

Interview with Medhi Walerski

Explain why *Romeo + Juliet* was an ambitious undertaking for you.

The story has been revisited and interpreted in so many ways and mediums and it has been done by so many dance companies. I didn't know if I had a unique perspective that was my own. Also, I had never done a story ballet before.

Funny enough, it has been one of the easiest creations I have done. I think the story lifted me; the way that Shakespeare wrote was so brilliant. Each character relates to the world we live in through such a broad spectrum of possibilities that I found so inspiring. The music inspired me deeply as well. Whenever I felt like I didn't know where the piece was going, I would re-read the play, or watch the movies or the other ballets. There is a great deal of writing on the play and I could immerse myself in this ocean of knowledge. I felt my spirit being nourished by such a great library of possibilities.

What were the interpretations that you took to Shakespeare's play?

I was very interested in the psychology of the characters. For example, in the scene when Mercutio is stabbed, I wanted to explore what happens in the subconscious when one realizes that one is dying. Or, when Juliet makes the decision to drink the poison, she is weighing love against life and making a decision about the unknown. I wanted to open up these moments and investigate them by stretching these capsules of time.

I stay close to the original storyline, but we are not in Verona nor the 14th century. I wanted it to be universal and to strip the story to its essence, allowing the dancers to sculpt the space. The set and costumes are minimalist as a counterpoint to the ornate interpretations that we normally see with this story. I wanted to extract the feeling of hatred and violence rather than emphasize the opposition between the families, and I found that the spectrum of greys between black and white could express a society taken over by hatred, yet also permit moments of limbo. Romeo and Juliet are dressed in white but they still move through shades of grey.

For me, the most beautiful moments in day and night are when they meet - when the sun rises and begins to illuminate the top of the sea. In music, it's the moment between the silence and the note.

How is creating a narrative work different from an abstract work?

In a narrative work, I have to convey a story. It's my responsibility to the audience that even if they didn't know the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, that they do after the performance. In an abstract work, the story is more permeable and how one character is to relate with one another is not as specific; we can all dive in and be lost in the unknown a bit.

How did the dancers prepare for their roles?

There is a rhythm in Shakespeare's words that connects with how he wanted people to feel. We had to connect those feelings with the body; for example, how to embody being in love.

The dancers did a lot of research - firstly, by reading the play. We had acting, sword fighting and stunt courses in order to untrain our bodies from the discipline of dance and access the raw essence of, for example, fighting. We rehearsed the choreography with reference to time and space, and the music, so that the dancers would experience the emotional journey of each scene and then allow that emotion to initiate the action in the body.

As an artist whose primary medium is the human body, which part of the body most fascinates you and why?

The senses of the body that connect us to one another - that ability to feel what happens between our bodies. Perhaps it is a universal body that lies among us.

-Pia Lo

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