Reprising ASL at ACT: *Romeo and Juliet* at A Contemporary Theatre

by Michael Shurgot. Published in 2019 Issue 1.

For the production: *Romeo and Juliet* (2019, A Contemporary Theatre). Performance attended: 2019-3-12. See production details at the end of the review.

John Langs is an experienced director of Shakespeare's plays. Before becoming artistic director of A Contemporary Theatre (ACT), Langs directed several productions for Seattle Shakespeare Company (SSC). Given Langs' background with SSC's generally traditional approach to Shakespeare's plays, his decision to stage *Romeo and Juliet* in an obviously contemporary setting as part of ACT's season was intriguing. In his program note, Langs states that ACT chose as its 2019 theme plays that "met the urgency of the moment" (Langs A2).When searching for its opening play, Langs adds, his artistic team asked: "What is the play that speaks to a legacy of violence and the inability of an older generation to comprehend the spirit of its children?" and "What is the play about the power of love to triumph over violence and discord?" (*Encore* A-2). *Romeo and Juliet* emerged as their obvious choice.

Figure 1. Joshua M. Castille and Gabriella O'Fallon in *Romeo + Juliet*. Photo credit: Truman Buffett.

DOI 10.18357/sremd01201818877

Two features of this production deserve special attention. First, the set. Initially erected around the circular stage in the Allen Theatre (the theatre-in-the-round upper stage at ACT) were three enormous steel chain-link fences, at least ten feet high and eight feet wide, welded to triangular bases attached to wheels, and thus easily moved around the stage. These fences evoked an urban setting; they appear everywhere in downtown Seattle at numerous construction sites. Similar fences surrounded the perimeter of the theatre above the seating area, and before the play began two cops carrying flashlights and clubs circled behind the audience. As the play opened, the entire cast emerged from several entrances to stand within a space framed by the fences to recite first Prince Escalus's concluding lines, thus announcing the play's tragic end, and then the prologue. In the middle of this space stood a large table that served initially, and at the play's end, as a tomb; later it served as Friar Lawrence's desk and then as Juliet's bed. Often, this table was a central fulcrum around which the angry young men of the rival families cavorted, especially Darragh Kennan in a brilliantly frenetic rendition of Mercutio's Queen Mab speech.

Figure 2. Darragh Kennan and Ryan Higgins in *Romeo + Juliet*. Photo credit: Truman Buffett.

The fences signified the family feud that divides Romeo and Juliet and the symbolism was often complex. In 2.2, for example, Romeo climbed precariously to the top of a fence that was placed in front of the stairwell from which Juliet spoke, thus surmounting a barrier to their love. At the

end, however, the fences surrounded three sides of the tomb on which the doomed lovers lay secure in a loving embrace, and were, ironically perhaps, "shielded" by the steel fences from any more harm. These interesting images aside, less convincing was the moving of these same fences around the stage after every scene, often into shapes radically different from the immediately preceding one, a decision that interrupted the rhythm of the play so extensively that continuity between scenes was hampered. Indeed, these constant, jarring movements became quite irritating. During the violent sword fight that eventually leads to Mercutio's death, for instance, the fighters climbed onto the bases of the fences and whirled them frantically around the stage, creating a dizzy, chaotic scene. When Romeo and Juliet parted in 3.5, Juliet climbed a fence in her bare feet, a remarkable athletic accomplishment that drew audience attention away from her tender parting words. While the prologue speaks of a "two hours' traffic," these constant movements extended the play well into three hours, excluding the intermission, thus mocking the prologue and diminishing the fluid intensity of the lovers' tragic story. Langs' and Mercier's obtrusive set left little to spectators' imaginations.

The second significant feature of the production was Langs' inclusion of two deaf actors—Howie Seago as Friar Lawrence and Joshua Castille as Romeo—and his approach of integrating oral and gestural languages into the play. Langs' casting of deaf actors in crucial roles reprised the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's (OSF's) earlier employment of deaf actors, thus smashing the "sound barrier" that had hitherto kept them off elite Shakespearean stages. The use of deaf actors exemplifies what Marvin Carlson terms a theatrical heteroglossia that "presents simultaneously on the stage different languages, [and] involves both languages that are spoken and others that are not" (Carlson 180). Seago already had experience of "sound barrier" demolition, since he played both the Ghost in Hamlet and Tubal in *The Merchant of Venice* at OSF in 2010 (Shurgot, "Review"; Shurgot, "Breaking"). Langs' staging of American Sign Language (ASL) was, however, considerably different from OSF's, and this major difference raises significant questions about the theatrical effectiveness of this director's version of heteroglossia. Whereas in the Ghost's appearance before Hamlet and in Shylock's meeting with Tubal, Hamlet and Tubal (i.e., just one other actor) had spoken Seago's signed ASL, during Romeo's early scenes, several actors stood around the perimeter of the stage and spoke his signed words. While this approach meant that other actors, especially Darragh Kennan and Reginald Jackson, had memorized not only their own lines but also many of Romeo's, one was never sure which of the surrounding five or six "speaking voices" was meant to be Romeo's.

Theatregoers experience actors by their voices: the actual sound, tone, rhythm, and the articulation of the character's words, whether prose or, especially, poetry. The embodied character becomes the spoken voice of the actor playing the character, as well as the

accumulation of that actor's physical movements around the stage. Langs' staging thus "de-centered" Castille's gestural ASL because spectators' hearing, if not their sight, was drawn to the speaking actors around the perimeter of the stage, rather than to Romeo standing or moving stage-center. While Langs' decision to cast a deaf actor in a title role is commendable, and ought to advance opportunities for deaf actors in future Shakespearean roles, his staging of many of Romeo's scenes was baffling because it unnecessarily complicated spectators' efforts to coordinate his gestural ASL with its many audible versions. Were we applauding Castille's physical expressions of ASL, very difficult for non-ASL "speakers" to follow, or the audio gymnastics of several other actors around the stage speaking coordinated portions of his poetry? Perhaps both; fair enough. But in too many scenes Romeo's ASL was not the center of attention in ways that could have focused spectators' appreciation of Castille's skill as an actor "speaking" Shakespeare's verse with his body.

Figure 3. Howie Seago and Joshua M. Castille in *Romeo + Juliet*. Photo credit: Truman Buffett.

Conversely, in Romeo's 3.3 meeting with Friar Lawrence after having learned of his banishment, Castille gestured wildly and flung his body madly around the stage, using the violence of his movements as a visible substitute for expressing his anger and disbelief. Here, a single actor followed Castille about the stage announcing his signed wailing and, remarkably, keeping pace with Castille's hysterical physical movements. This approach allowed one to sense

more clearly the "sound" of Romeo's "singular," infuriated ASL voice, while more closely following director Bill Rauch's staging at OSF of the Ghost and Tubal nearly a decade before. In Langs'2019 production, a single other actor offstage also articulated Seago's words as Friar Lawrence, and the scene was so carefully blocked that even Romeo's wild gestures were perfectly "articulated" for hearing spectators. These different approaches suggest that a successful theatrical heteroglossia involving deaf actors demands careful blocking and limited use of "accompanying voices," thus allowing spectators to focus on the talent that these same actors bring to the Shakespearean stage.

These reservations aside, Gabriella O'Fallon as Juliet and Castille as Romeo, both making their ACT debut, are talented actors who worked together very well. From their first sight of each other at Capulet's ball when they froze in place, to their lovely, amorous time together in her bed, to their final, touching moments lying together on the tomb, these actors exhibited the youthful, erotic passion of which they speak. For such a slightly built actor, O'Fallon's voice is surprisingly strong and her intonation varied. In her long soliloquy, "Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds" (3.2.1-31), she certainly approached (though not quite equaled) the sexual energy of Mercutio's Queen Mab speech. Conversely, Castille's "voice" in his scenes with Juliet was solely gestural and yet likewise orally varied. Further, because in the round space Castille's back was always turned to some spectators, they could judge his performance primarily by the assumed coordination of his many signing gestures, while his varied spoken words came from elsewhere around the stage. When combined with the obtrusive presence of the three chain-link fences through which spectators in different parts of the round theatre often viewed the stage, Langs' staging unnecessarily complicated spectators' reactions to Castille's performance. These difficulties aside, however, Langs had clearly worked very hard to integrate the two "languages" of his main characters, and when we could see both of their faces and watch their bodies move in relation to each other, their mutual desire and joy in each other's physical presence was communicated convincingly.

A possible shortfall for such "integration" of languages is that theatre reviewers are accustomed to judging actors' overall performances primarily on their vocal command of Shakespeare's verse. Since ASL is a language of gesture and movement, critiquing a staging such as Langs' must recognize how well actors employ ASL to express Shakespeare's words as well as how well a director integrates both spoken and gestural languages. Perhaps Langs chose to cast deaf actors, especially in a lead role, in *Romeo and Juliet* because he presumed that the play's popularity would facilitate a unified spectator experience for his multi-voiced heteroglossia, an integration of oral and gestural languages that involved simultaneously so many of his cast members. Unfortunately, such was often not the case, not least because focusing on Romeo as a

singular character became increasingly difficult when his "voice" came from so many different parts of the circular stage, while his facial gestures were often obscured. This observation is intended not to suggest that deaf actors should be cast only in minor, two-person scenes, and never in theatre-in-the-round. Romeo is, after all, a lead role, and Allen Theatre is a marvellously versatile space. Rather, deaf actors' complex articulation of ASL, which Leonard Siger terms "a language of considerable power and beauty, better suited to the expression of emotion, in some respects, than any spoken language" (Siger 13),deserves to be communicated to hearing spectators as clearly as possible, and in blocking that allows hand movements and facial gestures to be seen simultaneously as often and by as many spectators as possible.

While O'Fallon's and Castille's vocal and gestural performances dominated the production, other principal character roles (mostly played by veteran Seattle actors) were equally convincing and often brilliant. Kennan as Mercutio darted around the stage with turbulent energy, his precise blending of words and gestures, especially in his bravado Queen Mab performance, astonishing to behold. Amy Thone as the Nurse was wonderfully ebullient; she created an impatient screech and moved with the slightly bent walk of an older woman. Hilariously exasperated with Mercutio and his lascivious cohorts, Thone's Nurse displayed an equivalent tenderness with Juliet, especially in an improvised lesson in ASL while sitting on her bed. Thone also seemed genuinely terrified at finding Juliet supposedly dead in 4.5. As Capulet, Reginald Jackson—a tall, powerfully-built actor with a strong baritone voice—thundered his fury and gestured so wildly in 3.5 that Lady Capulet, the Nurse, and Juliet cringed near Juliet's bed during his tirade. Capulet's exit up a stairway, yelling "Trust to't, bethink you, I'll not be forsworn" (195), was so loud that Lady Capulet (Lindsay W. Evans) turned her back on Juliet as she uttered, "Is there no pity sitting in the clouds" (196), a gesture seemingly oblivious of her only child's suffering. Evans' Lady Capulet then walked partway up the same exit before turning and essentially abandoning her daughter, clearly out of a deep fear of her husband's volatility: "Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word. / Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee" (202-203).

Langs delayed the final scene in the churchyard while actors arranged the three fences around the tomb and strung tiny blue lights on them. Pretty, but again the story stopped unnecessarily for stage business. On the darkened stage, Paris (Chad Sommerville, who appeared as a cop earlier in the play) entered with a gun. Romeo overpowered him, stabbed him, then laid him tenderly in the tomb. Romeo climbed upon Juliet's bier and, weeping audibly, tenderly stroked her cheeks as he gently gestured in ASL the parting words that Kennan, playing Montague, spoke very gently from the open end of the three-sided tomb. As Romeo died, lying beside Juliet and embracing her, both silent within the ironically secure tomb, the entire theatre was hushed. Now, no words would suffice. After Juliet awoke and realized that Romeo was dead, she

gestured in ASL to heaven: "Take him and cut him out in little stars" (3.2.22). That was easily the most tender moment in the entire play! So simple, yet so beautiful. The Nurse had taught her well.

References

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Links

A Contemporary Theatre. https://acttheatre.org.

Production Details

General

Title	*Romeo and Juliet*
Year	2019
Theatre Company	A Contemporary Theatre (Seattle)
Date	2019-03-12

Cast

Romeo	Joshua M. Castille
Juliet	Gabriella O' Fallon
Friar Lawrence	Howie Seago
Lady Capulet & Friar John	Lindsay W. Evans
Nurse & Prince	Amy Thone
Mercutio	Darragh Kennan
Lord Capulet	Reginald Andre Jackson
Tybalt	Ryan Higgins
Sampson, Peter, & Others	Mikey Flores
Paris, Abram, & Others	Chad Sommerville
Gregory & Others	Matthew Thomas Moore

Creatives

Director	John Langs
Scenic Designer	Skip Mercier
Costume Designer	Pete Rush
Lighting Designer	Robert Aguilar
Sound Designer	Robertson Witmer
Dramaturg	Maggie Rogers
Fight Director	Geoffrey Alm
Stage Manager	Ruth Eitemiller
ASL Translator	Ellie Savidge