



289. Neptune (Plácido Domingo) enthroned amid his creatures in *The Enchanted Island*. Photo by Ken Howard for the Metropolitan Opera.

XXVIII, “Shakespeare and Media History”). The camera’s close-up has brought the viewer into intimate contact with both Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Verdi’s *Otello*, if at the expense of live theater’s full-spectrum immediacy. Ours is the age of international, multimedia Shakespeare; it is also the age of subtitled, global transmissions of an increasingly large operatic repertory. Opera, the grandest of theatrical arts, is reemerging as a new technological paradox, the intimate spectacle, and the Shakespeare operas are part of that continuing project. Working together, technology and cultural change continue to reimagine both “Shakespeare” and “opera” as well as their relation to one

another – the “conflict of theatres,” as Daniel Albright (2007) has called it – in productive new ways.

The Metropolitan Opera celebrated New Year’s Eve 2011 with the premiere of *The Enchanted Island*, a full-length pastiche of arias and ensembles from Handel, Rameau, Vivaldi, Purcell, and other baroque operatic composers, with an English-language libretto by Jeremy Sams. The plot is new, yet strangely familiar: Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander are shipwrecked on an island claimed by both Prospero and Caliban. Mingling elements from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*, *The Enchanted Island* is a twenty-first-century reinvention of the omnibus entertainment of earlier eras. In a nod to contemporary reconsiderations of the cultural politics of *The Tempest*, and with an eye toward operatic history, *The Enchanted Island* (see Figure 289) concludes with Prospero not only turning the island over to Sycorax and Caliban but begging Sycorax’s forgiveness, a moment that recalls the sublime ending of *Le nozze di Figaro*. At least in this Shakespeare opera, “this damned witch Sycorax” finally has a starring role.

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## 255. BALLET

Nancy Isenberg

AT ANY GIVEN TIME AND ON any given continent, full-length Shakespeare ballets appear on the calendars of professional and semiprofessional ballet companies. They perform these Shakespeare ballets in their home theaters and take them on national,

international, and intercontinental tours. Thanks to the ever-expanding coverage of Internet search engines, the extensiveness of the phenomenon is now clearly visible. All of the most famous ballet companies – among them the Bolshoi, Kirov, Paris Opéra, Royal Ballet, Stuttgart,

American Ballet Theater, and San Francisco Ballet – have produced memorable Shakespeare ballets. *Romeo and Juliet*, the best-known and most often choreographed and performed Shakespeare ballet, occupies as prominent a position in the ballet world as *Swan Lake* or *Giselle*. *The Taming of the Shrew* is also in the fixed repertoire of many companies. *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* repeatedly capture the creative energies of choreographers, as do *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*.

The frequency of Shakespeare ballets being performed around the globe in our time – both by well-known and emerging choreographers, set to historic and newly composed scores, mostly full-length productions but at times short thematic pieces – signals a tradition that dates back to the earliest days of ballet theater in the seventeenth century. The intensity and tenacity of this tradition can be explained in part by certain common roots that the two stage genres share, and by the subsequent ease with which, over time, characteristics of the one could be adapted to the conventions of the other.

#### FORMS OF ATTENTION

To date, research on Shakespeare and ballet has focused in large part on cataloging Shakespeare ballets by date, place, choreographer, composer, ballet company, and leading dancers, and to describing plot adjustments. Another area of research looks into the history of Shakespeare performances, especially from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, into which ballet pieces were inserted. (See, for example, Brissenden; Krasovskaya; Sanders). However, there is much work still to be done before we can fully grasp the complexity of the Shakespeare–ballet connection.

Investigation has been hampered by the ephemeral nature of ballet, which has not always left behind even a music score or set of choreographic annotations, both of which in any case require specialized deciphering skills to be comprehended. Furthermore, the perception of ballet as conservative, elitist, and strictly European or Western lessens its appeal as an object of study in the current cultural context in comparison with other performative genres. The paucity of recordings of modern Shakespeare ballet performances, another effect of ballet's lessened critical and commercial appeal, further hampers scholarship. We must also bear in mind that dance studies is a relatively new area of scholarship, the first PhD programs dating to the 1990s. Studies on what the dancing body means culturally have only recently become available to advance our understanding of the Shakespeare–ballet connection from a performative perspective. (See, for example, Desmond; Foster; Garafola). Lastly, we must acknowledge the hesitation among both Shakespeare and dance scholars to cross into each other's space in order to carry out intermedial research, even though they may be working from similar critical perspectives, such as those informed by stage conventions, politics, multiculturalism, gender, and sexuality.

#### BALLETS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER

Each of the following sections, drawing on research done in Shakespeare and in dance studies, addresses the relation between Shakespeare and ballet from one of the critical stances mentioned and brings to the fore points of convergence and divergence from contemporary and historical perspectives. Each section signals ways in which Shakespeare ballets articulate meaning in relation to Shakespeare and their own performative and cultural-political milieu. Examples derive from four ballets. Two of these are world-renowned and widely rehearsed: *Romeo and Juliet* (in particular, Leonid Lavrovsky's choreography danced by the Kirov Ballet in 1940 and John Cranko's created for La Scala in 1958 and revised for the Stuttgart Ballet in 1960, all set to Sergei Prokofiev's music) and Cranko's *Taming of the Shrew* (choreographed for the Stuttgart Ballet in 1969). The two others are more culturally and geographically restricted – a Russian *Hamlet* from 1991 and a US *Othello* from 2001 – both available commercially in VHS and DVD formats as *Hamlet Ballet* and *Lars Lubovitch's "Othello."* YouTube offers generous samples from all four ballets.

#### STAGE CONVENTIONS

Ballet as we know it today operates employing many conventions that share their origins with the dramatic stage in Shakespeare's time. (See Part II, "Theater," and Chapter 22, "Entertainments: Baiting, Dances, Contests.") Both proceed episodically, on an unencumbered stage, and employ a similar stock of stage props from masks to written notes and letters to swords. Certain Elizabethan conventions regarding costumes and the actor's appearance also have analogies in ballet. The nightdress, and in female roles unpinned hair, serve on both stages as indicators not only of nighttime but also of intimacy, intense psychological disturbance, and at times madness.

On the ballet stage, for example, Juliet appears in a nightdress in her intimate scenes with Romeo and in the scene where she takes the potion and reflects on the horrors of awaking alone in the vault with its "loathsome smells, / And shrieks like mandrakes' torn out of the earth" (*Rom.* 4.3.46–47). According to ballet convention, the ballerina's hair must be pulled back tightly into a bun to best display the dancer's elegant line from the shoulders upward, but following the shared convention with Shakespeare's stage, ballet's Juliet wears her hair down in the potion scene, as does Juliet's mother grieving over Tybalt's corpse. In other Shakespeare ballets, the crazed Ophelia, Hamlet's mother grieving over Ophelia's corpse, and Desdemona in her death scene all also dance with their hair down.

It is typical of Shakespeare's scripts to offer an array of characters from a wide range of social conditions. Ballet companies, with their principal dancers, soloists, and choruses, require a variety of male and female individual

and group roles, and a ballet convention wants those roles to display a broad spectrum of choreographic styles originating in high (court spectacle), low (peasant dances), and exotic traditions. This convention dates back to the late sixteenth-century *ballet comique*, which, like the contemporary Shakespearean stage, tended to incorporate a vast assortment of characters from all walks of life. Thus, the cast of characters in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example – ranging from the prince and heads of households with their wives and children to the Nurse, Friar Laurence, and the servants and friends of both houses – is easily accommodated on the ballet stage. John Cranko, in his choreographies of *Romeo and Juliet* (La Scala, 1958, and Stuttgart, 1962) and *Taming of the Shrew* (Stuttgart, 1969), fully exploiting the ballet convention of social variety, introduced into his street and tavern scenes socially transgressive roles not in Shakespeare, such as gypsies, prostitutes, and carnival performers.

#### TRANSITIONS FROM SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS TO BALLET

The principal roles of *Romeo and Juliet* pass from Shakespeare's plays to the ballet stage with remarkable ease, each adapting effortlessly to a long-standing model in the ballet tradition. The role of Romeo, for example, is cast onto the body of the *danseur noble*, who very strongly reflects the image of the dancing aristocrats of Europe's baroque courts from whom he descends. This can be seen in the erect, elongated shape of his body, the well-turned ankle he conspicuously displays, his neat footwork, the virtuosity of his high jumps, and the graceful movements of his arms, hands, and fingers. The courtier's obsession with his dancing body in Shakespeare's time finds its way mockingly onto the Bard's stage in *Twelfth Night* with the jigs and capers of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew Aguecheek. The former "would not so much as make water but in a sink-a-pace." The latter, whose "excellent" leg – according to Sir Toby – "was formed under the star of a galliard," has "the back-trick simply as strong as any man in Illyria" (*TN* 1.3.97–108). When the model transits onto the ballet stage, it brings with it the very attire of the baroque courtier – soft, sleek boots, tights, close-fitting waistcoat, and full-sleeved blouse. The male ballet dancer even today in many respects strongly resembles an Elizabethan courtier, like Hilliard's fair youth for example, without the ruff.

The role of Juliet is shaped along the lines of the Romantic ballet heroine with whom she shares an unhappy love story. Like Giselle, for example, Juliet has fallen in love with a man outside her sphere. Both their stories trace a young woman's painful coming of age, which ends with her death. Although indisputably personal tragedies, both Juliet's and Giselle's deaths indicate if not an individual choice at least the power of rejection in the face of an unwanted situation. Not surprisingly, dance scholarship

today traces the origins of the Romantic ballet heroine to Shakespeare heroines like Juliet (Banes 34).

Mercutio's choreography demands tremendous energy, giving vent, as does his language in Shakespeare, to a frenetic mind. Transgressive and uncontained in his words and dancing, defiant of taboos, he stands outside the strictly ordered social mainstream. In this sense, the dancing Mercutio finds his ballet roots in the *groteschi* roles of baroque court performances, where the aristocracy danced the noble roles and called in highly skilled professional dancers to perform transgressive, unnatural, and sexually ambiguous ones.

Tybalt, with his sinister, destructive nature and his disregard for moral codes (striking Mercutio under Romeo's arm), adapts easily to the ballet character type of the villain, epitomized by Rothbart in *Swan Lake*. Tybalt's movements in Cranko's choreography are aggressive, his gaze cruel and sly. His stance is typically one of hostile closure. Like Rothbart, he is not at ease at center stage. The ballet villain surely owes much to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century performances of Shakespeare's Tybalt as well as his Iago.

Of course, there are many ways in which Shakespeare ballets take their distance from Shakespeare plays. As a nonverbal genre, ballet narrative obviously requires the elimination of reported speech and action. Hence, typically in *Romeo and Juliet* choreographies, for example, Rosaline makes a physical appearance onstage in the earlier scenes, whereas Friar John and his undelivered message get eliminated. Shakespeare ballets that must simplify the original narrative do this in part by conflating scenes and eliminating secondary characters. Furthermore, they employ the corps de ballet to establish social contexts and give an ethnocultural sense of place, class, or gender, and they use the pas de deux (an extended partnered choreography consisting of several parts) to express the heightened emotion of intimate relations and use solos to communicate innermost sentiments.

#### THE POLITICS OF SHAKESPEAREAN BALLET

Among the performance genres alive today, ballet is perceived as one of the most elitist and conservative, and therefore tends to be dismissed by those scholars who look to the stage for ways to read social and political challenges and change. This negatively perceived identity is a remnant of the distant past when in fact ballet was an entertainment created by and for the aristocracy. Ballet historians locate its origins and earliest developments in the courts of Europe, from the late sixteenth-century spectacles at the French court of Catherine de Medici to the first academies of dance created in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by European kings and czars. The dancers who trained in these academies were privileged servants to their rulers. They received all the care and attention, warm clothing, and nourishment required to guarantee the health, strength, and beauty their art and its practice required.

They were considered a plaything of the Crown and court, of whose glory and power their performances were a richly garnished manifestation.

It is true that even today, especially when works from the canon are performed, and especially when performed in opera houses with their own elitist histories, the glitter associated with ballet spectacle keeps alive in the viewer's eye and mind that golden past, and thus tends to obstruct awareness of the immense power of ballet narrative and the dancing body on which it is inscribed to impart meaning today in challenging and innovative ways. The very fact that the Soviet regime was able to embrace the once imperial ballet tradition and turn it into one of its most significant internal and international propaganda tools bears witness to this power.

#### SUSTAINING SOVIET POLITICS: *ROMEO AND JULIET* (1940)

The ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, by opening two of its three acts with long crowd scenes involving brawls and ending with an elaborate reconciliation scene, placed a strong emphasis on the social theme of conflict between the feuding families at the expense of Romeo and Juliet's private drama. Juliet had a "higher" political function to fulfill in the ballet. At the time of the ballet, she was viewed as something of a national heroine in the popular Soviet imagination for her courage to defy patriarchal authority, which was seen in perfect analogy with the modern revolutionary spirit. The final reconciliation scene of Shakespeare's play, which is preserved in the ballet, demonstrated that she had not died in vain. But more to the point perhaps, the staging of the reconciliation scene as an exemplum to encourage peace between the old guard and the new worked as a political cover-up at a time when Stalin's purge of Bolshevik party members and supporters was at its most atrocious. Cranko's adaptation two decades later would reduce the number of crowd scenes and eliminate the reconciliation scene, ending the narrative with Juliet's death, which was more in keeping with the Western-Romantic tradition of personal tragedy.

#### UNDERMINING AND INTERROGATING SOVIET POLITICS: *HAMLET* (1991)

Skipping forward fifty years to the terminal phase of the Soviet Union, we find Shakespeare ballet still informing local political discourse, this time undermining and provocatively interrogating the political authority it had once worked for. *Hamlet, Reflections on the theme Hamlet*, choreographed by Svetlana Voskresenskaja and with Vladimir Malakhov in the title role, was created specifically for television shortly before – and broadcast shortly after – the August 1991 attempted coup that preceded by two months the official dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The storyboard works with four main characters – Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, and Claudius – who interact

in various combinations, figuring in some scenes the external world of the court and their public roles and in others exploring the inner truths of their separate and interacting selves, exposing their desires, weaknesses, doubts, and shortcomings. These main figures are typically supported by the corps de ballet in the court scenes. With no strongly delineated narrative line, the choreography presents as its principal organizing force the contrasting of public and private natures in its main characters. In this context, the complex psychology of an ever more isolated Hamlet unfolds.

Hamlet's isolation is articulated through a sequence of microepisodes in which the indifference of others and their blindness to his sense of disorientation become acutely evident. In such scenes, the choreography is a jumble of classical and modern/contemporary dance movements, full of frolicsome mockeries and transgressions, and frequently halted by long phrases in mime. At times, steps and gestures are executed with a stylistic exaggeration that makes them appear ridiculous. At times, a dancer breaks a fundamental ballet rule, as when Ophelia emphatically contradicts the ideals of elevation and extended lines by clubbing her foot after achieving a perfectly aligned arabesque (raised straight leg behind) or transforming a series of pirouettes on pointe into turns on the heels, toes pointing upward.

Such dancing and such episodes come with a local cultural subtext: the Soviet world in a state of chaos and uncertainty, where the individual is left to face alone and unprepared not only the dissolution of all the ideologies and institutions he has ever known but also the emergence of new forms of individual and organized corruption. Such a subtext applies not only to the sociopolitical situation in general but perhaps even more acutely to the specific state-subsidized world of ballet, where dancers wondered what would become of them and the glorious tradition to which they had unconditionally devoted their lives and bodies.

A lavishly choreographed and costumed courtly dance scene offers a bold statement about the decadence and ineffectiveness of the governing echelon. Claudius and Gertrude lead the dance characterized by sumptuous but excessively voluminous costumes that visibly jeopardize the dancers' movements, hems getting caught underfoot, sleeves flapping across the dancers' fields of vision. As if these exaggerations were not enough to drive the point home, the principal dancers wore thick leather gloves, a further ostentatious show of power but one that renders the execution of lifts extremely difficult, clumsy, and dangerous.

#### MULTICULTURALISM IN SHAKESPEAREAN BALLET

Ballet theater spaces today are sites of rich multicultural exchange: music, dance movements, and dancers of many

different ethnic and geographic experiences come together in any given performance. Ballet dancers, like athletes, are less hampered than other professionals in moving across linguistic borders, for through their bodies they speak a common language. We find “foreign” dancers and choreographers as residents or guests in companies and theaters across the globe.

Choreographers searching creatively to expand their vocabulary have always borrowed freely from other dance and movement genres. Today, the lexicon of ballet incorporates into its classical, courtly tradition inventory poses and gestures from an uncountable variety of other dance traditions associated with the likes of peasant festivals, ethnic celebrations, dance halls, ballrooms, and showbiz. It also borrows freely from modern, contemporary, and jazz dance, and depending on when, where, and by whom it is created and danced, any number of other body-movement practices, from acrobatics to martial arts. Likewise, composers of ballet scores and arrangers adapting preexisting works to the ballet stage all look to different periods, geographies, and genres for melodies, tones, and tempos that can articulate meaning.

There was a time when the parameters of height, weight, and body shape for ballet dancers were severely restrictive, and when skin color was not an issue because all ballet dancers were of Western European descent. Today’s ballet stage is more generous, and willing to accommodate and even welcome certain types of previously excluded body differences, including dark skin or slanting eyes. Dancers who come from and have studied in different parts of the world bring to their profession not only different body types but also a little something of their native culture in the style of their movement, their approach to their role, and their interpretive art. The physically and culturally wider range of bodies and personalities has broadened the possibilities of meaning on the ballet stage, the Shakespeare ballet stage being no exception.

#### COORDINATED DIVERSITY

Lar Lubovitch’s *Othello* ballet as performed in 2001 by the San Francisco Ballet illustrates how racially, ethnically, and culturally different dancers, in the choreutic execution of their roles, can address troublesome issues of social difference in powerful ways and even propose positive models of respectful coexistence. Casting Othello in modern times poses challenges on the ballet stage similar to those on the dramatic stage. The skin color of the performer playing the lead role comes under close critical scrutiny and becomes an issue of paramount importance on which will hang every critical interpretation of the performance. However, when the performance takes place on the ballet stage – where the narrative is played out exclusively through bodies and not at all through words – racial, ethnic, and cultural differences stand out much more markedly than on the prose stage.

Desmond Richardson, the black American dancer cast as Othello in the San Francisco Ballet production, brought to his role not only training in classical ballet but also experience in break, contemporary, and black dance techniques. The shape of his body as a result of his personal dance history, along with his character’s choreography, set him as much apart from the traditionally trained classical male dancer as his dark skin. The opening scene, where he appears alone onstage, clearly establishes his otherness in ballet terms. Instead of an erect, vertically aligned body whose energy is uplifting, tearing away from gravity (as defined in baroque courtly dancing and inherited by ballet), we see a grounded, inward-turning body, knees and head to the floor. As Richardson raises his head, he twists and bends his torso and neck in a gyrating movement, while his arms and hands seem to be drawing some unseen energy into his body. These movements derive from African traditions of danced religion, earthy and spiritual at the same time. Richardson then rises to his feet, gathering up a magnificently ample cape, which he holds high in full view as he turns his back to the audience, pausing thus for a moment before lowering the cape onto his broad shoulders as the curtain behind him opens onto the ballet’s first scene. This moment marks the entrance of the black, versatility-trained dancer into the role of classical ballet’s *danseur noble*. It can also be read in broader social terms as an eloquent gesture toward racial equality.

Physical proximity between a black Othello and a white Desdemona, about which much has been written recently in stage histories of the play, has been a particularly sensitive issue in the United States. The tensions affiliated with this question are heightened on the ballet stage, where flesh meets flesh in intensely intimate and sweaty ways and where hands grip and cling where offstage they would not be allowed to go. The fact that in the San Francisco Ballet *Othello* the role of Desdemona was assigned to Yuan Yuan Tan, a dancer from mainland China, sidestepped (perhaps unintentionally) a potentially nettlesome skin-to-skin black versus white confrontation. At the same time, Tan, who was trained in a cultural context that highly values discipline, sacrifice, humility, perseverance, shyness, and modesty, brought these characteristics to her interpretation of Desdemona.

At the wedding celebration in the first act, Desdemona seems hypnotized by Othello. He raises her from a low curtsy with his hands on her neck and backbends her in a deep circle; she faces him, head turned upward, in total submission. As they dance, her energy seems to derive from his. When he sets her down from a lift, she continues the flow in the direction and with the energy of his release; her trust in him is absolute, as when descending from another lift, she slides headfirst along his back and across his torso to then be swirled around and around and slowly lowered to the ground. To the audience, Tan’s performance here is not only suggestive of the hypnotic “witchcraft” of Othello’s narrative of self that “often did

beguile her” (*Oth.* 1.3.155–68) but also dances out the Asian American stereotypes of the “good subordinate” and “model minority.”

Throughout the ballet, the contrasting styles, body types, and skin color of Richardson and Tan work both culturally and aesthetically. The San Francisco Ballet’s *Othello* was performed at a time of heightened debate about black versus yellow racial tensions in California that had only shortly before come out into the open. Set against a street reality of hatred and violence, the exquisite harmony of the different but coordinated energy of Richardson and Tan’s partnered dancing on the *Othello* ballet stage can be read as smoothing out some of the jagged edges of that tension, embodying and projecting before the audience a model of interracial cooperation where difference is the key asset.

#### FEMALE IDENTITY IN SHAKESPEAREAN BALLET

In association with canonical otherworldly ballets like *Les Sylphides*, *Swan Lake*, or *Giselle*, the ballet heroine (like the ballerina whose identity was once fused with such roles) is a dangerously elusive object of male desire that lures him ruinously away from patriarchal responsibilities and domestic life. In the fairy-tale ballets like *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*, the heroine becomes an attainable object of desire in a world of happily-ever-after. By contrast, when Shakespeare’s tragic characters like Juliet, Ophelia, and Desdemona and their real-world narratives of heightened psychological complexity alight on the ballet stage, they bring female subjectivity much more sharply into focus. In all cases, however, whether seen as an object or representing a subjective self, the ballerina mesmerizes her audience with the grace and delicacy of her line and movement as she dances out the tragedies and good fortunes of the heroines she embodies.

John Cranko’s Kate in his *Taming of the Shrew*, however, is as far a cry from ballet’s virginal Giselles, seductive sylphs, and fairy-tale Cinderellas as she is from its Juliets, Desdemonas, and Ophelias. She shows no signs of the ballerina’s grace and delicacy of line or movement when she stomps across the stage hard on her heels, chin out, arms pumping aggressively, when she lifts her leg with bent knee and flexed foot, and extends her arm with a thrust and a punch. But if we stop for a moment to reflect on the ballerina as a real woman who to achieve her art and a place of prominence in a world of fierce competition must show great strength, resolution, and self-assertiveness, we can see Cranko’s Kate bringing this real woman into the limelight – the dancing woman who knows her own mind and is determined to get what she wants.

As we know, the late 1960s were challenging times for *The Taming of the Shrew* in Shakespearean performance and criticism. (See Chapter 251, “Identity and Subjectivity.”) Only months before John Cranko’s 1969



290. Sue Jin Kang and Filip Barankiewicz in John Cranko’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, 2012. Photo: Stuttgart Ballet.

ballet of *Taming of the Shrew* opened in Stuttgart, German feminists had begun their separatist movement by marching angrily out of leftist political rallies and throwing tomatoes at the men they had once considered their comrades. A whip-cracking Petruchio, and in the final scene a submissive Kate – as the earlier twentieth century had been portraying them – conflicted harshly with the feminist call for a new sexual politics. Cranko took up the challenge and in his choreography articulated a progressively more balanced relationship between Kate and Petruchio. He did this through a series of three pas de deux that provide the structural foundations of his work.

In the first of these, in the wooing scene, the two are on a reactive par. When Petruchio blocks Kate’s movement in midexecution and gets her into a tight hold, she knows how to get herself free. When she tricks him into losing his balance, he knows how to trip her in return. Their movements are violent and acrobatic, almost grotesque. They are rarely aligned, and they use each other’s bodies to build up their own counteractive energy. (See Figure 290.)

The next pas de deux is at Petruchio’s house, after the long journey, the uneaten supper, and the night in the cold. The choreography here has progressed from reactive to interactive. As Petruchio lifts Kate, she assists him with a *plié* (bending of the knees) and a leap. His extended arm and hand serve to guide the transition of her weight from

one pose to another. They travel through their separate spaces mirroring each other's movements, creating distance and then eliminating it as if they were preparing to weave those separate spaces together into a greater whole.

Their final pas de deux is at Bianca's wedding, Petruchio's and Kate's first public appearance as a married couple. The dancers' bodies move in concerted harmony, creating patterns as they replicate each other's movements, as each appears to be an extension of the other. But in the shadows of this message of cooperation and mutual respect that this duet embodies lurks the memory of the Kate of the ballet's act 1, who had no qualms about emptying a chamber pot from her balcony onto the heads of Bianca's suitors, and the Petruchio of the same act who allowed himself to be duped into drunkenness and deprived of his clothes and purse by a band of prostitutes. Theirs is a contract in which the recognition of female assertiveness and male fallibility keep power in balance.

Cranko's choreography has entered the repertoires of ballet companies around the globe, where Kate is a preferred role for many ballerinas. They love the strongly marked choreography and more so the strength of the character that unfolds in Kate's dancing. They love to dance the role of a woman who – for once – manages to escape from her position of submission without having to die for it.

#### FEMALE SEXUALITY IN SHAKESPEAREAN BALLET

The San Francisco Ballet's 2002 *Othello* offers another model of female assertiveness, in the role of the Venetian courtesan Bianca, who inherits from Shakespeare an identity defined by sexual license and social unruliness. A secondary figure in Shakespeare, in the ballet Bianca is developed into a major female role, danced by the Cuban émigré Lorena Feijoo. Feijoo's Latin American identity, associated with cultural myths in the United States of highly seductive Latino sensuality, combines with her choreography to express the Venetian courtesan's provocative and disruptive identity.

Bianca's first entrance in the ballet is a celebration of that identity. Lifted triumphantly by male members of the corps de ballet, she is the epitome of fiery female sensuality. Her unpinned hair, as ballet convention dictates, immediately signifies a straying from the patriarchal ideal, which wants a woman properly "pinned up" when she appears in public. Her sleeveless, low-cut, softly flowing costume creates expectations of unconstraint in her choreography. Her soft demi-pointe shoes, emphasizing "earthy" contact with the ground (as opposed to reinforced pointe shoes typically associated with ethereal elevation) further that promise.

The music accompanying Bianca's entrance onstage is a tarantella, a dance genre whose remote origins are associated with a spider myth dating back to early modern times. It was believed that the bite of the tiny wolf spider – most

often suffered by women, who were stung under their skirts as they worked in the fields and orchards – injected a poison into its victim, which caused her to dance wildly, such dancing appearing to be the only means to drive the poison out.

Being a *tarantata* – a woman who has been bitten by a tarantula – gave a woman a freedom otherwise unattainable. She was set free in her poisoned state from her daily life of subordination and enclosure within the patriarchal family space. She danced, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, in the public square and through the village streets, for all to see. And from the public square the dancing might travel through the streets of the village. Typically, villagers would dance with her, as if infected by her dancing, or in the belief or with the excuse that their participation would help drive the poison out of her. Being a *tarantata* was indeed an opportunity for a woman to move freely about, to be mistress of her time and space and body, call attention to herself, and live a luscious moment of social protagonism. Modern research has discarded the spider as the true vector of the illness, identifying its cause rather in the state of oppression of women in rural society in southern Italy, where the dance and the myth originated.

Bianca's choreography in the ballet can be read in reference to this cultural history of the dance genre. We see it in her frenzied gestures, wild swirls, great leaps, and expansive moves across the stage, and in the way her choreography infects the mixed male and female chorus who join her. In Lorena Feijoo's tarantella, these characteristics of the spider victim's state, through a submerged affinity, become vehicles to figure the Venetian courtesan's freedom, social unruliness, and celebrity of sorts.

#### MALE IDENTITY IN SHAKESPEAREAN BALLET

A gender-sensitive approach to Shakespeare's Romeo looks at how the role addresses questions of male sexual identity in early modern England. We see this in Romeo's fears of being effeminate, as he reveals in the fight scene after Mercutio's death ("O sweet Juliet, / Thy beauty hath made me effeminate ..." [*Rom.* 3.1.104–05]), and in Friar Laurence's reprimand when Romeo weeps his "womanish tears" ("Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art ... unseemly woman in a seeming man" [*Rom.* 3.3.109–12]). Yet in the tomb scene he displays indubitable masculine energy in his decisiveness, in the vigor with which he forces open the gates to the tomb, and in the boldness with which he faces his unknown foe.

The male dancer – the original "man in tights" – as we well know, is likewise often seen as effeminate. What not everyone realizes is that the popular convention of viewing male dancers as effeminate, regardless of their sexual orientation, has its roots in those same attitudes found in Shakespeare's England regarding actors (for their emotional displays, for their cross-dressing) or members of the aristocracy (for their obsession with their bodies). But

when the male dancer cuts through the air with his triple and quadruple turns, flies across the stage with his great leaps, or commandingly maneuvers his partner through sure, steady lifts, he demonstrates a strength, power, energy, and self-possession that for all their gracefulness clearly also connote virility. Thus, ballet's Romeo provides a modern performative and cultural frame of reference for querying male sexual ambiguity in perfect alignment with discussion in Shakespeare criticism regarding the early modern male. Both Shakespeare's and ballet's Romeo can be seen as precursors of the current ideal of the strong but sensitive male.

#### HOMOSEXUALITY IN SHAKESPEAREAN BALLET

In the 1991 Russian *Hamlet* ballet, Vladimir Malakhov played his part as the Danish prince with a mixture of recklessness and mischievous innocence, characteristics of cynical pessimism that were on their way to becoming his signature traits. The markedly androgynous physical features of the twenty-three-year-old dancer were exploited in the ballet to enhance the style of his interpretation. This happened in the camera work when the lens closed in on Hamlet's gaze and held steady on it for several seconds at a time, and in his dancing, where at times he executes steps typical of the female dancer's vocabulary or style.

The ambivalence of Malakhov's dance style and the psychology of his character are one and the same, as clearly enunciated in his opening choreography – an homage to the “to be or not to be” soliloquy. Tormented by the pull in two opposite directions, Hamlet struggles against the attracting force of a courtly doublet hanging on a crossbar. When he succumbs to its power and slips his arms into the sleeves, he goes into convulsions. The doublet has transformed his ultracontemporary unitard into a traditional male dancer's stage garb. Under its spell, his dancing is classical, but when he breaks away from its power, his dancing is contemporary. But before he begins to express this struggle, Malakhov performs a very effeminate adagio extension (an *arabesque penchée*, for those familiar with ballet steps) as a kind of *révérence* toward the bodice. There is no doubt from the very beginning that this ballet's Romeo is at one level interrogating, if not undermining, attitudes toward “deviant” sexual identity and orientation in the changing Soviet political context where the rigidly enforced codes of decorum made no accommodations to sexual diversity, especially when on public display.

As holds true for all Shakespeare performance, Shakespeare ballets weave together an infinite multiplicity of cultural variables, each ballet bringing about among them its own idiosyncratic mediations. Specific local sociopolitical contexts meet with far-reaching traditions, conventions, and ideologies, as do the individual identities and experiences of all those contributing to the production. The influence of such rich diversity pervades the

production from its smallest detail to its overall impact. Readers interested in exploring further the multifaceted cultural implications of the four ballets discussed in this chapter are referred to the accompanying sources cited (particularly Bennett; Isenberg, “Accommodating Shakespeare”; Isenberg, “Feminist Movement”; Isenberg, “Beyond the Black/White Paradigm”; Isenberg, “Latino Spider Bites”; Isenberg, “Dramatic Leaps”). Howard (1998) and Isenberg (2010) discuss courtly dancing in relation to Shakespeare and ballet.

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## 256. MUSICAL COMEDY

Tetsuo Kishi

“MUSICAL! MUSICAL! I’M sick of these artificial barriers between the musical and the drama. In my mind, there is no difference between the magic rhythms of Bill Shakespeare’s immortal verse and the magic rhythms of Bill Robinson’s immortal feet,” says Jeffrey Cordova, the larger-than-life man of theater in the 1953 film musical *The Band Wagon* (Comden and Green 35). In the film, Cordova (Jack Buchanan) stars in *Oedipus Rex*, which he also produces, adapts, and directs. He goes on to try to make a musical out of the Faust legend, which turns out to be a dismal failure, but it would be intriguing to imagine what the outcome would have been like had he tried to make a musical out of Shakespeare’s work instead, because in spite of his conviction, there is a difference between Shakespeare and musical comedy.

Ben Jonson’s well-known remark on Shakespeare, “He was not of an age, but for all time,” is no doubt valid. Yet the difference between today’s and Shakespeare’s original audiences has often troubled modern directors of Shakespeare, who often shift the time, the place, or both of a particular Shakespearean play, and with some help from visual elements such as costumes, props, and scenery try to present, for instance, *Hamlet* set in Nazi Germany or *Macbeth* set in medieval Japan. Such a temporal and/or geographical shift is usually necessary when a musical comedy is an appropriation of Shakespeare. If they want to produce a work that is interesting enough to their audience, creators of a Shakespearean musical will have to solve two problems. First, to what extent should they retain Shakespeare’s language? Second, what kind of music should they provide?

### MERRY WIVES – THE MUSICAL

One solution is simply to set Shakespeare’s text to pseudo-Elizabethan music, as in the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Merry Wives – The Musical*

(2006), based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The director, Gregory Doran, adapted the original text, cutting a number of passages but retaining essentially the speeches Shakespeare wrote himself. As for the songs, Ranjit Bolt’s lyrics did not sound particularly Elizabethan but did not contain any twenty-first-century colloquialisms either. Many of the songs functioned as a replacement for the dialogue, and a couple of scenes, with minor changes to Shakespeare’s wording, were sung through, which made the work definitely operatic. Paul Englishby, who composed the music, discusses his own work in the liner notes of the CD and says, “what began to emerge as I worked on the music for *Merry Wives* was a very eclectic musical mix, including Tangos, Vaudeville and Big Band Jazz, all sewn together with Elizabethan twine.” The phrase “all sewn together with Elizabethan twine” is no doubt crucial, and perhaps we can safely assume that *Merry Wives – The Musical* is the closest we can get to an Elizabethan musical comedy, if any such genre existed during Shakespeare’s lifetime.

### INCORPORATING FAMILIAR SONGS: *THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA*

In 1991, David Thacker directed *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* for the Royal Shakespeare Company, taking a different approach. He hardly changed Shakespeare’s text but set the piece in the 1930s, with the actors wearing formal costumes of the period, and added a number of popular songs belonging to the same period. The result was that the audience felt as if they were watching and listening to a musical comedy about a fashionable society of the 1930s. Guy Woolfenden, who provided some original music, says in the liner notes of the CD, “Music was obviously extremely important to the style of [this] production. High on the list of essentials was an on-stage 1930’s band and a specialist singer, present