



SHAKESPEARE AND LATINIDAD

Edited by Trevor Boffone and Carla Della Gatta

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Politics, Poetry and Popular Music:
Remixing Neruda's *Romeo y Julieta*

Jerry Ruiz

In spring 2016, Stephanie Ybarra, then the director of special artistic projects at The Public Theater, approached me about directing a staged reading of Pablo Neruda's 1964 play *Romeo y Julieta*. Ybarra oversaw The Public's Mobile Unit programme, which tours performances of Shakespeare's works to correctional facilities, homeless shelters and community centres across New York City's five boroughs. Familiar with my extensive history of working with Latinx and Spanish-language artists and audiences, she entrusted me with spearheading this project.

The Mobile Unit, re-established under the leadership of artistic director Oskar Eustis in 2010 after a thirty-year hiatus, aims to overcome the various barriers that communities and individuals might face in accessing Shakespeare. As The Public Theater contemplated ways to reach non-English-speaking communities, it looked back to its own rich tradition of Spanish-language performances during Joseph Papp's tenure as artistic director. In fact, in the 1960s, Papp wrote to Pablo Neruda seeking permission to tour a version of his Spanish-language translation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Neruda assented.

In summer 2016, following the Mobile Unit's current formula of stripped-down stagings and ninety-minute versions of Shakespeare's texts, we held public readings of an abridged version of Neruda's work. The initial readings took place at an after-school programme for high schoolers in Brooklyn and at a church in the Jackson Heights neighbourhood in Queens. This initial project would develop further over the next few years. As it did so, I gradually discovered the power of well-known popular music to illuminate Shakespeare's (and Neruda's) play for Spanish-speaking audiences.

Neruda's contemporaries in Chilean music, most famously Violeta Parra, had responded to the injustices of their day through powerful protest music. In our work, the sociopolitical context of Neruda's translation became intertwined with a contemporaneous musical sound track as an entry point

for staging the play in Spanish. The project gradually blossomed into *Mala Estrella*, a streamlined version of the Romeo and Juliet story culled from Neruda's translation, and then combined with popular Latin American music and original Spanish-language songs.

Preparation of the Text of *Romeo y Julieta* for a Mobile Unit Staged Reading

Before I began assembling my script for the initial readings in summer 2016, Ybarra asked me to follow the performance parameters typically employed by the Mobile Unit: the performance should be about ninety to a hundred minutes in length, with approximately eight or nine actors playing all of the roles. These parameters enable the performance to be both portable and accessible. At the same time, they force a director to make some crucial choices about how to prepare the text.

As I began to cut Neruda's translation, I used another Mobile Unit script as a guide for approaching a ninety-minute run time while keeping the story clear and intact: dramaturg James Shapiro's cut of Shakespeare's original *Romeo and Juliet* text. This English-language production had taken place in spring 2016, not long before our staged readings. Shapiro, an eminent Shakespearean scholar, has prepared several cuts for the Mobile Unit. Having assisted on a production of *Much Ado about Nothing* that used one of his cuts, I knew that his work would always strive for narrative clarity and maintain the spirit of the original text.

Directorially, my way into considering *Romeo and Juliet* via Neruda began with the theme of exile. The discovery that Neruda had spent three years in exile in the late 1940s and early 1950s because of his affiliation with the Communist Party proved illuminating, given that Romeo ends up in exile after killing Tybalt. As such, Romeo's forced departure from Verona seems quite poignant, and I began to consider the larger sociopolitical realities of Neruda's native Chile in the mid-1960s. This angle seemed especially important given that Neruda carved out a significant career not only as poet but as a diplomat and political figure. He eventually returned to Chile, remaining active in politics. In fact, by 1970, his supporters wanted to nominate him as a presidential candidate, but he declined, instead endorsing pro-democracy leader Salvador Allende. Allende was eventually elected and then overthrown by Pinochet, whose regime some still blame for Neruda's mysterious death in 1973.

Part of what makes Neruda's telling of this story unique and important is his keen awareness of the power of social unrest to shape the personal lives of individuals living under unstable or unjust authoritarian regimes. Romeo and Juliet's romance becomes more than teenage rebellion: it is also an act of

political subversion. Romeo's eventual exile takes on a deeper significance in a translation by a Chilean poet who found himself exiled. Moreover, it might resonate very deeply with a Spanish-speaking audience of immigrants and descendants of immigrants now living in the United States. This context was an essential part of my instructions to the actors on the first day of rehearsal, as well as in subsequent table work. I wanted them all to consider that Romeo and Juliet's love is truly dangerous and destabilising, and that their actions are not just romantic and heroic, but defiant. At the same time, I began to view the role of the prince in the play as that of an authoritarian, autocratic leader who essentially imposes martial law in Verona, in part to gain control of the escalating (and seemingly endless) feud between the Capulets and the Montagues.

Driven by a desire to capture the unrest and uncertainty of Neruda's time, I gravitated towards the music of his contemporaries: the great Chilean protest singer-songwriters Victor Jara and Violeta Parra. I invited Julián Mesri, the highly knowledgeable Argentinian musician and composer (as well as actor and playwright), to join us for the reading. I knew that his familiarity with this music would help me integrate appropriate musical content. In the end, we incorporated the ballad 'Muchacha Ojos de Papel' by Luis Alberto Spinetta to underscore the fateful first meeting between Romeo and Juliet, and Violeta Parra's iconic song 'Gracias a la vida' to punctuate the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt. Mesri wrote original music for the prologue and turned the prince's final speech into an epilogue, both of which he sang.

The Latin American music, paired with Neruda's beautiful language, rendered many of the play's well-known passages new again. Romeo and Juliet's first meeting and the subsequent balcony scene – scenes that many theatre aficionados can recite by memory and that are replete with well-worn phrases such as 'O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?' and 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet' – became novel again for a bilingual audience hearing them for the first time in Spanish. Additionally, the cast's awareness of the sociopolitical textures at play for Neruda and his original audiences brought Shakespeare's tragedy to life in a new and exciting way for our artists and audiences alike.

Adaptation: Development of *Mala Estrella/Star Crossed*

In summer 2017, Ybarra approached me again about continuing my work with the Mobile Unit on *Romeo y Julieta*. This time, The Public was collaborating with the New York City Parks SummerStage programme, which presents free performances in parks throughout all five boroughs.

The idea that emerged throughout my conversations with Ybarra was that music, especially songs known to a Spanish-speaking audience, could serve as

a gateway into Neruda's translation of Shakespeare's story for SummerStage's Spanish-speaking audience, who are accustomed to enjoying live music but might not be as well versed in classical theatre.

Ybarra and I approached the highly acclaimed Argentinian performer Sofia Rei. Rei writes original music and also interprets well-known traditional songs from the Latin American canon in a contemporary style, employing elements of electronic music such as vocal loops. Rei eventually selected a number of songs, and through a series of conversations, we placed them strategically throughout the play. Many of these songs were from Chile or Argentina, with two Violeta Parra pieces, as well as Spinetta's aforementioned ballad 'Muchacha Ojos de Papel'. Rei sang all the songs herself, backed by her three-piece band. This decision was made for somewhat practical reasons, chiefly to allow us to cast the best Spanish-speaking actors available without having to worry about their singing abilities. Her voice, and the presence of the musicians, who added a significant amount of underscoring, hinted at the dynamic storytelling potential inherent in this approach. We billed the evening as *Los Desdichados*, or *Star Crossed*. The event, which used a cast of four in addition to the four musicians, offered select highlights from the love story at the centre of Shakespeare's play with various songs serving as connective tissue.

The following year, in 2018, The Public commissioned me to continue developing the project with Sofia Rei. Although we were satisfied with the four-actor version of *Star Crossed* presented in 2017, it had been limited to scenes between the two lovers and their respective confidants, the nurse and the friar, which rendered it solely a love story, stripping it of the sociopolitical context that served as our initial entry point into Neruda's text. Characters such as Mercutio (with his raunchy humour) and the foppish suitor Paris had been entirely absent, which may have meant a missed opportunity to connect with the audience through comedy.

For this third iteration, then, we added a fifth actor who would play Mercutio, the prince and Paris. The actress playing the nurse would also double as Tybalt, allowing us to depict the fateful fights between Mercutio and Tybalt and then Romeo and Tybalt; the actor playing the friar would also play Capulet and the comedic role of the servant Peter. Additionally, Rei would be further integrated into the dramatic structure of the evening, serving as the chorus at the beginning and end of the play. She became our primary storyteller, framing the evening more clearly. With Rei in this role – performing both love songs reflective of the central characters' journey and protest music evocative of the larger sociopolitical circumstances – we were able to successfully interweave those two strands of the story.

The song list remained largely intact from the previous version, with some key additions. In brainstorming this new version with Rei, I landed on a

satisfying Spanish title for the project: *Mala Estrella*. This phrase was pulled from Neruda's translation of the play's famous prologue sonnet. When I mentioned this new title to Rei, she replied, 'that sounds like the perfect title for a *cumbia*'. Rei proceeded to compose a cumbia song with lyrics based on Neruda's translation of the prologue. An opening number in the cumbia style – which originates in Colombia and Venezuela, and combines African, Indigenous and European influences – firmly places these characters and their story in the Americas from the beginning. This number was performed following an abbreviated version of the fight between the Montague and Capulet servants, with Romeo intervening and Tybalt interrupting to clash with him. Rei also composed a song titled 'Reina Mab', which was combined with a condensed version of Mercutio's Queen Mab speech. The scene was staged with Mercutio and Romeo smoking marijuana before entering the Capulets' feast.

It so happened that some of our actors this time around could sing well, so Romeo ended up singing a snippet of 'Muchacha Ojos de Papel', Romeo and Juliet sang 'Jurame' (a romantic ballad by Mexican songwriter Maria Grever) as a duet, and the friar rapped his first speech as well as a subsequent monologue where he is giving counsel to Romeo. All these changes resulted in a work that felt complete and satisfying as a theatrical narrative buoyed by the constant presence of music, unlike the version from the previous summer.

Retrospect

There are some obvious challenges when introducing a primarily Spanish-speaking audience to Shakespeare's work. Language and cultural barriers may exist, and some of these audiences have likely not enjoyed the degree of familiarity with Shakespeare that even non-theatre-going English speakers usually have; indeed, *Romeo and Juliet* is commonly assigned as part of the curriculum in American high schools, and many English speakers have likely watched a film version at some point, even if they have never seen it in a theatre.

Fortunately, Neruda gifted us with a masterful Spanish translation of *Romeo and Juliet*, which served Ybarra, Rei and me as the foundational piece of our continued work on the material from iteration to iteration. The process of making Shakespeare our own and filtering it through our cultural experiences while adding both traditional and new music proved to be artistically rewarding. In our experience, popular music played a key role in making the story accessible to a Spanish-speaking audience, while underscoring the political resonance that Shakespeare's play would have had for a poet such as Neruda in his time, and that it continues to have for Spanish speakers in the United States, individuals who may well have left their homeland behind due to political unrest or economic uncertainty.