performance: Romeo and Juliet* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 85.

<sup>7</sup> K. Tynan, *The Observer*, Sunday, 9 October 1960, 24.

Zeffirelli and his cast treated Shakespeare's characters as if they were 'neither larger or smaller than life; they were precisely life-size, and we watched them living, spontaneously and unpredictably [as] nobody on stage seems to be aware that he is appearing in an immortal tragedy, or indeed a tragedy of any kind; instead the actors behave like ordinary human beings, trapped in a quandary whose outcome they cannot foretell.'<sup>8</sup> Tynan not only read the production brilliantly, he even hinted at Zeffirelli's cultural initiative to break down national barriers and stereotypes in the service of a new pan-European common culture helping to heal the Second World War's substantial wounds. But as we shall see, particularly in his film of the play, Zeffirelli's initiative proved to be more of a national challenge than a truce.

The stage production's virtues centred on its youth, the hot blood stirring in the kids kicking about the town square, the sweet eager innocence of the young lovers, a wild and whirling Mercutio from Alec McCowen (ten years older than Dench and Stride) playing one of his first major Shakespeare roles, and Zeffirelli's strong sense that it was fate – not so much star-crossed as historically inevitable – that dictated the tragedy. The adults and their ancient quarrel, in keeping with the way the production anticipated the 1960s, are extraneous, clueless rather than complicit. Lord and Lady Capulet and even Romeo and Juliet's surrogate parents – the Nurse and Friar Lawrence – are absorbed in their own little marital melodrama or private agendas and when they do try to help, their efforts play right into fate's hands.

Two elements of Zeffirelli's production were to have a lasting impact on both the English theatre and the larger culture of the 1960s. Zeffirelli's insistence that his cast move and speak as naturally as possible proved influential in the contemporary staging of Shakespeare. Zeffirelli discouraged any rhetorical embellishments in the speaking of Shakespeare's verse; he wanted his young cast to make their bodies and their movements central to the creation of character. Tynan commented that '[Zeffirelli] has even taught his English cast how to shrug.'<sup>9</sup> John Russell Brown, in what remains the finest and most detailed analysis of the Old Vic production, understands the way Zeffirelli's cast embraced his fresh approach to the fusion of language and gesture: 'The greatest innovation of his production lay in unifying words and stage business, in making the actors' speech as lively and fluent as their physical action. The result was that the dialogue did not appear the result of study and care, but the natural idiom of the characters.'<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.    <sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> J. R. Brown, 'Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*', *Shakespeare Survey* 15 (1962), 149.

This mode of physical and vocal attack became central to Peter Hall's work with the Royal Shakespeare Company, which he created in 1960. He, too, was after a modern way of speaking Shakespeare that respected the verse (particularly its caesuras and line ends) but which emphasized its irony and ambiguity rather than its rhetoric, and flowed naturally from the action. He created a company of new, largely unknown, 'life-sized' actors like Judi Dench, Ian Holm, David Warner and Glenda Jackson and gave them leading roles in the company's early seasons. None were theatrical stars then; all would be by the end of the decade. Tynan, a prominent drama critic, and Brown, a professor at Sussex, both having articulated and celebrated new approaches to staged Shakespeare influenced by Zeffirelli, would go on to become the literary managers for the National Theatre's first two directors: Laurence Olivier and Peter Hall.

The other element the production gave to the decade was 'hair'. Expressed so directly, the idea seems risible. When Zeffirelli first spoke to his cast, he outlined the Italian renaissance world he wanted them to inhabit and capture. He wanted the women and the men to have long hair as if they stepped out of quattrocento portraiture. He wanted them to move naturally with speed and power. Wigs were out. He received some initial resistance from the men, but his Italian charm soon won the lads over. By the middle of the 1960s, long hair for males and females had become the universal signature of youth culture, of the Rock 'n' Roll bands they made famous, and *Hair* was even the title of the long-running 1960s' counter-cultural Broadway musical. The show had Shakespearean origins (and a central song with lyrics nicked from *Hamlet*) as it was developed in a workshop sponsored by Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival.

Zeffirelli's production became an international sensation. Tynan believed that 'The Vic has done nothing better for a decade.'<sup>11</sup> The show ran for a year, made a triumphant visit to Venice, where the gondolas were piled up unloading the audience, and went to the United States, where it opened at the City Center Theater on Broadway in 1962. Judi Dench, to Zeffirelli's great disappointment, did not accompany the production to New York. Her Juliet had caught Peter Hall's attention and he had invited her to be a member of the first community of actors to form the Royal Shakespeare Company. In fact, only John Stride of the principal actors in the original Old Vic production went to New York and none of them would be included in the cast for the film version.

<sup>11</sup> Tynan, *The Observer*, 24.

Gaining funding for the film proved difficult, as Shakespeare remained box office poison in Hollywood. But by May of 1967 a British production team had managed to secure a B-picture budget (\$800,000) from Paramount and the film had been planned, scripted, designed and cast (the budget was almost doubled after Paramount was shown a first rough cut and the film eventually grossed over \$50 million). Zeffirelli gathered the principals, including the film score's composer Nino Rota, for several weeks of rehearsals at a villa he had rented outside of Rome. His miniscule budget had at least given Zeffirelli the freedom (despite Paramount's complaints) to cast his film in the same unconventional manner he had shown in the Old Vic stage production, with lots of novice actors with little stage experience and even less in film. The two unknowns cast as Romeo (Leonard Whiting, who turned 17 during the shooting) and Juliet (Olivia Hussey, 15) mingled with more established stage actors like Robert Stephens, Natasha Parry and Pat Heywood. But all of them were relatively unknown in Hollywood and Pat Heywood was appearing in her first movie. Zeffirelli began shooting in late June and wrapped in mid-October, using locations in Tuscany (Tuscania and Pienza), Umbria (Gubbio) and south of Rome (Artena) with the interiors filmed at Cinecittà, the huge Roman sound stage.

Film allowed Zeffirelli to make the built landscape of fifteenth-century Italy central to his telling of Shakespeare's tale. Film also allowed him the ability to move seamlessly between long-shot and close-up, the Italian cityscape and the human face. The film embraces the town square at Gubbio and the beautiful Romanesque church of San Pietro just outside of Tuscania with the same attention it devotes to capturing the faces of Benvolio, Abraham, Mercutio, Tybalt, Romeo, the Nurse and Juliet.<sup>12</sup> Film also allowed him, through camera work and cutting, to move with the reckless speed he thought essential to creating his Italian Shakespeare. Camera deployment and editing are central to film's grammar and rhetoric and pace; it is instructive and surprising to note that Olivier's film of *Hamlet* is precisely the same length as Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, yet, by intention, one delays whilst the other dashes.

Zeffirelli's film begins as it ends, in stasis, but a stasis that vanishes almost in an instant. The opening shot, as Russell Jackson indicates, differs from the one described in the shooting script, prompted, he conjectures, by Zeffirelli's unexpected reunion with Laurence Olivier who was acting in *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (dir. Michael Anderson, 1968) also being shot at

<sup>12</sup> R. Jackson, *Shakespeare Films in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 213–14.

Cinecittà.<sup>13</sup> Olivier's presence and immediate interest in the project allowed Zeffirelli to open his film with the first lines of the play's prologue recited in voice-over by Olivier as an overhead shot captures a hazy early morning view of Verona. As Ramona Wray notes, the shot and Olivier's voice pay homage to his groundbreaking film of *Henry V*, which had entranced Zeffirelli when he first saw it in 1945.<sup>14</sup> But the shot is more than a nod from apprentice to mentor. Zeffirelli's aerial camera shot lingers over Verona as Olivier's opening shot does over London, including a quick pan shot over the river Adige mirroring Olivier's focus on the Thames. Just as Olivier's camera pans up to catch a playbill fluttering down from the sky announcing a Globe performance of *Henry V*, so Zeffirelli's camera moves upwards to focus on the sun burning through the early morning mist. Olivier's opening invites us to the theatre, Zeffirelli's escorts us out of the mist into Verona's sun-drenched square. Zeffirelli takes us in a flash from the voice of Shakespeare's English theatrical heritage to Italy and the movies.

Olivier recites only the first eight lines of the sonnet-prologue, cutting the sestet, a forewarning of major textual cuts to come and also a signal of similarly daring camera cuts, the first from sky to square and the sounds and stirrings of commerce, crowds, kids and conflict. *Romeo and Juliet* is the most formal of Shakespeare's early works, with a text loaded with couplets and embedded with sonnets. Even in his quick acknowledgement of Olivier and his Shakespeare on film legacy, Zeffirelli's screenplay and camerawork announce his intention to break new ground in filming Shakespeare. From the outset, Zeffirelli announces that he will privilege image over text, sight over sound, action over verse, and that he will promote music to a newly substantive role as well.

When his camera cuts to the square and the busy morning market, the screen immediately explodes in colour as the scarlet and gold Capulets, Sampson and Gregory, cannot resist baiting the Montague servant, Abraham, dressed in a more subdued combination of aqua and olive. Abraham tries to turn their bait into a jest by smirking and wagging a long green bean in their faces. Sampson responds by tripping an older Montague, who falls and cuts his temple, and the game's afoot. The family quarrel erupts anew, this time smack in the middle of the day and the market. As Peter S. Donaldson notes, Zeffirelli's camera introduces

<sup>13</sup> R. Wray, 'Franco Zeffirelli', in M. T. Burnett, C. Lehmann, M. Rippy, and R. Wray, *Welles, Kurosawa, Kozintsev, Zeffirelli*, Vol. xvii of *Great Shakespearians* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 141–84.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

the strutting, preening young, by first shooting their feet stirring up the dust, then rising to pause briefly on their codpieces, and only finally moving up to linger on their faces captured in medium close-up.<sup>15</sup> Then Tybalt and his pack of cock-a-hoops arrive to stoke the pageantry and pheromones in their confrontation with the Montagues.

The opening beat of the film provides us with a brilliantly choreographed and brutal fight scene that quickly advances from a taunt to a trip to drawn swords and the clamouring of a bell bringing Capulet and Montague militias charging into the square. All of Verona seems to erupt as Zeffirelli cuts to a small residential piazza where the women are tossing pots, pans, chairs, tables and even what looks like sacks of flour down on the fighters below. Abraham is stabbed in the face; another fighter plunges his sword into the body of a fallen rival; chaos reigns until the Prince and his guard come thundering into the square on horseback to quash the quarrel. The fight absorbs almost five minutes of screen time and contains fifty-seven cuts, the use of a handheld camera, as well as cameras mounted on dollies, a horse and a crane. This scene announces that Zeffirelli is determined to take Shakespeare not just into film but into the movies. His 'Italian feeling' is nourished and augmented by Hollywood and by Nino Rota's lush operatic film score. This is young Shakespeare, performed by the young, for the young, not Shakespeare for his cultural guardians, the social elites and the professors.

Zeffirelli's film grounds Shakespeare in a specific culture, climate and landscape. He wants his gamecocks to kick up the dust and coat Shakespeare with the violent reality of Verona's streets as a means of drawing a new audience into the elevated reality of verse drama. He also knows when and how to sprinkle his film with fairy dust to heighten the tender romance that contrasts, clashes and ultimately falls prey to the street violence.

Capulet's 'old accustomed feast' (1.2.20) combines music and dance, song and sonnet, to bring the combustible fusion of young romance and awakening passion to a romantic climax. Michael York reveals in his autobiography that Zeffirelli heightened the visual atmosphere of the ball scene by 'filling the air with gold dust that shimmered in the candlelight' as Romeo and Juliet touch hands for the first time.<sup>16</sup> This gold dust serves as a stark contrast with the dust kicked up in the male-dominated 'dances' in the street. With a few exceptions, Zeffirelli shoots the street fights on the

<sup>15</sup> P. S. Donaldson, *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 154.

<sup>16</sup> M. York, *Travelling Player: An Autobiography* (London: Headline, 1991), 139. I am indebted to Russell Jackson for this source.



horizontal, thus capturing the linear work of violent swordplay. In the ball scene, like the pattern of the Moresca dance it features, Zeffirelli's camera works in circles spinning within circles. It is during the Moresca that Romeo and Juliet have their first physical encounter. The dance and dancers as well as the camera whirl around with increasing speed until the pace is too fast to sustain and we can no longer tell the dancers from the dance. The urgency of the dance, like the violence of the street, gets accelerated so powerfully that it loses control, and Pasqualino De Santis's Academy Award-winning cinematography beautifully reflects the script's extended exploration of the connection between speed, violence and passion.

Courtney Lehmann sharply frames critical controversy about Zeffirelli's film through critiques of Nino Rota's score for the film, especially the song 'What is a Youth?' with lyrics by Eugene Walter who, though born in the 1920s, was a true international cultural child of the 1960s. Lehmann describes Nino Rota's film score as 'controversial' by detailing the ways in which other critics have found it saccharine, banal, and overly operatic.<sup>17</sup> In the film, the song is the occasion for the two lovers' meeting at the Capulet feast. It introduces the lovers physically and it introduces the melodic themes that will develop as a through line in the film. A contrasting ongoing reference in the film is the instrumental music played as background to the opening sonnet. This music retains the context of Olivier's magisterial voice and of establishment British Shakespeare and remains essentially unaltered in its recurrences (as in its use for the minuet at the ball), whereas the song's themes undergo significant alterations in rhythm, tempo, instrumental voicing and harmonic texture, all according to dramatic context. It is an origin song for the score of the film.<sup>18</sup>

To trace the song's changing role in the film's course, it is useful to recall the song's character, structure and performance style. 'What is a Youth?' has two main sections, each with two verses, each with a separate melody. The song is performed after the guests at the Capulet feast perform contrasting dances, one a formal partner dance resembling a minuet, based on the musical theme for the sonnet, the other a more energetic communal exercise, a Moresca, involving big contrary motion circles, rhythmic wrist bells and accelerating tempos. After the contrasting dances, a minstrel takes his place

<sup>17</sup> C. Lehmann, *Screen Adaptations: Romeo and Juliet – A Close Study of the Relationship between Text and Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 227.

<sup>18</sup> A recent perceptive exception to the negative reaction to Rota's score and Walter's song can be found in N. Vienne-Guerrin, 'Zeffirelli's Shakespearean motion pictures: living monuments', in R. Jackson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 213–23.

to sing in a circle formed by the now stationary dancers. Between the first singing of the song and a repeat, a woodwind plays the opening theme of the song: the effect is to register at once Romeo's spellbound vision of Juliet's idealized innocence and beauty and, at the same time, the guests' energized, breathless attention to what sounds like an archaic pan pipe lobbing up out of the libidinal well at the centre of the Moresca circle. Like the melody, the lyrics of the first verses of the song will be subtly altered and musically inflected. The line 'So does the fairest maid' becomes 'So dies the fairest maid', and on both *does* and *dies* the singer performs a decorative sliding melisma that both emphasizes and masks the word it decorates. The second theme of the song ('Comes a time when one sweet smile') is subject to a spectrum of changes. Its initial cantabile style, melodic rocking thirds and dotted rhythms will be given a ritual largo setting and a Latin text in the wedding scene. It will be appropriated as a gallop in a boisterous street scene, whilst its pacifist lullaby harmonies will be weaponized by accelerating tempos and aggressive minor intervals in the Tybalt and Mercutio fight.

But Zeffirelli's Italian project for his 1968 film reaches above and beyond his collaboration with Nino Rota on its music and began in fact far earlier, in the 1960 stage production at the Old Vic. For that production, he in effect bit his Italian thumb and declared open rivalry between the two national houses, the one for whom Shakespeare is the touchstone of national identity, the other for whom opera is the cultural key. Zeffirelli's macro-agenda in his film foregrounds numerous operatic conventions, makes implicit reference to prototypical scenes in Italian opera and infuses 'Italian feelings' into English theatre in a way that has provoked as much strife as harmony among American and English critics of the director's work.

Close listening to the music's shift will reveal its link to the camera's shift, from dance and song, to the meeting of the lovers' eyes, then hands, then lips. This rush from *fête* to fate is signalled by the woodwind solo sounding again the introductory phrase of the minstrel's song. For a director as steeped in operatic and orchestral literature as Zeffirelli, the scene conjures musical touchstones such as Papageno's flute and its power over forest animals and kidnapers in *The Magic Flute*, or the bird calls in the mad scene in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, or the opening of Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun*.

Zeffirelli's staging of Mercutio's death also invokes operatic conventions. The scene evokes desperate clowns like Canio (in *Pagliacci*) and Rigoletto and dying heroines like Gilda, Mimi, Violetta and Aida, whose last throes are their most musically climactic. Their final moments enact the mesmerizing link of music and primal emotion in these operas. Surely Rigoletto's crippled gait and his curse of the Duke's courtiers is a model for the dying Mercutio's

pitiful ascent of the long flight of steps to the portico of the church to deliver his full-throated 'A plague o'both your houses!' (3.1.83). In the tradition of great operatic jesters like *Pagliacci's* Canio, Mercutio's climb jests at love by mimicking Romeo's climb to Juliet's balcony, still fresh in our visual memory – and this jester now has wounds and scars to spare in answer to Romeo's dismissive putdown of his friend before the balcony scene.<sup>19</sup>

In these two early scenes, Zeffirelli establishes the rhythm and landscape of his film as it moves between the street and the lovers and, in so doing, also establishes the resonances between the film's Italian renaissance setting and the 1960s cultural world of its making. Zeffirelli first introduces Romeo alone, quietly wandering up a narrow street – one much like those we have just seen crammed with the violence of the opening fight. He twirls a sprig of mint blossom, leading many commentators to associate his dreamy romanticism with the pacificism and 'flower power' of the 1960s. Certainly, Leonard Whiting's Romeo becomes as much the focus of the camera's gaze as does Olivia Hussey's Juliet.

Here the film participates in the sexual liberation of the 1960s when the young began to experiment with the expression of fluid gender roles through hair style and the unisex fashions of Carnaby Street. But Zeffirelli is even bolder in expanding the camera's gaze to transcend the convention of its male fixation with the female face and form. The camera work and cuts in Romeo and Juliet's bedroom scene focus even more on Whiting's body than on Hussey's. He is lying on his stomach and his pale bare nether cheeks are privileged over her sheet-covered breasts, and when he rises and stands looking out at the dawn not the dark, hearing the lark and not the nightingale, the camera's gaze at his backside provides the possibility of multiple responses to his naked beauty. As Donaldson writes, 'Although Romeo is the only male present in the scene, the camera work creates a homoerotic connection even as it portrays heterosexual love.'<sup>20</sup> In a remarkable way, Zeffirelli's very 1960s' treatment of this moment and the entire range of homosocial relationships in the film cast a warm eye back to the androgynous appeal of Shakespeare's transvestite theatre.

As I mentioned at the outset, Zeffirelli's two productions of *Romeo and Juliet* provide a bookend for the 1960s. The decade, like his productions, began in youthful energy and optimism but ended in social dislocation and tragedy. The young dominated the decade in song, style and personal and

<sup>19</sup> I am more than musically indebted to Professor Susan Crowl for her aid in the analysis of Shakespearean film scores here and elsewhere in my work.

<sup>20</sup> Donaldson, *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors*, 170.

social rebellion. Their enthusiastic response to Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* suggested that a new audience existed for Shakespeare films and was at least tangentially responsible for the release of Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971) as the 1960s literally bled into the 1970s. Polanski's film aspired to appeal directly to the young commercial audience Zeffirelli's film had created for Shakespeare. His *Macbeth* had several direct connections with Zeffirelli's work. Polanski's literary adviser on the film, Kenneth Tynan, who helped him shape the text and his approach to the play, had been an early important champion of Zeffirelli's Old Vic stage production. The textual and visual approach to *Macbeth* fashioned by Polanski and Tynan relied heavily on the work of Polanski's Polish countryman, Jan Kott. Kott's *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* (1962) was a powerful twentieth-century middle-European reading of Shakespeare's history plays and tragedies as enacting what Kott called 'the grand mechanism' where one strong-booted thug followed another in dominating and crushing civil society.

*Macbeth* was ripe material for Kott's bleak approach and the vehicle that visually embodied Kott's vision was Polanski's treatment of the minor character, Ross. The film conceives Ross as a stooge for power, a middleman always looking for his main chance, a perpetual Thane-in-waiting. He is dispatched by Duncan to deliver Cawdor's title to Macbeth; he is the third murderer in Banquo's assassination; he opens the door to Macduff's castle for the slaughter of his wife and all his pretty ones; he is the messenger who shamelessly brings that news to Macduff in England; and he is back in Scotland to accept Lennox's emblematic chain of authority when Lennox deserts to join Malcolm's forces. When Ross presents the chain to Macbeth, waiting to be its next recipient, Jon Finch's Macbeth stares at him with blank disdain and slips the chain over his servant Seyton's neck.

Polanski's radical cynicism at the end of the 1960s challenges Zeffirelli's early romanticism and reflects one of the ways a decade that began in so much promise ended in so much blood. Polanski escaped a Poland dominated first by the Nazis and then by the Soviets to end up in Hollywood as the director of the award-winning *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). His reward was the savage slaughter of his pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, and her house guests by members of the deranged drug-addled Charles Manson Family. The connection between Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* and Polanski's *Macbeth* is John Stride, Zeffirelli's stage Romeo and Polanski's film Ross. Stride begins the 1960s playing Shakespeare's youngest and most romantic tragic hero and ends it playing a crass self-serving Shakespearean middleman, unintentionally charting the downward 1960s spiral from youthful social optimism to murderous decadence. Polanski's *Macbeth* is an accomplished piece of film-making with

its own frightening beauty, but it is in many ways the antithesis in approach, tone and temperament to Zeffirelli's pioneering film. The decade began by Zeffirelli using Shakespeare to bring some warm Italian feeling to London and concluded with Polanski appropriating Shakespeare to bring a middle-European chill to Hollywood as the 'swinging sixties' dissolved into the 'sad seventies'.

Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* is the crucial link between the Anglo-American Shakespeare films of Olivier and Welles and the subsequent work of Kenneth Branagh and his contemporaries. Branagh is as much a son of Zeffirelli as he is of Olivier and Welles. He wants his camera work to dazzle, his actors to be both natural and bold, and his film scores to soar. His partnership with Patrick Doyle bears resemblance to Zeffirelli's with Nino Rota; both directors obviously relish their composers' fearlessness in raiding opera for tempo and tune. Branagh even followed Zeffirelli's lead in the creation of his own Italian idyll in his film of *Much Ado about Nothing* (1993) shot on location in Tuscany.

Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* is a powerful homage to Zeffirelli's film. As Ramona Wray notes, Luhrmann's film is so invested in Zeffirelli's that 'it copies the technical and textual decisions of its predecessor' in its casting of the young lovers, the use of a ripe film score, and 'shot for shot replications' of individual scenes.<sup>21</sup> Luhrmann rightly observed that 'we've set the film in the world of the movies', and one of those movies is Zeffirelli's.<sup>22</sup> The rich irony of this is that Zeffirelli's film, once attacked for its massive textual cuts and heady cinematic excesses came to be regarded by contemporary high school students in the late 1990s as the 'classic' or 'real' version of the play.<sup>23</sup>

Two decades later another significant London stage production of the play looked back to Italy, Zeffirelli, and film for its design and execution. Branagh, along with his co-director Rob Ashford, mounted a production of *Romeo and Juliet* in London with the young film and television stars Lily James and Richard Madden. Two elements, beyond its young star power, distinguished the production set in the 1950s. The set design and costumes were all in shades of black, white and grey and the play featured Derek Jacobi, then 77, as Mercutio. This brilliant and contrarian casting and design, seemingly a challenge to Zeffirelli's youth-dominated 'Italian feeling' approach to the play, in fact shared a source with Zeffirelli's 1960s stage

<sup>21</sup> Wray, *Great Shakespearians*, 181–2.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), 128.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

and film productions. Branagh and Ashford took their inspiration from the black-and-white Italian film neo-realism of the 1950s created by Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica and Luchino Visconti, Zeffirelli's mentor.

Zeffirelli, in both his stage and film versions of the play, had appropriated the realism of this style but married it with more melodramatic elements poached from opera and Hollywood. His film, all shot in vivid Technicolor, created a style resembling neo-realism on speed. The tone of the Branagh–Ashford production was created less by the play's famous lovers than by Jacobi's remarkable performance of Mercutio with wavy silver hair, dressed in an elegant grey pinstriped suit, and carrying a walking stick as though he were Vittorio De Sica himself stepping out of one of his own films. The effect was stunning and doubly so in its black-and-white world, as indebted to Italy and Italian culture as Zeffirelli's lively colourful stage and film productions five decades earlier.

Zeffirelli's productions of *Romeo and Juliet* and their afterlife helped to define the tragic arc of the 1960s from the Kennedys to the Mansons. That arc came full circle in 2019 with the release of Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. Tarantino's movie provided a counterfactual account of the Manson Family murders and the end of the 1960s where Rick Dalton, an over-the-hill movie and television star, foils the savage murder of Roman Polanski's pregnant wife Sharon Tate and her guests at their Hollywood Hills home. Dalton is played by Luhrmann's Romeo, Leonardo DiCaprio, and his home is located next to Polanski's on Cielo Drive. Dalton and his stuntman sidekick Cliff Booth, played by Brad Pitt as a middle-aged version of Mercutio, confront and destroy the members of the Manson Family who invade Dalton's home believing it to be Tate's. In action-hero style, Dalton incinerates the last surviving attacker with a flame-thrower whose fiery blast jumps across the swimming pool that separates them. Tarantino's film, like Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, is packed with film references. DiCaprio's Dalton doing good work in a swimming pool is surely meant to echo Luhrmann's decision to shoot his version of the balcony scene with both lovers treading water in the Capulet swimming pool.

Tarantino reaches back beyond Luhrmann to twice reference Zeffirelli's film. The narrative of *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* is set in February and August of 1969. In a February scene, the camera catches the marquee of the famous Vine Theatre at the corner of Hollywood and Vine announcing Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* as the current attraction. In August, the camera once again flashes on the marquee now proudly proclaiming: ROMEO AND JULIET: EIGHTH STRAIGHT MONTH. The success of Zeffirelli's

movie redeemed the tragic tale it told. Tarantino's goes one bold fantasy step beyond by transforming the actual social tragedy that closed the 1960s into a comic action-hero triumph by an ageing Romeo and his sidekick.

Zeffirelli's stage and film productions of *Romeo and Juliet* helped to write the cultural history of the 1960s and their influence and power have extended deep into the first two decades of the new millennium. The jury is still out on whether the ongoing big historical picture will reflect Zeffirelli's rivalry with traditional stage productions – including his own – or reconciliation, pairing a new visual vernacular on digital screens with new audiences for Shakespeare on stage and screen.

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