Bill Buckhurst

What we tried to do, and certainly what I tried to do when I first read it again knowing that I was going to be directing it, was to try and think of it as a new piece of writing as best you can. Myself and the designer Ben Stones spoke at great length about these sort of conundrums and how we were going to present the world of Verona etc, You want to make it understandable, you want to make it dynamic, you want it to pack an emotional punch, all those things, which actually any audience member would want. It’s not London, it’s not, you know, it’s not about young people in London in 2009. I didn’t want to be sort of cramming in today’s world into this situation. And yet there are many factors in the play, many themes, many issues, which, you know, resonate today very strongly and make that 400-year gap since it was written very, very small indeed. What we eventually came up with was the idea of creating a world which Ben has coined a phrase of ‘period urban’, which sort of embraces elements of today’s culture with elements of Elizabethan culture as well. This is quite interesting in several ways I think because first of all Shakespeare’s world of Verona isn’t strictly speaking absolutely exactly Verona as it was. There’s no guarantee that Shakespeare ever went to Verona. I like the idea that he probably didn’t but, you know, hung out in pubs and that and spoke to people who had been there. And so he’s got this sort of information of what this place is like, perhaps, you know, but he also puts in an awful lot of culture references of Britain at the end of the sixteenth century. So it’s kind of a weird mixture, the world he creates.

The scene that immediately jumps out for me as the pivotal point in the play and the proceedings is Act Three, Scene One, the death of Mercutio followed by the death of Tybalt. What is so wonderful about this play, which we discovered in rehearsal, is its incredible mix of genres and style that Shakespeare creates.

Up until Act Three, Scene One, OK, yeah there’s a fight at the very beginning, nobody dies but there is a fight, so you’ve got a bit of action there, a bit of drama, followed immediately by a bit of a, actually quite a comic scene, we’ve been discovering, the Romeo and Benvolio scene, followed by the romance, you know, the love story blossoming, the balcony scene, which again has got lovely comic elements. You’ve got characters like the nurse who bring a lot of comedy on, the servants who, you know, we’ve still retained, some of it has gone. But you’ve got a real mix of style, and it’s quite light, actually, the ball scene. Even though there’s the argument with Tybalt and Capulet, actually it’s fun, it’s joyous, it’s about celebration. Then suddenly in Act Three, Scene One everything changes. This character Mercutio, who’s built up like a, you know, like a really important, major player, he comes on, he’s obviously feeling a bit feisty that day, and Benvolio predicts that there could be trouble in the air.

From the play (Act 3 scene 1)

I pray thee, good Mercutio, let's retire.
The day is hot, the Capulets abroad,
And, if we meet we shall not ‘scape a brawl,
For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring

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And kind of out of nowhere, and certainly we’ve discovered in the running of the scene which goes a real pace, he’s killed, and in the most extraordinary way. It’s like it’s almost like you couldn’t predict that this would happen. And it’s like, you know, and the way he reacts, oh no it’s just a scratch, it’s nothing, and then as he discovers how bad it is suddenly he’s dead and Benvolio comes out. And when Benvolio comes out and says, Oh Romeo, Romeo, brave Mercutio is dead, an incredible line, actually, it’s full of long vowel sounds. It starts with an ‘Oh’. Actors notoriously we are afraid of anything that is Oh or Ah, and actually what Ben who is playing Benvolio is doing brilliantly is really using those sounds to fill the space. And that line is kind of the pivotal line, I think, in the whole play. From that moment, out of nowhere, one of the main players in this play is dead and nothing else will be the same after that at all.

And that’s one of the most thrilling elements of the play, I think, that Shakespeare has the nerve to get rid of one of his important players early on creating a sense of instability and unpredictability which, you know, I think for audiences, I think even the audiences who are watching at the moment are feeling that even though they know the play. And 400 years ago that must have been really exciting. I think, you know, in terms of story telling, in purely sort of technical terms, what I’ve discovered in the rehearsal period is the sort of escalation. The story sort of unfolds, really topples over from that point. And let’s not forget, I mean the whole play takes place over sort of, you know, barely four days. Things happen at a real rate of knots and we’ve been really working on that in terms of the overlapping of scenes that actually, you know, from that point in Act Three, Scene One, this story develops a real galloping pace.

I think that time is a big key player, most definitely, in the play. I mean Shakespeare is notoriously kind of loose with his timescales. I mean, in terms of like how much time has passed between one scene and the next is very loose, you know, it could be an afternoon, it could be five minutes, he’s quite loose with that. But I think the point being, I think the point he is making all the way along is the fact that these young people are reacting in moments and living in the moment and not thinking about the consequences of their actions some of the time. And in fact what we’ve kind of discovered is that when a character like Romeo leaves his fate with the stars, he’s constantly going, you know, you be my guide, he believes in being in a larger power in himself, which is guiding him on life’s journey. And then when he’s told the news of Juliet’s death he says, I defy you, stars! Another pivotal point in the play where he suddenly kind of comes of age and takes responsibility for his own actions. And what does he do? He goes and kills himself.

Without wanting to get too sort of, you know, without wanting to intellectualise it too much, but I do think of, you know, it’s a classic coming of age story, really. And it’s a sort of existentialist story.

He begins the play allowing things to happen without thinking about them, believing that something, a bigger power than himself is controlling himby the end, he’s realised that actually only he can guide his life, actually.

From the play (Act 5 Scene 1)

Come, cordial and not poison, go with me
To Juliet's grave; for there must I use thee.

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I think that actually she kind of has a maturity that Romeo kind of lacks. I mean, I’m just thinking about the balcony scene and when she says, you know, she kind of controls the events in a way that he doesn’t. He allows himself to get carried away with his feelings, you know, if you look at his language in the balcony scene, he uses huge imagery. I mean, he’s a king of using big images to describe his feelings, metaphors and similes, even when he’s talking about Rosaline. But when he’s in the garden in the orchard and he looks up at the balcony, the language he uses, the moon, the sun, the stars. I mean, he uses the biggest kind of images he can think of to describe how he’s feeling. Which is very lovely and has been actually quite an interesting thing to explore in rehearsals because, you know, the temptation with that kind of language is possibly to get all sort of flowery with it. But that’s actually the danger and the pit fall you don’t want to fall into and the great thing that James brings to the character is a real sort of solid quality and a real truth behind those words. So he’s using this kind of large, rather sort of metaphorical sort of language, and Juliet’s quite practical really. I mean, she does say, You are the god of my idolatry and, you know, which is a massive image to think about, but she’s really practical about, if you really love me, let’s get married tomorrow, basically. She takes control in a way that Romeo seems unable to, and whether that says something about her understanding of life and the way that one is responsible for one’s actions, I’m not sure.