

# Romeo & Juliet

## A 45-Minute Foray Into Shakespeare

*By Rosina Mason Whitfield*

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**STORY OF THE PLAY**

*Reading Shakespeare in class is akin to going to a restaurant and eating the menu. Shakespeare is meant to be acted and attended, not just words on a page.*

With this belief in mind, playwright Rosina Whitfield created this lively and shortened version of the Bard's classic. It is specially designed to be played by five actors as a touring show to introduce middle and high school students to the wonder of Shakespeare in a way that is enjoyable and accessible. The show did, in fact, tour for two years to schools in Pennsylvania where students always loved the sword fights and kissing! Narration and observations by the actors further involve the students, helping them see that Shakespeare's characters deal with the same things kids deal with today: conflict with parents, boyfriend/girlfriend issues, and neighborhood violence ... and to show that violence doesn't solve problems.

Approximately 45 minutes.

**ORIGINAL PRODUCTION**

This play was toured throughout the schools in York County, Pennsylvania, for more than two years.

*The play premiered with the following cast:*

*Older Male Character: Rosina Whitfield*

*Younger Male Character: Laura Alberghini*

*Romeo: Nathan Gumke (now professional actor  
Nathan Keyes)*

*Juliet: Amanda Aymin*

*Nurse: Mary Alice Hodges*

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**CAST OF CHARACTERS**

*(1 m, 2 w, 2 flexible. Actors play various roles.)*

OLDER MALE CHARACTER 1: (OMC1) Can be played by a male or a female.

YOUNGER MALE CHARACTER 2: (YMC2) Can be played by a male or a female.

ROMEO

JULIET

NURSE

**PRODUCTION NOTES**

The Capulets and Montagues should be depicted in like colors. For example, the Montagues may be in varying shades of blue and the Capulets in various shades of red. Each male character should have a distinctive hat with an accompanying cape or tunic. When various actors play the same role they should wear that particular hat and cape or tunic. The women pretty much remain the same characters throughout the play so they can be in dresses. Juliet can throw on the tunic and hat when she plays her father, and the Nurse can just don a veil when she does her lines as Lady Capulet.

Changes should be simple and quick. The base costume for the men should be leggings and boots with a Renaissance-style shirt for a generic look so that capes and tunics can be thrown on top of them.

The sword fights (for the two actors YMC2 and Romeo) should be professionally coached to have the maximum impact on the audience.

The kissing needs to look real. Middle schoolers will have a reaction but a fakey stage kiss will lessen the play's effect.

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### **SETTING**

There are two coat racks, one on either side of the stage. Hanging on them are various capes, veils, hats, a minister's robe, and a crown. Next to one of the coat racks is an umbrella stand containing two swords, a dagger, flowers, and two vials. In the center is a low platform or table. It needs to be strong enough for actors to stand on and large enough for Juliet to lie on. There are three chairs downstage left and three chairs downstage right.

**Optional Change:** Some schools administrations may be concerned about the "burden at night" lines, even though it is made clear Romeo and Juliet are married. If necessary, the lines may be omitted without contacting the publisher for permission.

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*(AT RISE: ALL of the actors come center and face the audience. OMC1 is in the middle.)*

OMC1: We begin our play with what's known as an exposition.

YMC2: Say WHAT?!

OMC1: An exposition, an explanation, it's a set up for what's to come.

YMC2: Does it have to be Shakespeare? It's so HARD!

OMC1: It's not that hard, if you take it one word at a time. I will say it for you and by the end of it you will know what's going on.

Two households, both alike in dignity,  
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,  
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.  
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;  
Whole misadventured piteous overthrows  
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.  
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,  
And the continuance of their parents' rage,  
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,  
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;  
The which if you with patient ears attend,  
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

Now, does everyone understand what is happening? Sure you do. Now as the play opens we know that the two families, the Montagues and the Capulets hate each other, but Shakespeare never tells us WHY.

YMC2: A land deal gone bad?

ROMEO: An unpaid gambling debt?

JULIET: A neighbor's dispute over a barking dog?

NURSE: A difference in race, religion, or culture?

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OMC1: Who knows. But it only takes about three pages for the first sword fight to break out. Now this will soon be Romeo (*ROMEO bows.*) but at the beginning of the play Romeo is off somewhere. So for right now, he will play his own enemy Tybalt.

*(ROMEO goes to coat rack and gets cape and hat that designates Tybalt.)*

OMC1: *(Cont'd.)* Benvolio, Romeo's friend, is the other guy.

*(YMC2 bows and gets cape and hat that designates Benvolio. The following lines are given if one or both of the actors playing OMC1 or YMC2 is female.)*

OMC1: *(Cont'd.)* Now in Shakespeare's day all of the female roles were played by young men. Women were not allowed on the stage. We are going to do it just the opposite, and in our version women will play some of the men's roles. Tybalt and Benvolio meet on the street.

TYBALT: *(Drawing his sword.)*

What, art thou drawn among these heartless hinds?

Turn thee, Benvolio, look upon thy death.

BENVOLIO:

I do but keep the peace: put up thy sword,

Or manage it to part these men with me.

TYBALT:

What, drawn, and talk of peace! I hate the word,

As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee:

Have at thee, coward!

*(THEY fight. During the fight, OMC1 puts on the cape and crown that designates the Prince. NURSE and JULIET sit on chairs stage left. OMC1 says the following line before donning the crown.)*

OMC1: Now the whole town is sick of the whole thing.

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