Before Juliet

A Study of Love

By Nelly E. Cuellar-Garcia

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DEDICATION

For my all my acting students, past and present,
Your constant energy and willingness to engage in theatre fully and wholly continue to be a source of inspiration for me…

STORY OF THE PLAY

Death and Strife, along with the Chorus of Darkness, serve as narrators in this foreboding tale, the story of Romeo and his first love, Rosaline. Although their families have been at war with each other for centuries, the young couple are so enamored with each other, they are ready to defy their families and face the inherent danger. But Death and Strife will cleave their tentacles onto the dreams and aspirations of this mortal pair.

Filled with moments of bittersweet tenderness and joy, the play unexpectedly turns dark when Rosaline betrays Romeo and arranges his death at the hands of his enemies. This highly theatrical piece gives the audience a glimmer into the depths of despair that consumes Romeo at the beginning of Shakespeare's classic, "Romeo and Juliet."
Running Time: 60--70 minutes.

Performance History

This play won the 2006 Literary Award from ZCISD. It played to a sold-out house for the two weeks it premiered in December, 2006 at The Nest in Zapata, TX.

CAST LIST

(5 m, 3 w, 15+ ensemble)

DEATH *(m)*
STRIFE *(f)*
CHORUS OF DARKNESS *
ROMEO *(m)*
ROSALINE *(f)*
JULIET *(f)*
MERCUTIO *(m)*
BENVOLIO *(m)*
TYBALT *(m)*

*Chorus of Darkness always becomes the soldiers, servants, citizens, etc. as part of their progression as narrators of the tale.

SETTING

Verona, Italy -- at any given time. The setting is very fluid, an isolated garden with a raised area and a pillar, a dark city street, and beneath a cherry blossom tree. Initially the garden is bathed in blue light and filled with low lying fog. Often the stage is crisscrossed with pockets of shadows and light. Wispy curtains can slowly move with wind. In Scene 3, Juliet faces the rising sun. In Scene 9 a storm begins to brew; the winds howl, and jagged lightning appears in the sky. In Scene 10, we are in a courtyard of the Black Griffon: with drums heard in the background. In Scene 11, the couple meet under their favorite cherry blossom tree.

Director's Notes

The worst mistake a director can make with this piece is to try to recreate Shakespeare's emotional world as it appears in "Romeo and Juliet." We must remember that in this piece Romeo has not become the gloomy lost soul we initially meet in the classic. He is still idealistic and filled with a passion for all things, old and new.

Juliet is also quite different than what you would envision in a typical "Romeo and Juliet" show. I despise type-casting students. I have had many discussions with my design and directing staff over their need to cast a beautiful and ethereal Juliet. In the piece I created, Juliet is awkward and gawky and imagines a world where her opinions and words carry weight. Her innocence stems from being immersed in textbooks and believing that she will have a voice in her life -- something that we are only too aware will never come to pass.

As for Rosaline, I didn't want to deal with the simpering, chaste shell that she is described to be in the classic, so I created a unique woman who broke the mold of everything a woman of noble rank was thought to be. Further, I ensured that she came to life as a bold, inventive woman by giving her something other than love as a domineering force in her life. Her need for vengeance is not unique, but her approach to it is reminiscent of the old traditional Greek heroines who took their fates into their hands and chose action instead of prayer as a means to a solution.

The Chorus of Darkness serves to marry the real world with the mystical that surrounds us. My students have had many discussions over the role "fate" has in our daily lives. Some will argue that if you believe in a deity, you must believe that your place in the world has already been pre-determined; while those that see the world rationally espouse the idea that we are a

product of our own actions and therefore are shaped by our experiences and their aftermaths. The Chorus of Darkness can be channeled towards any of these directions and any others that the director can envision.

The choices for this ensemble are so vast that it is easy to lose the vision of their purpose -- simply to use mortals for their own amusement for the span of twenty-four hours. Does that, then, make them evil, or simply mystical beings living their lives on a different plane of existence where they view us simple playthings for their amusement?

The director's vision for this piece will be quite complicated. Regardless, the experience of working with this piece will offer great emotional rewards to the entire cast and company.

Prologue

(AT RISE: Curtains open to reveal a stage bathed in blue light and filled with low-lying fog. The stage is crisscrossed with pockets of shadows and light illuminating an isolated garden. The CHORUS OF DARKNESS, Death's minions, twirl, twist, and move to beating pulses of rhythm creating alchemy in the night.)

CHORUS: And it came to pass that Death, the child of Satan and Sin, grew lonely -- surrounded only with the incessant parade of souls he reaped.

(CHORUS re-enacts the birth of Strife.)

CHORUS #1: And so one night, he went out into a storm-filled sky, called down lightning, brought down a star, infused it with his heat and heart, and melded all together to create Strife as a companion to his eternity.
STRIFE: And with her first breath, her essence was spread out into the world and found a niche in every mortal's heart in which to hide.
CHORUS: Strife -- it tears your soul and rips your innards into bleeding coils of entrails. No one is exempt from its clutches.
CHORUS #1: Peasant or king, wealthy or poor, wise man or fool … strife consumes its bearer…
CHORUS: Until all that remains is an empty shell without rhyme or reason ….
STRIFE: Strife makes death much more interesting to behold ….
DEATH: What first was created for my amusement has become an invaluable arsenal for man to use against each other ….
CHORUS #1: War, honor, friendship … these drive men forward to shape and carve a destiny from nothingness …
STRIFE: But Strife, bred for chaos and destruction, will fell a man in one blow ….

End of Freeview

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