

# "A hall, a hall! Give room, and foot it, girls": Realizing the Dance Scene in *Romeo and Juliet* on Film

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## Abstract

In Shakespeare's text, the dancing at the Capulets' feast is initiated by Romeo's friends, who enter as masquers and approach the ladies, while Romeo watches from the sidelines. Film directors alter the dance in interesting ways. George Cukor (1936) relies on Renaissance paintings and dance steps to create a "production number" for Juliet. He creates a glittering court masque in which Juliet has the queen's leading role and Romeo the king's prime vantage point. Franco Zeffirelli (1968) includes Romeo in the choreography, and the lovers' initial attraction reaches a dizzying climax in a Moresca enjoyed by everyone in the household. In the most dramatically and psychologically satisfying version, Baz Luhrmann's (1996) film, the lovers independently seek refuge from the drunken party. Later, Juliet must dance with a sweetly dorky Paris while she and Romeo bond over her predicament. The different interpretations demonstrate that dance sequences are under-analyzed sites of directorial creativity. In these three cases, they contribute to the characterization of Juliet, the implied basis of the lovers' mutual attraction, and the theme of their relationship to their social and familial milieu.

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As Emily Winerock's essay has demonstrated, Shakespeare structures the dance sequence at the Capulets' feast in *Romeo and Juliet* as an informal masque, a social practice in which masked youths essentially crash a party, refrain from speaking, are welcomed by the host as mysterious guests, and invite the ladies to dance. As Winerock notes, the stage direction "*Music plays, and they dance*" (1.5.23) leaves a host of details to the discretion of the players or (in modern times) the director and/or choreographer, but cues embedded in the dialogue establish important aspects of the scene as Shakespeare conceived it: namely, Romeo is ambivalent about attending the party; once there, he does not dance but watches Juliet from the sidelines; during the dance the lovers discover their passion for each other; and the abrupt departure of the young men occasions the end of the party and the scene. In the text, the dance potentially occupies significant stage time; sixty-six lines of dialogue separate "*they dance*" and Romeo's taking of Juliet's hand, which he has planned to do once the "measure [is] done" (1.5.47). Literary critic Alan Brissenden viewed

the dance in this scene as a symbol of harmony and an ironic contrast to the "discord and tragedy which follow" (1981, 64), but in performance — and especially in film adaptations such as those of George Cukor (1936), Franco Zeffirelli (1968), and Baz Luhrmann (1996) — the dance contributes in many other ways, as well. All three films devote ten or more minutes to this pivotal scene. None presents the masquers as initiating or ending the dancing, and two of the three eventually permit Romeo to dance with Juliet, but they preserve the other elements listed above. Within this framework, however, the choreography and blocking of the sequence create strikingly different effects.

### Overall Design Decisions — Cukor, Zeffirelli, Luhrmann

Naturally, creative decisions about the dance sequence do not occur in a vacuum; they are influenced by a host of other decisions, such as the choice of period, geographical setting, and costumes and by the cinematic and aesthetic tastes of their respective eras. Cukor and Zeffirelli chose different approaches to a "period production." Cukor modeled his sets and costumes on Italian Renaissance paintings of religious scenes and classical myths, and he produced what Kenneth Rothwell has termed (not altogether ironically) "a first-rate example of the kind of archaeological production" that was popular in the nineteenth century (1973, 347). The "super-extravaganza mentality" of 1930s cinema also influenced Cukor, who filled the main roles with box-office stars (most of whom were in their forties and thus too old for their parts).<sup>1</sup> The dance sequence occasionally resembled a "production number" in the style of Broadway musicals from the 1930s (Rothwell 1973, 345). The result is a reverent, glittering, inappropriately epic production, with lots of spectacle and (to this viewer's eye) very little emotional depth or credibility.

Zeffirelli, by contrast, shot his film on location in an Italian hill town and recreated the dress and domestic architecture of Renaissance Italy (not Renaissance fantasies of goddesses and angels). He assigned the lead roles to Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey, teenaged unknowns, whose youth and inexperience were seen by many as an asset, even if their mastery of the heavily cut text was sometimes lacking. Having worked with Luchino Visconti, a master of Italian realist cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, Zeffirelli was seen as rejecting "years of stifling reverence" to create a truly cinematic and artistically unified version of the play (Cirillo 1969, 71 and 78). Zeffirelli's production also benefitted (as Cukor's could not) from being shot in color.

Unlike Cukor and Zeffirelli, Australian filmmaker Baz Luhrmann had no interest in a period production. Rather, he set the play in a postmodern, beachside Latin city, dominated by warring family-owned corporations (Montague and Capulet) and saturated with media, violence, and religious imagery. Luhrmann's ethnically diverse cast featured young but known actors

in the main roles: Leonardo DiCaprio (22) and Claire Danes (17) as the lovers; Colombian-born John Leguizamo (32) as Tybalt; and African American actor Harold Perrineau (33) as Mercutio. Prominent character actors (such as Brian Dennehy, Diana Venora, and Paul Sorvino) took the adult roles. The cinematography featured "whip pans, lightning cuts, super macro-slam zooms, static super-wide shots, tight-on point-of-view shots, and other vertigo-inducing angles courtesy of crash-crane camera-work" (Lehmann 2001, 206). Some critics objected to Lurhmann's "postmodern razzmatazz," but others admired and were energized by his use of multi-media pastiche and by his artfully realized imaginary world, "itself a curious hybrid of Shakespeare's Veronese setting, L.A.'s Venice Beach, and the film's on-location shots of Mexico City" (Lehmann 2001, 191-92).

Not surprisingly, the choreographers of the two period productions, Agnes de Mille and Alberto Testa, respectively, provided plausible simulations of Renaissance dances, while Lurhmann and his choreographer, John "Cha Cha" O'Connell, employed a variety of modern styles — from 1970s "pantomime dances" (like the Swim) to Motown. But beyond enhancing the historical moment of the setting, the choreography and blocking of the dance scenes contribute significantly to the characterization of Juliet, the implied basis of the lovers' mutual attraction, and the theme of their relationship to their social and familial milieu.

### Cukor: A Court Masque, a Comic Juliet

Initially, Cukor's masquers resemble those implied by the text. Romeo and his friends wear cloaks and commedia-style masks and hold palm fronds; they march in without speaking and are greeted by a nostalgic Capulet. However, they do not initiate the dancing. Capulet's line, "A hall, a hall! Give room . . ." (1.5.24) is cut, since a torch dance is already visibly in progress. After being spurned by his current love Rosaline (in an interpolated sequence), Romeo walks off alone, just as Juliet and other ladies enter the enormous hall and begin a dance for the entertainment of the guests. Juliet is at the center, the featured performer, and she immediately catches Romeo's eye, though he is quite far away from her. A line of pages bearing silvery branches precedes the women, singing Juno's wedding song from *The Tempest* ("Honour, riches, marriage-blessing" [4.1.106]) and later "O mistress mine, where are you roaming?" from *Twelfth Night* (2.3.35). The lyrics create a nice in-joke for those who recognize them and imply that the performance is a kind of "coming out" or engagement party for Juliet, who has been promised to Paris by her father. The women are dressed in white gowns with embroidery based on the dress worn by the goddess Flora in Botticelli's *Primavera*, not normal Renaissance clothing (see figure 1).

At one point in the dance, De Mille also recreates the iconic tableau of the Three Graces (on the left in Botticelli's painting), with Juliet in the central position. As a result, Cukor's version of the scene resembles not the informal masque of the text, but the court masque popular in the reign of James I. Romeo occupies the "king's position" directly opposite the ladies' entrance, as the observer to whom the entire spectacle is addressed. The cinematography puts the viewer as well in this privileged position. As a result, the lovers' initial attraction is rather grandly orchestrated (in all senses of the word). The dance is a showcase for Juliet; how could Romeo not notice her? He is captivated by her beauty and grace, as in the text, but one might feel that he merely yields to the prepared spectacle rather than picking Juliet for his own reasons. On the other hand, as we shall see, in responding to Romeo's gaze, as she eventually does, Juliet departs from the script others have written for her.<sup>2</sup>

De Mille's choreography for the women relies on simple steps: balances left and right, a *ronde de jambe*, and a "turn single" with quick running steps (each lady dances in a small circle around herself). The light, shimmering fabric of the ladies' skirts billows as they turn (see figure 2). Later in the scene, De Mille inserts a historically accurate pavane sequence to the very music Thoinot Arbeau suggests for this stately dance.<sup>3</sup> Other moments, however, recall Busby Berkeley musicals. At 26:00, the ladies take hands and make a series of arches. Juliet runs under their arms directly toward a strategically placed camera at the other end of the "tunnel." Also Berkeley-esque are the cascading arm gestures as the ladies kneel to crown Juliet as if she were a queen, indeed, and the domino effect as a line of young men turn toward her in quick succession, with Paris being the last. At this point, Juliet is supposed to give Paris a rose and dance with him, but she and Romeo (who is now within her field of vision) lock eyes, and poor Paris is toast (27:45). From this moment on, Juliet's trance-like dancing becomes a source of comedy. She dances toward Romeo when she should be going in the other direction; she repeatedly wanders away from Paris, who is bewildered by her behavior. Romeo watches with affectionate laughter, and the viewer is invited to do the same. As a result, Juliet departs from her parents' script, and she (but not Romeo) emerges as helplessly smitten and somewhat dotty in the grip of love.

In Cukor's version, Romeo does eventually dance with Juliet, and the choreography cleverly motivates Romeo's first line. Juliet (delighted to find that Romeo has stepped in to be her partner) offers her hand, but when she tries to withdraw it, Romeo holds on, violating the pattern of the dance. This nicely motivates his first words to her ("If I profane with my unworthiest hand . . ." [1.5.90]), and they proceed to speak their sonnet together in the relative privacy of a balcony, into which Romeo steers Juliet, having continued to hold onto her hand. In effect, Romeo

uses his knowledge of — and willingness to depart from — the choreography of the dance to initiate physical contact and to draw Juliet into private conversation. Overall, the choreography creates a grand spectacle and stresses the comic aspects of Juliet's first encounter with love, which, for some viewers, may reduce her stature as a heroine, especially since the actress playing Juliet seems rather mature to be so bedazzled.<sup>4</sup>

### Zeffirelli: Transported by a Wild Moresca

In contrast to Cukor's glittering, sound-stage spectacle, Zeffirelli set the scene in a plausible Italian Renaissance mansion with an interior courtyard and banquet hall. The period costumes (for which the film won an Oscar) are richly realized. The scene glows with reds and golds, and one can feel the weight of velvet and brocade encrusted with jewels (unlike Cukor's flowing silks and black-and-white aesthetic).<sup>5</sup> Zeffirelli preserves something of the masque premise: while a few other guests sport masks, Romeo and his friends stand out in their disguises. Capulet welcomes the masked youths along with others thronging his doorway, but he speaks the lines that hail their arrival as the occasion for dancing ("A hall, a hall!") as a general greeting *before* the masquers appear, and, as in Cukor, dancing is already under way (22:56).

Like Cukor, Zeffirelli gives viewers a revealing glimpse of the character of Rosaline, Romeo's current love. One of Romeo's friends asks her to dance, and she puts down her goblet and primps before extending her hand. As Rosaline pirouettes towards the camera and past it, Juliet (between her suitor Paris and another man) suddenly replaces Rosaline in the frame (24:14). Romeo reacts and then then watches intently as Juliet dances. The choreography and camera-work enable us to view Juliet's entrance from Romeo's perspective and to accept that, in the instant that her body and her red velvet gown replace Rosaline in the frame, she also replaces Rosaline in Romeo's heart.<sup>6</sup> While this moment is certainly contrived by Zeffirelli, it is by chance that Romeo happens to have this perspective on the scene. Juliet is one of many dancers on the floor, not the central figure, and as the dance progresses Romeo has to compete with other spectators to keep his eye on her; he does not occupy a privileged position, as Cukor's Romeo did.

After her entrance, Juliet and the company dance an extended facsimile of a pavane or other slow dance, using anachronistic hand gestures (palms raised and facing outward) that nonetheless give a period feeling. The music is an orchestrated version of the melody that accompanied our first view of Romeo, a nice touch that further links the lovers (Cirillo 1969, 74). Initially, Juliet does not notice Romeo — she is intent on her dancing; but eventually he catches her eye and nods deferentially, and thereafter she begins to look for him as she dances. After the Capulets

chide Tybalt for threatening to challenge Romeo, Lady Capulet calls for a "Moresca" (an allegedly Moorish-inspired dance with a reputation for wildness), and wristlets with bells are distributed.<sup>7</sup> Romeo hesitates — making a "no thanks" gesture — but then puts the bells on and joins the line of men circling the women, who are dancing in the opposite direction. He meets Juliet in the course of the dance, and they make eye-contact and share a few steps (see figure 3). They touch elbows, but their hands do not touch until he speaks to her after the dance is over.

At 29:57, the music accelerates, and the dance reaches a dizzying climax, emblematic of the emotions aroused in the lovers. Unlike Cukor, Zeffirelli presents them as equally caught up in the moment, an effect that the camera accentuates (and conveys to the viewers) through accelerated footage, cross-cutting, and blurry focus. If anything, Romeo is the more affected by passion, since he changes his initial decision not to dance, while Juliet maintains decorum and her part in the dance till the very end. The choice of the dance — the wild Moresca — alters the motivation for the end of the scene. Zeffirelli emends Capulet's line so that he hails a group of ladies who are fanning themselves as they leave the hall: "Oh, what ho, my mistresses! Will you be gone?" (37:31). By addressing the ladies instead of the masked "gentlemen" (as in the text [1.5.118]), it is the ladies' fatigue, rather than the abrupt departure of the masked youths, that brings the festivities to a close. The energetic dance also partly explains Juliet's unexpected exit from the dance floor. Breathless, laughing, and slightly unsteady, she walks into the atrium. Despite her obvious innocence and demure behavior throughout the scene, the blocking suggests that her interactions with Romeo have awakened her flirtatious instincts: as she enters the atrium, she turns to see whether Romeo has followed her (30:48). Thus, in this version, the attraction between the lovers seems more equal, more personal, and more influenced by chance than in Cukor. The choreography of the dance does not "present" Juliet to Romeo and the guests; rather, he picks her out of the crowd, and she responds.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Zeffirelli's version is the warm, joyous inclusiveness of the dancing. Everyone — from the nurse and the young pages to the master, mistress, and their guests — enjoys watching (laughing and clapping) or participating in it. Juliet is a part of the whole, not its focus (as in Cukor), and Romeo must struggle to keep her in view as he watches from the sidelines or joins the line of young men in the dance. We experience, as Winerock and Brissenden note, the happiness and security that are about to be lost. At the same time, the exuberant choreography reflects and feeds their nascent passion, and a suddenly more mature Juliet emerges who is willing to take matters into her own hands.

### Luhmann: Bonding from a Distance

In Luhrmann's version, the dance sequence is (predictably) eclectic and over-the-top. The masque of the text is transformed into a Carnival-like masquerade ball. Everyone is in costume and high on something. Romeo views the party ambivalently, as in the text, but Luhrmann (more than Cukor or Zeffirelli) emphasizes Romeo's alienation from the festivities, which embody the excesses and emotional shallowness he finds in his social milieu.<sup>8</sup>

The first part of the scene stars Mercutio, not Juliet, emphasizing his importance in this production. The unchallenged leader of Romeo's cohort, he is dancing energetically on a grand staircase in Broadway or Las Vegas style, with a phalanx of male backup dancers in purple satin. He is cross-dressed in a white afro wig and a silver lamé bra and miniskirt.<sup>9</sup> He performs high kicks, hip gyrations, and arm pumps in a Latin/Motown amalgam. His gender-bending outfit reminds us of his close — and perhaps homoerotic — relationship with Romeo and emphasizes the link between dance and sexuality, which is not overtly stressed in the more decorous period productions.<sup>10</sup> The camera cuts away from Mercutio to find Romeo, who is still dazed from the drug Mercutio gave him before the party. Amid a room full of dancing couples, Romeo is accosted by Capulet, who reminisces about wearing a visor in his youth (using lines moved from earlier in the scene), but his drunken bellowing ("*Amore!*") and Romeo's woozy sensations drive him from the ballroom to the bathroom, where he doffs his mask and dunks his head in the sink to sober up. As he leaves, he notices colorful fish in a large aquarium. As he inspects the fish, he spies the eye of a young woman (Juliet) looking up at *him* from the other side. The love theme "Kissing You" begins off-screen, and the two smile and connect, moving along the sides of the tank, playing with their reflections in the glass, which appear to bring them together, even though their bodies are separated by the tank (see figure 4).

This carefully blocked (and much noted) sequence, though not technically a dance, helps make the lovers' attraction believable; they have both sought refuge from the party and enjoy the colorful fish and their graceful movements.<sup>11</sup> They have independently and simultaneously elected to deviate from the script for the evening. As they near the end of the tank, where they might speak to each other, the Nurse arrives and hurries Juliet away. Romeo runs after them to see Juliet presented by her mother to Paris. In an interesting transposition, Paris says to Juliet, "Will [you] now deny to dance?" — a variation on Capulet's line earlier in the scene (1.5.17), when he challenged the women to dance with the masquers. Thus, the line that might have led to Juliet's dancing with Romeo (but doesn't in the text) is now modified to cajole her into dancing with Paris, while the lovers' theme song swells (ironically) in the background.<sup>12</sup>

The choreography for Paris and Juliet is simple. Taking ballroom hold, they execute a few slow steps, arm wraps, and underarm twirls. Like the fish tank, the dance both separates and unites the lovers. Juliet is constantly looking over her shoulder at Romeo, obviously more interested in him than in Paris. For his part, Romeo smiles — not at her, but in affectionate sympathy for her dilemma. Paris, oblivious in his astronaut suit (which contrasts with the lovers' more romantic knight and angel costumes), proudly executes some (apparently dated) pantomime arm movements resembling "the Swim" or "the Curtain." Juliet tries to stifle her laughter and looks at Romeo for validation (see figure 5). The dynamic Luhrmann creates is a charming and original realization of the text: the dance separates Romeo from Juliet physically (rather than bringing them together, as in the other versions), but it deepens their emotional and psychological connection, as they bond over Paris's sweetly dorky attempts to impress her.

After the dance, Romeo takes Juliet's hand near a pillar (as in Zeffirelli), they speak their sonnet together, and kiss (more passionately than in the period productions) in the mansion's glass elevator. The Nurse, Paris, and Lady Capulet run up and down the grand staircase (like a trio of *Keystone Cops*) trying to intercept them, while the camera dances around the lovers in the elevator, capturing their passion from every angle. Thus, though Luhrmann does not allow Romeo to dance with Juliet, he satisfies the audience's presumed desire to see them express their new-found love through physical contact. More important, the comedy of the scene is at the expense, not of either of the lovers, but of those who would obstruct their love (Paris, the Nurse, and Lady Capulet).

## Conclusion

In these versions of the dance at the Capulet feast, the choice of period, actors, music, and other large-scale directorial decisions naturally affect the overall impact of the scene. However, the details of the choreography and blocking lead to three strikingly different effects with respect to the character of Juliet, the basis of the lovers' attraction (beyond or in addition to the chemistry of "first sight"), and their relationship to their environment. Cukor creates a suave Romeo, who receives love as if on a silver platter, and a goddess-like (if somewhat distracted) Juliet. Zeffirelli gives us two teenagers drunk with love, who impulsively forsake the warm embrace of the families who expect to manage their fates. Luhrmann gives us young people, mature beyond their years, who seek refuge from a society dominated by media, drugs, and violence and find it, if only briefly, in their love for each other. In my judgment, Luhrmann's production is the most satisfying, dramatically and psychologically, but all three directors use the details of the choreography and blocking to put their creative stamp on Shakespeare's decision to rely on nonverbal communication — dancing, eye-contact, and the touching of hands — to establish and build the lovers' relationship before they put

their feelings into words. Beyond music and spectacle, the details of the dance sequences in these and other adaptations of Shakespeare's plays repay close study, both as aspects of Shakespeare's dramatic art and as prime sites for directorial license and creativity.

### Notes

1. Leslie Howard (43) and Norma Shearer (34) were the lovers; John Barrymore (54) and Basil Rathbone (44) played Mercutio and Tybalt, respectively. The quoted phrase is from Rothwell 1973, 345.
2. Elisa J. Oh has argued that the masquers' entry into the party is itself somewhat transgressive, an act of *sprezzatura*, but as we have seen, Mercutio is the instigator and Romeo only a reluctant follower (2014, n.p.).
3. This sequence occurs between minutes 29:00 and 30:40 of the published DVD. Future time references will be given parenthetically in the body of the text. I am indebted to Dr. Nona Monahin for verifying that the music on the sound track is indeed a tune that Arbeau recommended for the pavane in his dance manual *Orchésographie* (1589).
4. Unlike the two other scenes I will discuss, Cukor's version of the feast is not available on YouTube.com or other public sites.
5. Cirillo comments at length on the beauty of the *mise en scène* and the cinematography: "crimson velvets, pink and yellow satins. Never have textures been so closely reproduced on a screen" (1969, 74).
6. This moment and most of the scene can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrpOxPctRyU> [accessed 27 April 2017].
7. As Winerock notes, no specific dance is mentioned in the text. However, Zeffirelli and Testa's *Moresca* draws on the dance's historical features. Bells were an important element of Renaissance Morescas (intended to drive away evil spirits), and one form of the dance relied on circles and free-form linear patters, as seen in this scene. Some Morescas became so antic and grotesque that Castiglione advised in his *Book of the Courtier* that persons of rank dance it only "*in camera privatamente*," that is, in their rooms, privately (*International Encyclopedia of Dance* 1998, 4:462).
8. Rosaline does not appear in Luhrmann's version of the scene, so the sudden transfer of Romeo's emotions from one woman to another is not highlighted, as it is in Zeffirelli's and Cukor's versions.
9. Mercutio's prominence in Luhrmann's version has something in common with Cukor's, in which Mercutio's sexual antics dominate the build-up to the dance scene. He smooches prostitutes and

pantomimes sodomizing a dancing hobby-horse with a toy sword; he is comically repaid when another hobby-horseman rams a lance between *his* legs.

10. The link between dancing and sexuality is deep and part of the subtext of masquing. As Paul Kottman observes, a masque formalizes "conditions under which a veritable parade of substitutable objects of desire might appear to each other" (2012, 11-12).
11. The aquarium anticipates the swimming pool in which the majority of the balcony scene will take place and other meaningful uses of water in the film.
12. The complete scene can be found at [http://www.teachertube.com/video/luhrman-party-scene-352584?utm\\_source=video-google&utm\\_medium=video-view&utm\\_term=video&utm\\_content=video-page&utm\\_campaign=video-view-page](http://www.teachertube.com/video/luhrman-party-scene-352584?utm_source=video-google&utm_medium=video-view&utm_term=video&utm_content=video-page&utm_campaign=video-view-page) [accessed 27 April 2017].

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