

# *Roméo et Juliette: de la Haine à l'Amour* A Controversial Adaptation

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## Abstract

This essay examines the adaptation strategies adopted in Gérard Presgurvic's critically controversial *Roméo et Juliette: de la Haine à l'Amour* (2001). It investigates the factors which brought about the controversial response in France in 2001, analyzing the reception of the show from three perspectives: the audience, the critics, and the subsequent adaptors of the work. The essay also discusses the reasons for the negative reaction to its adaptation in 2002 in England, the country where Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was staged for the first time.

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The story of Romeo and Juliet has been adapted throughout the centuries in a wide range of forms and media, from symphonies and movies to manga and puppet shows. We may presume that an author who adapts a play such as *Romeo and Juliet* has a clear marketing strategy and may aim at taking advantage of the play's "almost mythical status" (Minutella 2013, 16), while participating in "the aura of 'greatness' associated with Shakespearean creation" (Fischlin and Fortier 2000, 11). Nevertheless, even though Shakespeare's works are at the center of Western culture "neither the production nor reception conditions for these plays are predictable" (Bennett 1997, 95). Thus, the adaptation of a Shakespeare play does not guarantee either a box office success or critical praise. This is precisely the case for one of the most critically controversial adaptations of the tragedy, *Roméo et Juliette: de la Haine à l'Amour* (2001),<sup>1</sup> a French *comédie musicale* by Gérard Presgurvic. Despite mixed critical reviews, this musical turned out to be a commercial success, attracting over two million people and selling six million CDs and DVDs in France alone.

The show, moreover, has had further adaptations all over the world. It has been translated into numerous languages, including Italian, English, German, Spanish, Romanian, Hungarian, Russian, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and in each instance, refashioned according to the taste of the target culture. Since 2002 these adaptations have been well received in almost all the foreign countries

where they were presented, with more than five million spectators: one of the most recent versions, the Italian *Romeo e Giulietta: Ama e Cambia il Mondo* (2013),<sup>2</sup> directed by Giuliano Peparini, with lyrics by Vincenzo Incenzo, has been widely acclaimed in the very country where the two lovers' story is set. On the other hand, one of the first adaptations, produced in 2002 in Shakespeare's home country, met with a box office and critical Waterloo, turning out to be an unexpected, and colossal, failure. Amy Scott-Douglass dubbed it "a rock opera that may well be the worst musical adaptation of Shakespeare ever written" (Scott-Douglass 2007, 795).

In what follows, I will examine the adaptation strategies adopted in Presgurvic's production and investigate the factors which brought about the controversial response in France in 2001. I will analyze the reception of the show from three perspectives: the audience, the critics, and the subsequent adaptors of the work. I will also discuss the reasons for the negative reaction to its adaptation in 2002 in England, the country where Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was staged for the first time.

### France And The Musical Tradition

Since the 1980s, Gérard Presgurvic (b. 1953) has enjoyed an influential career in France as a composer of movie scores and a songwriter. He has also co-written several successful albums by Patrick Bruel. What gave him international fame, however, is his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Roméo et Juliette: de la Haine à L'Amour* (2001). The show, which premiered on 19 January 2001 at the Palais de Congrès in Paris, has been variously defined as a *comédie musicale*, *spectacle musical*, a musical, a rock-opera, and an *opera popolare*,<sup>3</sup> which highlights the difficulty in labeling it. Its author seems to prefer the term *comédie musicale* in a bid to mark the French identity of his creation and distance it from the tradition of musicals.

Actually, behind Presgurvic's name, there is a team of talented artists with well-established careers in France: the internationally known choreographer Redha (né Redha Kamel Benteifour); the lighting designer Antonio de Carvalho; the costume designer Dominique Borg; the sound designers Thierry Rogen and Philippe Parmentier; and the stage designer Petrika Ionesco. The show sits in the tradition of the *comédie musicale à la française*, started by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg (Dupuis and Labarre 2013, 4), who established a uniquely French aesthetic for the genre. They both studied musicals in London and New York, and it was actually the attendance of a performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in New York in 1972 that motivated Boublil "to create something along the same lines for French consumption" (McLamore 2018, 439). This experience originated *La Révolution Française* (1973) and the original concept for the world's most popular musical, *Les Misérables* (1980 Paris; 1985 London; 1987 New York). After a period of neglect, a

new wave of interest hit Paris, thanks to the success stories of Luc Plamondon's *Starmania* (1979), a "cult musical hit" (Sebesta and MacDonald 2017, 351), and *Notre Dame de Paris* (1998), which revitalized French musical theater, paving the way to the birth of a string of musicals in France: *Les Mille et une Vies d'Ali Baba* (2000), *Roméo et Juliette* (2001) and *1789: Les Amants de la Bastille* (2012), to mention just a few.

As Isabelle Danto (2010, 185) observes, in French the expression *comédie musicale* may be misleading. Beside the so-called *théâtre musical*, the term may refer to two theatrical forms which are quite distant in terms of economic logic and artistic needs. On the one hand, there are the well-known American tradition of Broadway musicals like Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957) or British productions like Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1976), which develop plot line through songs. On the other hand, there are works like Presgurvic's *Roméo et Juliette*, in which "the scores and thus the dramaturgy do not incorporate song and scene cohesively, but idiosyncratically as in MTV and pop concerts" (Do Rozario 2004, 127). Detractors of the French-style musical belittle it as "une succession de tubes en adoptant les méthodes de l'industrie musicale internationale pour se lancer par le disque" (a succession of tunes using the strategies of the international musical industry to launch the show through the album) (Danto 2010, 185).<sup>4</sup>

Presgurvic started promoting his musical a year before the actual production, with a press conference on St. Valentine's Day in 2000. His articulated promotional strategies, peculiar to the genre of the *comédie musicale à la française* (Dupuis and Labarre 2013, 5), were slated by critics, but the author defended his approach claiming that "c'est la stratégie habituelle d'un Souchon [French singer-songwriter] ou d'un Goldman [French singer-songwriter] qui sortent un disque entre six mois et un an avant de faire une scène. La différence, c'est que nous, on n'était pas connus!" (This is the usual strategy of Souchon or Goldman, whose albums are released out between six months and a year before the live performance. The difference is that we were not famous!) (Quinson 2001).

As a matter of fact the show was initially promoted through the recording industry: some songs such as "Le Rois du Monde" (Kings of the World) or the opening song "Vérone" became chart hits accompanied by appealing music videos. Moreover, *Roméo et Juliette* was promoted on major French TV networks; after the cast appeared on TF 1, 60,000 people rushed to get a ticket for the show (Medioni 2000). These calculated media strategies made the music and its protagonists incredibly popular long before the show opened, thus creating high expectations for both audience and critics.

## A Schizophrenic Reception

In an interview given one month after the première, Presgurvic evaluated the show's reception. While paying no heed to the mostly hostile and unsympathetic reactions of the critics, who noted that "c'est tellement outrancier que ça en perd tout crédit" (it is so outrageous that it has no credibility) (Quinson 2001), he was thrilled by the enthusiasm of the spectators who crowded the theater: "certains ont même déjà vu le spectacle plusieurs fois en un mois!" (some have already seen the show many times in a month!) (Quinson 2001). Borrowing Una Chaundhuri's definition of the reception of Peter Schaffer's *Equus* (1973), we may define the contemporary response to Presgurvic's work as "schizophrenic" (Chaundhuri 1984, 293), seeing that the show was despised by critics but appreciated by audiences. It received severe criticism, like Baptiste Delval's comment "rien à voir ici, si ce n'est médiocrité et bêtise" (nothing worth seeing here, apart from mediocrity and stupidity) (Delval 2010) but also lavish praise from enthusiast spectators: "Quel magnifique spectacle : je suis allée le voir au palais des Congrès lors de sa sortie. MAGNIFIQUE..." (What a wonderful show: I went to see it at Palais des Congrès as soon as the show opened. WONDERFUL...).<sup>5</sup>

The gap between box office sales and critical reception can be explained by analyzing the author's adaptation strategies, some of which aroused much critical discontent and disappointment. While a few reviewers (mainly internet critics and bloggers) welcomed Presgurvic's rendition positively, most critics savagely disparaged it, since it was not "a wholesale rethinking of the original" (Sanders 2006, 28): it did not make a social comment on the contemporary situation, nor did it shed new light on the play's meaning, as previous successful adaptations in different media had done. Unexpectedly, there was no re-actualization of the story: the author did not update it or reset it somewhere else as is the case for *West Side Story* (musical 1957, film 1961), set in the New York slums, or Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996), set in North America in the 1990s.

Critics wondered why "s'attaquer à un chef-d'oeuvre de la littérature, si on n'en fait pas une lecture nouvelle et pertinente pour ses contemporains" (to adapt a literary masterpiece without providing a new interpretation which is more relevant for a contemporary audience) (Boulanger 2002); Paul Taylor asked whether Presgurvic was just too lazy "to rethink the story in modern terms?" (Taylor, 2002). What these critics did not realize, I believe, is that Presgurvic succeeded in creating a modern production that enhances the sense of contemporaneity and speaks to young audiences without altering the historical and cultural setting of the original text. According to Presgurvic, his work is modern but faithful to what he sees as the core of the Shakespearean tragedy: "J'ai respecté pratiquement toute l'intrigue mais c'est vrai que j'ai 'actualisé' certains personnages

pour les rendre plus contemporains" (I respected almost the whole plot but it is true that I have 'updated' some characters in order to make them more contemporary) (Quinson 2001). Presgurvic's adaptation strategy was an attempt to exploit the canonical status of the play, showing a sort of reverential approach without seeking a radical transformation to the narrative.

The show opens with an overture, as the director defined it, a sort of postmodern prologue performed by Presgurvic himself, who reminds his audience of the predictability of the story they are going to see: "Toutes les histoires, commencent pareil, rien de nouveau sous la lune, voici cette de Roméo e de Juliette" (all stories begin the same, nothing new under the moon, here follows the one of Romeo and Juliet): (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) In this sense Presgurvic's claim of fidelity seems to imply a lack of invention and originality. Nevertheless, as Susan Bassnett argues, "faithfulness is an impossible concept and can only exist if the interpretative processes are not undertaken at all" (Bassnett 1985, 93). As will emerge, the authorial identity of Presgurvic and his team is visible at all levels: textual, musical, performative, visual, and technical.

### A Postmodern Show

"'Shakespeare' and the Shakespearean canon," as Sanders reminds us, "do not come to us — as spectators, performers, readers, critics, or listeners — free of the subsequent cultural heritage they have fostered and enjoyed" (Sanders 2007, 9). *Roméo et Juliette* is in actual fact skillfully built on several previous adaptations of the play, thus enhancing "a dialogic concept of appropriation" (Desmet 2014, 41). What Graham Allen claims about postmodern architecture can be applied to this production: "postmodern architects practice what we can style an intertextual architecture which appropriates styles from different eras and combines them in ways which attempt to reflect the historically and socially plural contexts within which their buildings now have to exist" (Allen 2000, 180). Any new adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in any medium automatically evokes the most celebrated renditions of the past, such as *West Side Story* in the musical field, and Zeffirelli's and Luhrmann's movie versions. Presgurvic is well aware of the cultural impact of these works: his adaptation performs in dialogue with them and is enriched by these connections, standing somewhere in between a traditional Romeo and Juliet portrayed in Zeffirelli's movie version and visions emerging in *West Side Story* and in Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet*, which are "anything but 'Strictly Shakespeare'" (Lehmann 2007, 124).

Like Zeffirelli's movie, Presgurvic's remake "represents a happy conjunction of play, medium, cast, audience, and cultural moment" (Hapgood 1997, 92). It is the atmosphere of Zeffirelli's Verona that Presgurvic tried to recreate on stage: the scenery, albeit modern, seems to recall the

architecture of a Medieval/Renaissance Verona; Juliet's balcony, for instance, closely resembles the one in the film, covered in ivy. In a way he also reinterpreted the iconography of the movie, presenting similar items of clothing (but made in different fabrics) and designing costumes in shades of blue for the Montagues and in shades of red for the Capulets; it was Zeffirelli's iconic re-vision that made these two colors distinctive of the two families for the adaptations to come.

Also, the portrayal of Mercutio is rather similar to that in Zeffirelli's film. In *Roméo et Juliette* Mercutio looks somewhat effeminate, in particular in the scene at the Capulets' party when he wears a sort of necklace analogous to Lady Montague's jewel. This depiction of Mercutio is less extreme than in *Romeo+Juliet*, where he is dressed as a drag queen, or in the Italian adaptation of Presgurvic's musical, in which a dying Mercutio kisses Romeo on the lips. Yet it foregrounds a profound and hidden relationship between the character and Romeo, as in the Italian movie, in which "Mercutio's looks at Romeo are slow and deliberate, suggesting the latter has betrayed a long-standing relationship. There is a strong implication here of a special relationship between Romeo and Mercutio now thwarted as a result of Romeo's new-found love" (Cartmell 2000, 43-44).

Presgurvic aims at the same commercial success of his show among the younger generations, just as Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* "was a hit with the newly emergent youth market in the 1960s" (Woods 2013, 149), despite the mixed reviews. He also adopts the same strategy, by casting Damien Sargue (18 years old) and Cécilia Cara (16) in a bid to appeal to younger audiences and families, for whom the production was marketed. The impact of this movie on Presgurvic's show is so evident that Garcia Landa claimed that *Roméo et Juliette* "seems inspired by Franco Zeffirelli's film rather than by Shakespeare's play" (2005, 186).

The unavoidable point of reference for any musical adaptation is *West Side Story*, which "carved itself a place in western culture, as almost no other musical" (Wells 2011, 2). Bernstein's masterpiece is not taken as a model for the music, since Presgurvic's score is essentially catchy pop-rock and far from the articulated music of *West Side Story*, which ranges from contemporary jazz to Latin music (like the mambo) to operatic-style songs. Nonetheless, the choreographer, Redha, proudly admitted in the program that he wanted to create a "*West Side Story* du troisième millénaire" (A *West Side Story* for the third millennium) (Smart 2000). As Do Rozario notes, Redha's choreography "incorporates many forms of dance to create a style unique to the contemporary performance of the songs that enunciate Vêrone" (2004, 135).

As in *West Side Story*, dance performs a vital role in articulating the themes of division and strife that are core to the original text. Dance also plays a crucial part in expressing the characters' feelings, and it contributes to telling the story through one of the different languages or codes used in the show. As Hutchings argues, dance is suited to an audience long accustomed to the

pace and aesthetics of music videos or familiar with Baz Luhrmann's hit movie version of the play, which is probably the most iconic re-vision of the past few decades (2007, 465). Presgurvic himself, a composer of film scores, revealed that one of his main inspirations came from movies like Luhrmann's hit. So he cut his musical like a movie, exploiting several technical devices such as "freezes, spot lights, split stages, slow motion, and sliding backdrops to transfer editorial techniques to live performance" (Do Rozario 2004, 137).

### Controversial Directorial Adaptation Strategies

Presgurvic's modernization works on multiple levels: it affected not only the characters, but also the storyline and the language. Some scenes were deliberately added to provide some of his characters with more psychological depth. More space is granted to adult characters such as Romeo's mother and Juliet's parents, who are given several songs. Lady Capulet, for instance, standing as spokeswoman of all the female characters on stage, complains about women's common destiny: "Les femmes, n'ont pas le choix, les hommes ont tous les droits" (Women have no choice, men have all rights). Romeo's father is not even mentioned. Among the younger characters, the most significant change concerns Tybalt, who is much more aggressive and violent, due to the atmosphere full of hate he has grown up in (he defines himself as "le fils de la haine," the son of hatred); he also develops an unnatural passion for his cousin Juliet. In fact, it is jealousy which stirs in him the desire to kill Romeo, as he explains in the song "C'est le Jour" ("It is the Day"). (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Cousin, cousine, la blague est fine  
Je l'ai vue grandir je la vois partir avec lui.  
Comment peut-elle aimer le fils des Montaigu?  
C'est le mariage raté du vice et de la vertu...  
Je vais le tuer, non le blesser  
Comme elle me blesse.  
Juliette, je vais lui faire payer ta faiblesse.

(Cousin, cousin, the game is up.  
I have seen her grow, I see her leaving with him.  
How can she love the son of a Montague?  
It is a marriage ruined by vice and virtue....  
I am going to kill him, not hurt him,  
As she hurts me.

Juliet, I am going to make him pay for your weakness)

Tybalt's passion is also visible during the scene at the party in which Juliet seems to be courted by Paris and Tybalt and only Romeo's arrival refocuses the story.

Despite the claim of 'fidelity,' Presgurvic adds three characters to the original *dramatis personae*, each representing a form of communication: le Poète (the poet-poetical language), la Muette (the mute-sign language) and la Mort (Death, dance). The poet is the only one who delivers a speech, albeit incongruous and purposeless. Prior to the balcony scene, Juliet opens her heart to the poet, declaring her love for Romeo and asking him: "Toi qui peux faire parler la terre, toi qui connais si bien les mots. Dis-moi poète à quoi ça sert. Un jour de plus sans Roméo?" (You that can make the earth speak, you that know words so well, tell me, poet, what is the point in staying another day without Romeo?). Yet the character of the poet does not perform a proper function, apart from embodying the concept of poetry as a form of expression, and he does not contribute to the development of the action. He has, therefore, been defined by some audience members as a "pointless" and "unnecessary character."<sup>6</sup> (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

The dumb character, a faithful servant of the Capulets, employs sign language to communicate and translate the song lyrics. Unlike the poet, she met with positive response from the audience members:

One of the things I loved about the original production of the musical was the inclusion of La Muette. I always loved her character and the interactions she shared with the others, especially the Nurse and Juliette. I'm always disappointed that she's never included in any of the other productions, even though I understand their reasoning for it.<sup>7</sup>

Unsurprisingly, neither of these characters have been included in the subsequent adaptations of the production, which strongly suggests that they did not work satisfactorily. On the other hand, Death is by far the most incisive additional character, even if she does not pronounce a single word. Death is a female dancer in white who dances alongside Romeo and other characters, as a symbol of their inescapable fate. Her white costume is suggestive of the symbolic association of the color with death in Asian countries. Moreover, from a visual perspective, white is much more noticeable and eye-catching than black. The presence of this character, conceived by Redha, is very evocative, as Do Rozario remarks: "The characters do not 'see' her, but respond to, and describe her 'cold breath' with shivers and starts" (Do Rozario 2004, 125). Her role is intriguing in the scene of Romeo and Juliet's wedding when, standing on the altar next to the unaware lovers,



she reminds the audience of the Eros – Thanatos dichotomy, the twin themes of love and death which are inexorably intertwined in the original story.

The character's presence affects the conclusion of the play, modifying the way the protagonists die, while evoking Medieval morality plays. The two lovers from Verona are in a sense deprived of their free will and turned into puppets: even though they are both determined to die, Death's mode of intervention is crucial: she kills Romeo with a kiss and then passes Romeo's dagger to Juliet for her to kill herself. We may note the consequences of this alteration on our understanding of the psychology of the young couple: Death may be seen as an actualization of the lovers' thoughts, providing them with a proper way to die; or as the epitome of the tragic universe of Romeo and Juliet in which they are marionettes in the hands of an Aeschylean blind fate. Audience response to the character was so positive that she has been included in several adaptations in Japan, Russia, the Netherlands, Mexico, Korea, and Taiwan, and has been performed by both male and female dancers.

Even though Presgurvic did not modify the storyline radically, the alterations he made, as in the case of the death of the lovers, deeply affected the dynamics of the story and sometimes questioned its internal coherence. Several characters are aware of Romeo and Juliet's love and of their marriage: not only the nurse and Friar Lawrence, but also Mercutio, Benvolio, Romeo's mother and some Montagues and Capulets. Romeo's friends openly reproach him for his love affair with Juliet in the song "On Dit dans la Rue" ("They Say on the Street"). The characters' awareness of the protagonists' relationship influences the narrative in such a radical and powerful way that the more 'traditional' adaptations, like the Italian one, omit this song:

Benvolio: On dit dans la rue, que Roméo est perdu,  
 Qu'il mérite bien la lame, de ceux qui vendent leurs âmes.  
 On dit dans la rue, que le fils des Montaigu  
 À trahi ses parents, déshonoré son rang....  
 Mais pourquoi la fille de ton ennemi?  
 Roméo: Je n'y peux rien, c'était écrit.

(Benvolio: They say on the street that Romeo is lost,  
 That he well deserves the blade of those who sell their soul.  
 They say on the street that the son of a Montague  
 Has betrayed his parents, dishonored his rank....  
 But why love your enemy's daughter?  
 Romeo: I can't help it. It was written.)

*(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*

Presgurvic's attempts at modernization of the text have been severely criticized: besides the lack of a live orchestra, critics have disparaged the lyrics as among the main weaknesses of the show (Quinson 2001). A look at the libretto reveals that only sporadic echoes of the lyrical Shakespearean text remain. A clear illustration of the poverty of the language is in Lady Capulet's song about Juliet's need to get married, in which the character expresses her regrets about her lost youth and her unemotional relationship with her husband. In "Tu Dois te Marier" ("You Must Get Married") she sings to her daughter:

Ton père ne m'aime plus,  
M'a-t-il seulement aimé  
quand on s'est connus.  
Il voulait se marier.  
L'amour lui est venu  
quand il m'a désiré,  
quand il m'a vu nue.

(Your father does not love me anymore.  
He loved me only  
When we met.  
He wanted to get married.  
Love came to him  
When he desired me  
When he saw me naked.)

This banal reflection on a woman's life describes simplistically her subordinate position as sexual object and adds nothing to the characterization of Lady Capulet. It might even be seen as depriving her of intensity. Critics also slated "Aimer," one of the curtain call songs, performed by Romeo and Juliet during the marriage scene:

Roméo: Aimer c'est ce qu'y a de plus beau,  
Aimer c'est monter si haut  
Et toucher les ailes des oiseaux,  
Aimer c'est ce qu'y a de plus beau.  
Juliet: Aimer c'est voler le temps,  
Aimer c'est rester vivant

Et brûler au coeur d'un volcan,  
 Aimer c'est ce qu'y a de plus grand.

(Romeo: To love, what is more beautiful  
 To love, it is to soar so high  
 And touch the wings of birds  
 To love what is more beautiful.  
 Juliet: To love is stealing time  
 To love means staying alive  
 And burn in the heart of a volcano  
 To love what is better.)

*(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)* The text is rather plain and trite but once again, Presgurvic maintained that the simplicity of the language was a deliberate choice: "J'ai volontairement voulu utiliser des mots et des images simples comme peuvent le faire des ados amoureux de 15 ans, l'âge de Roméo et Juliette" (I deliberately used simple words and images like any 15-year-old adolescent in love might do at the age of Romeo and Juliet) (Quinson 2001).

The other controversy lay in the absence of a live orchestra: the music is actually pre-recorded. Presgurvic explains: "Pour avoir le rendu sonore que je voulais, il aurait fallu un orchestre de cent musiciens" (I would have needed an orchestra with one hundred musicians, to achieve the sound I wanted) (Quinson 2001). Apart from this aspect, the quality of the music has not been questioned. Songs such as "Aimer," "Les Rois du Monde," and "Vérone," chart successes in France, have been chosen as curtain call songs in almost all the countries where the show has been adapted. Interestingly, not all the songs have been positively received. Four of them have been cut by the majority of the adaptors: "La Folie" ("Madness"), sung by Mercutio, "Pourquoi?" ("Why?") by Juliet, who complains about her arranged marriage with Count Paris (both excluded from the French version after some months), "Le Pouvoir" ("Power"), Prince Escalus's meditation on the privileges of being a leader, and "Le Poète" ("The Poet"). If the last song has been excluded like the eponymous character, the others might have been left out because they fail to contribute to the development of the action or to the deepening of the characters as individuals.

"Never Was A Musical Of More Woe, Than  
 This Of Juliet And Her Romeo" (Spencer 2002)

Unlike the usual procedure for British and American musicals, Presgurvic's show has been heavily reworked in every country where it has been adapted. Characters have been deleted or added; songs have been excluded, completely re-written, re-arranged, or put in a different order; and costumes and settings have been redesigned in a bid to speak directly to the specific audience. While almost all adaptors succeeded in creating a production suitable to the taste of the target culture, the British adaptors failed: they seem not to have taken into account the risks and implications of transposing *Romeo and Juliet* for a censorious London audience.

As Mel Atkey remarks, "few French musicals have been international successes" (Atkey 2012, 74) and Presgurvic's show was not among those that were. The British adaptation *Romeo and Juliet: The Musical*<sup>8</sup> opened on 4 November 2002 at Piccadilly Theatre in London, bringing with it high expectations in both audiences and critics, on the back of the positive response in France. David Freeman (director), Don Black (lyricist) and Redha (the choreographer of the French version) shaped the new production in an attempt to provoke positive expectations and responses in their audience, probably relying on the pre-stated assumption that any rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*, in Patrice Pavis's words, "is good because it is Shakespeare" (Pavis 1982, 103). Yet the reviews from both well-established critics and more liberal bloggers were ferocious, sometimes even offensive, and the show managed only a three-month run (Plamondon and Cocciantes's *Notre Dame de Paris*, by contrast, ran for seventeenth months at the Dominion Theatre in London). Undoubtedly, transposing Shakespeare for a British audience through the medium of music has several implications, not least the Bard's iconic cultural status "as normatively constitutive of British national identity as the drinking of afternoon tea" (Dobson 1992, 7). Moreover, this musical production was erroneously presented as a musical, but it is a "million miles from Broadway," to borrow the title of Atkey's monograph. As I have argued, this kind of show is very far from the Anglo-American tradition in terms of style, melodies, and lyrics. If a production is publicized as a musical, it tends to be interpreted in light of this in the receptive process. Marketed as a *West Side Story* for the third millennium, the production deceptively attracted audiences and critics looking for "an unforgettable experience, appealing to both head and heart" (Jackson 1997, 60), as Bernstein's musical had proved to be. In England, reviews reflected shared assumption of what a musical should be, or should not be, from the perspective of the demanding London theater community, who expected a show that would compare with great classics such as *Les Misérables*. "This is not a great musical and certainly does not compare with great classics such as *Les Misérables*," commented Alan Bird. "It is a show you may enjoy," he conceded, "but not one

you will fall in love with" (Bird 2002). — to Charles Spencer's more caustic "aficionados of all-time great bad musicals had better make haste" (Spencer 2002).

While criticism of Presgurvic's *Roméo et Juliette* concentrated on some specific aspects such as the libretto and the promotion strategies, in the case of the British adaptation nothing was spared: from lyrics and music to cast and scenery and, quite predictably, the author himself. It was quickly dismissed as "an unholy mess" (Taylor 2002), an "imbroglio" (Wolf 2002), a "flatulent conception" (Spencer 2002), or simply as "this rubbish" (Keatinge 2002). Contrasting views emerged on the production: if for Morley (2002) "David Freeman's production at the Piccadilly is a gala evening of high campery," Gardner (2002) acknowledged that "The evening is not all disastrous. David Freeman's production, with its movable scaffolding towers, brings fluidity to the crowd scenes and a touch of Versace to Renaissance Italy." Other aspects of the staging were questioned, starting with the cast — in particular Juliet, played by the inexperienced Lorna Want at her debut, and Tybalt, who attracted the spectators' attention for his close resemblance with David Beckham rather than for his talent: "if I were Juliet," wrote Loveridge (2002) in *Curtain Up*, "I'd have fallen for my cousin." The costumes, an odd and anachronistic mix of early modern and contemporary styles came under fire as did the set, especially in the scene of the Capulets' ball which according to Wolf, "incongruously evokes the orgy sequence from *Eyes Wide Shut*, masks and statuary and all" (Wolf 2002).

Ferocious criticism was aimed at the lyrics and the music, as seen in Nicholas De Jongh's humorous review of the "dire musical" for *The Evening Standard*: "Valiant performance, but a plague on both the music and lyrics" (De Jongh 2002). Drama critics pointed out that nothing remains of Shakespeare's language: "barely a word from the Bard is allowed to survive. Instead, it is as if one gave the text to a group of thirteen year olds and asked them to translate it, the mundane and banal replacing the poetic. Don Black's lyrics are commonplace and mercilessly lacking in wit" (Loveridge 2002). The critics' attacks were mainly aimed at "These are my rivers," which corresponds to the controversial "Aimer" of the French version:<sup>9</sup> (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Romeo: Your eyes, these are my rivers  
One glance can start a journey  
That takes me to wondrous places  
Your eyes, these are my rivers  
Juliet: Your arms, these are my mountains  
Hold me, and stars seem closer

No one can ever reach us  
 Your arms, these are my mountains  
 Romeo & Juliet: No need to ever wander  
 We have the world before us  
 Don't move, let's always stay here  
 My heart has found its way here.

Audience response aligned with critical opinion: "The English-language version c'est horrible, though. I wish they'd chosen a better lyricist, like Tim Rice or even someone like Paul Simon than Don Black!"<sup>10</sup> Unlike Luhrmann, who updated the context but incorporated much of the Elizabethan language, Presgurvic and the British lyricist assumed that the Bard's poetry would be an obstacle for their young target audience. If *Romeo + Juliet* managed to blend reverence for the play's text with accessibility (French 2006, 109), *Romeo and Juliet: The Musical* impoverished the text and was doomed to fail.

The British adaptors tried to improve the show in terms of its music, providing it with a different orchestration, replacing some songs and adding others, in a bid to give it a more transatlantic and less European flavor. For instance, at the end of "These are my rivers," they added a few bars to the original song that echo the conclusion of the most celebrated "Somewhere" from *West Side Story*. But rather than read as a response to this musical masterpiece, the songs instead mark the unbridgeable gap between this *Romeo and Juliet* version and the American appropriation. The British adaptors' attempt passed unnoticed, and the show turned out to be a failure:

Gérard Presgurvic's music is well enough sung, but [...] sudden leaps up and down the scale remind us of those dodgy Eurovision Song Contest entries. The singers belt out the songs but they are somehow melody free. We are firmly in the territory of "mock opera" with music largely derived from the *Les Misérables* style sudden spasms of Europop. (Loveridge 2002)

The singers seem rather to mock this style, performing Presgurvic's pop music as if it were Bernstein's. Yet, apart from the fifteen-year-old Juliet actress ("She at times practically shouts the songs, which is a pity as she has an exceptional voice for such a young actress," Bird 2002), all the others sing beautifully. There is also recurring reference to the Eurovision Song Contest and to the concept of Europop music which "drowns out Shakespeare's lovers" (Taylor 2002). Interestingly, when Plamondon-Coccianté's *Notre Dame de Paris* premiered in London in 2000, it received similar mixed reviews that derided both score and libretto: "it was equipped with embarrassingly

lowest-common denominator lyrics and a ramming repetitive score" (Gänzl 2001, 236). Benedict Nightingale for *The Times* acknowledged "there are occasional imaginative production touches" but also added that "another *Les Mis* this isn't" (Nightingale 2000).

This insistence in reviews on the Eurovision Song Contest comparisons and recognition of a "Europop vein" (Sebesta and MacDonald 2017, 351) seems to suggest an anti-European attitude and might be read in light of the intense rivalry in the competition between the United Kingdom and the more successful continental countries. Since 1997, the United Kingdom has experienced a run of disappointing results in the competition. In 2003, the UK actually finished last in the Eurovision Song Context, scoring zero points. A resentful stance might also explain the violent, and often gratuitous, personal attacks against Presgurvic, who in this reading becomes a Frenchman who dared to adapt Shakespeare. Keatinge criticized Presgurvic's inflated ego: "There is something almost sad about this production of *Romeo & Juliet*, but for all the wrong reasons — pride before a fall for Gerard Presgurvic, who in his biography writes he 'now only lives for this sort of musical, beamed at an international audience!'" Try beaming it at an invading alien force, it is likely to be more effective" (Keatinge 2002). Perhaps it is no coincidence that it has been despised as "an anglicized French import" (Wolf 2002), marking the foreignness of the product, which has too little to do with the Bard and his tragedy.

This Francophobic position is well expressed by British producer Sir Cameron Mackintosh who argued that "the French have hardly ever taken musicals, and Paris has proved the early graveyard for most of the worldwide musical successes of the last 50 years; they prefer revivals of operettas, Euro-rock musicals of dubious origin" (quoted in Atkey 2012, 56). As we are often reminded, undisputed masterpieces such as *West Side Story* and *Les Misérables* flopped only in Paris. As the singer-songwriter Bontempelli clarified, "the musical was slow to catch on in France because of Anglo-Saxon team's failure to understand the specific tastes of the French audiences" (quoted in Sebesta and MacDonald 2017, 349). Similarly, the British adaptation did not meet expectations since it was unsuitable to the refined taste of London audiences. Moreover, the poverty of the language and the banality of the songs suggested there was no need to adapt it again after *West Side Story*, an unimpeachable model that had done it so well: "This big budget production appears to succeed in scoring 'null points' in just about every possible category. From whichever angle you consider this production, it fails" (Keatinge 2002).

Yet the anti-French sentiments and the prejudice against a European musical identity may have clouded reviewers' judgments. More than trying to defend Shakespeare and his work, critics seem to be protecting the long-standing Anglo-American dominance of musicals. The British adaptation is criticized for its evident weaknesses in lyrics and score but also for its lack of 'Britishness' and

for its marked European allure. It seems to me that what is at stake is not Shakespeare's image, but the reputation of British musical theater.

### *Roméo Et Juliette Today*

Despite the absolute failure in England, many other adaptations of *Roméo et Juliette* have flourished all around the world. The French production was also reprised in 2010, with a slightly different title, *Roméo et Juliette: Les Enfants de Vérone* (*Romeo and Juliet: The Children of Verona*). Perhaps predictably, it inspired a similar critical response to when it was first staged: "Laideur (des décors et des lumières)...inintérêt (pour un livret inexistant et des chansons irrémédiablement coincées dans les années 90)...Pourquoi a-t-il fallu qu'on nous ressucite ce pénible *Roméo et Juliette*? Shakespeare se retourne dans sa tombe..." [Plainness (of setting and lights)...boredom (due to an inexistent libretto and in songs which have been irremediably conceived in the 1990s)...Why did they have to bring back to life this unbearable *Romeo and Juliet*? Shakespeare must be turning over in his grave) (Delval 2010).

Presgurvic had made some improvements concerning the scenery and lighting, and he added four new songs. They do not contribute to the development of the action, though, and make the show both harder to follow and heavier. The critics' principal regret, however, concerned the new cast: "on ne peut s'empêcher de regretter la présence scénique, le charisme pour certains et la fraîcheur pour d'autres, des interprètes de la version de 2001" (One cannot but regret the stage presence, the charisma of some actors in the 2001 version and the freshness of others) (Quinson 2010). Needless to say, this revival was a commercial success in its original French staging, too, paving the way for a second wave of interest in the show, as the subsequent Japanese and Italian adaptations testify. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

The show has not met with the same success in every country where it has been performed, and France enjoyed by far one of the most successful productions. Unlike many of those who tried adapting *Romeo and Juliet*, Presgurvic took into consideration both the theatrical and musical systems of his time and created a production that strategically played to audience reception. He must have considered that Shakespeare is a complex concept that refers "to a person, to a set of printed texts, to a crucial icon, to a theatrical tradition" at the same time (Pujante and Hoenselaars 27). In his musical remake, Presgurvic exploited the canonical status of Shakespeare's tragedy, which helps assure box-office success, but he also exploited celebrated earlier adaptations which resound in his reincarnation through a complex process of filtration (Sanders 2006, 24). As I have argued, Presgurvic's *Roméo et Juliette* embodies a postmodern aesthetic which makes it very appealing to a contemporary audience. That is why, despite mixed reviews, his production turned



out to be the most successful French musical ever, and achieved support from an international audience, apart from the British one. Therefore, even though the pop-rock score of Presgurvic's adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* did "little to advance the French musical," the show still "further established the European musical for the export market" (Sebesta and MacDonald 2017, 351).

Ironically, a favorable and sympathetic comment regarding Presgurvic's show came from the United States, one of the mother-countries of the tradition of musical. An American spectator who bought the audio CD of the show frankly admitted: "The story of Romeo and Juliet has been done so often that I didn't really want to see or hear another version. This one changed my mind. Even though it is in French, the story can be followed and the music and voices are wonderful. Give it a try."<sup>11</sup>

### Notes

1. Produced by Gerard Louvin and directed by Daniel Moyne; Choreography: Redha; Costumes: Dominique Borg; Coordination: Evelyne Presgurvic; Lights: Antonio De Carvalho; Sound: Thierry Rogen & Philippe Parmentier; Director of Production: Alain Giffard. Cast. Romeo: Damien Sargue/Vincent Nicolet, Juliette: Cécilia Cara, Benvolio: Grégori Baquet, Mercutio: Philippe D'Avilla; later John Eyzen, Tybalt: Tom Ross, Lady Montague: Eléonore Beaulieu, Lady Capulet: Isabelle Ferron/Karoline Blandin, The Nurse: Réjane Perry, Lord Capulet: Sébastien El Chato, Friar Laurent: Jean Claude-Hadida, The Prince: Frederic Charter, Paris: Essai, The Poet: Serge Le Borgne, Death: Anne Mano, the Mute: Laurence Filippi.
2. For details, see the production's official website: <http://www.romeoegiulietta.it/>
3. There is still open debate about this genre. It is generally agreed that it has its origin in the European, mainly Italian, stage tradition; it is a sort of hybrid which combines Italian opera with elements deriving from the musical and foregrounds a form of narration through songs instead of prose moments. The main examples of *opera popolare* are Luc Plamondon-Riccardo Cocciantè's *Notre Dame de Paris* (1998), Lucio Dalla's *Tosca Amore Disperato* (2003), Pasquale Panella-Riccardo Cocciantè's *Giulietta e Romeo* (2007), and Michele Guardì-Pippo Flora's *I Promessi Sposi — Opera Moderna* (2010), to mention just the most significant.
4. All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.
5. From customer review of the DVD at [www.amazon.fr](http://www.amazon.fr) (Mme Nina Beugnot, 1 February 2010, "Quel magnifique spectacle...")
6. Both comments come from "Roméo et Juliette Confessions" (<http://retjconfessions.tumblr.com>), a blog dedicated to *Roméo et Juliette*: [broadwayhopeful123](https://retjconfessions.tumblr.com/post/63578358632/i-think-kind-of-pointless), "I think 'Le Poète' is kind of pointless," tumblr post, <https://retjconfessions.tumblr.com/post/63578358632/i-think-kind-of-pointless>.

le-po%C3%A9te-is-kind-of-pointless; Anonymous, "Le Poete is such an unnecessary character! On the other hand, I wished Paris had singing parts like the Hungarian version," tumblr post, <https://retjconfessions.tumblr.com/post/47115065142/le-poete-is-such-an-unnecessary-character-on-the>

7. Anonymous, "One of the things I loved about the original production of the musical was the inclusion of La Mulette. I always loved her character and the interactions she shared with the others, especially the Nurse and Juliette. I'm always disappointed that she's never included in any of the other productions, even though I understand their reasoning for it," tumblr post, <https://retjconfessions.tumblr.com/post/38012272034/one-of-the-things-i-loved-about-the-original>.
8. Produced by Glem, Adam Kenwright, & City Lights; music: Gerard Presgurvic; Lyrics & Book Don Black; Director & Book: David Freeman; Choreography: Redha; Orchestration, Musical Supervision, Musical Adaptation, & Vocal Arrangements: John Cameron. Cast: Romeo: Andrew Bevis; Nurse: Jane McDonald; Juliet: Lorna Want; The Prince: Michael Cormick; Benvolio: Matt Dempsey; Tybalt: Alexis James; Paris: Tim Walton; Friar Lawrence: Sevan Stephan; Mercutio: Rachid Sabitri.
9. Unfortunately, there are not clips available of the British adaptation of *Roméo et Juliette*.
10. From customer review of the audio cd at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) (Maggie, 12 February 2003, "I Don't Speak French...". Available online at [https://www.amazon.com/Romeo-Juliette-Original-Cast-Gerard-Presgurvic/dp/B00005B6CW/ref=cm\\_cr\\_arp\\_d\\_product\\_top?ie=UTF8](https://www.amazon.com/Romeo-Juliette-Original-Cast-Gerard-Presgurvic/dp/B00005B6CW/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_product_top?ie=UTF8)
11. Elendir Turlinde, September 11, 2005, Amazon user review of *Romeo & Juliette-Original Cast*, audio CD.

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