



SHAKESPEARE AND LATINIDAD

Edited by Trevor Boffone and Carla Della Gatta

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*Romeo y Julieta: A Spanish-Language
Shakespeare in the Park*

Daphnie Sicre

In 2006, while I was a high school drama teacher in Miami, Florida, I was approached and asked to direct Miami's first ever Spanish-language production of Shakespeare in the Park – *Romeo y Julieta*. The request came to me by way of one of my students, Steven Rodriguez, on behalf of Colleen Stovall, the artistic director of Shakespeare Miami (formerly the Miami Shakespeare Festival). Colleen had been directing Shakespeare in Peacock Park in Coconut Grove, Miami, and had expressed an interest in mounting a Spanish-language production of *Romeo and Juliet*. The only problem was that she did not speak Spanish. Steven, who had been cast in her *Taming of the Shrew* and was her intern at the time, suggested my name.

I am fluent in Spanish and had directed theatre productions in this language before, but I had never directed Shakespeare in Spanish. I had also only directed scenes and monologues from Shakespeare's work, never a full-length production. Fortunately, in 2004, I had spent the summer taking workshops with the Royal Shakespeare Academy and the Globe Theatre. Thus, I embraced the challenge and jumped right on board. Needless to say, mounting *Romeo y Julieta* was a crash course in translating a classic to Spanish for various Latinx audiences. From casting concerns to translation choices to local weather conditions, the challenges were many. But overcoming all these challenges was worth the learning experience, especially since this production introduced many local Latinx audiences to a classical work in their native tongue for the first time, and for free.

I met with Colleen, and we finalised the production dates for the summer. We quickly started production and casting meetings. She also contacted the Miami-Dade Division of Arts and Culture, which had held various free concerts at the West Miami Dade Park but had never helped produce any Shakespeare in the Park productions. With the help of the Miami-Dade Division of Arts and Culture as well as the City of Miami Parks and

Recreation, Shakespeare Miami agreed to host three nights of Shakespeare in the Park in Spanish, for free, at Tropical Park as part of the newly formed *Noches Tropicales*.¹ *Romeo y Julieta* ran from 21 to 23 July 2006, as part of this series. With the support of Mayor Manny Diaz, and donations from local and non-local businesses for lumber and costumes, our production was set. But before we could start, we needed a cast, and I needed to pick the right script.

The first major challenge was casting. Everything about Shakespeare Miami was on a volunteer basis. Neither I nor the actors would be paid for our role in the production. This also meant that we could not cast union actors, thus limiting our acting pool selection in Miami. Colleen and I created a casting call in both English and Spanish that we posted through multiple outlets, from *Craig's List* to *Backstage*. We also posted on several Spanish casting sites. We asked for Latinx actors fluent in Spanish as well as actors who understood and would be willing to act in Spanish. Unfortunately, the response was very low, likely a result of the online casting exposure not being as far reaching as it would be today, as well as the volunteer nature of the production. I turned to various high school teachers across the area and asked them to share this opportunity with their Spanish-speaking students. We also approached students at University of Miami and Florida International University (FIU). Given the age of most of the characters in *Romeo y Julieta*, high school and college theatre students were the perfect casting choice.

We had no response from students at the University of Miami, but several FIU and high school students showed up to audition. Some community members came out to audition as well, which was perfect, as we needed strong actors to play the friar, the nurse, and Romeo and Juliet's parents. Most of the community did not have experience acting, but they still wanted to give it a try, and thus they came out and auditioned. Our nurse was a white American actress who had learned Spanish in high school and college. She spoke Spanish with a noticeable American accent but was charming in the role of the nurse. She had previously performed with Shakespeare Miami and had worked with Colleen. Our friar was a complete surprise: he had never acted before but was probably one of the most talented actors I had ever worked with. The actor that played Juliet's father was an improv actor who wanted to give dramatic acting a try, and he made all of our rehearsals a blast. Juliet was a former FIU film student who looked young enough to portray a fourteen-year-old, and Romeo was Steven, the student who initially contacted me about the production. Despite the age difference and the actors' unfamiliarity with each other, our Romeo and Juliet shared a powerful chemistry. Once onstage, the friar and the nurse excelled in all their scenes, becoming audience favourites.

We managed to cast every role in the show despite the low turnout of trained actors. However, after we cast Romeo's parents, they both dropped out due to the demands of the rehearsal schedule. We also had a couple of

other actors who played minor roles drop out for various reasons. This is community theatre where no one gets paid, and individuals who have not previously acted in a professional setting often do not realise the importance of regularly attending rehearsals. Although we broke up the rehearsals into scenes, the schedule still proved too demanding for some. What we were not ready for was having the actress who played Romeo's mother drop out the week the play opened! Without an actress, and with only one week until opening, we ended up cutting most of Romeo's mother's lines from the play. But we still needed a Lady Montague for Mercutio's death and Romeo's banishment. With no other options, I stepped up, memorised the lines, and played the role for the crucial scenes.

Overall, we ended up casting seventeen actors, from ten different countries: Colombia, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Mexico, Cuba, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil and the United States (including one actor from Puerto Rico). In all my years of directing, that is the only time I have had the pleasure of working with so many Latinx and Latin American actors in one play. I loved that everyone came from all over the Americas – as came out in performance through the different Spanish accents – and that they were all here to put on this production for the community. However, the diversity of the cast created problems with the script and the Spanish language used.

Choosing the script was not an easy process. As the only fluent Spanish speaker on the production team, I had to select the script. In 2006, Amazon and other online book retailers did not have as many options as they do now. I could not just search online for Spanish-language translations of *Romeo and Juliet*. I called my family in Spain and asked them to go to a couple of bookstores and purchase copies of the play. I received seven different translations in the mail. It took me a couple of weeks to read all them. I wanted to find a translation that kept the rhythm and the rhyme of Shakespeare's words. It was important that the translation retain the iambic pentameter as well as the richness and flow of the language. My favourite script was Pablo Neruda's 1964 translation, a beautiful, poetic adaptation in which Neruda intertwined his own language and made it his own. Yet, because the translation contained neither the fluidity nor the metre of Shakespeare's text, I had to find another version. If I wanted to keep the same integrity of Shakespeare's words, I needed to pick a translation closer to his original script.

Next, I landed on a 2003 translation from Colección Letras Universales, which seemed most useful because it provided a bilingual translation side by side with the original. This text was written in conjunction with the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham in Stratford-upon-Avon, and it pulled from an English version that was similar to the First Quarto from 1599 (Q2) and 1623 (F). It maintained the metre and rhyme of the English. As soon as we started table work, however, we discovered that

this script was not ideal. The page layout helped with translations, but the actors' diverse backgrounds made it complicated to define some of the words in the script as well as to pronounce certain words. It became clear that even though we all spoke Spanish and were predominantly Latinx, there were too many unknown Spanish words in the script. It was the curse and blessing of casting diverse Latinx actors from all across the Americas. The Spanish used was similar to the 'old Spanish' used during the 1500s and 1600s in Spain, difficult to understand in much the same way as Elizabethan English. We often found ourselves using *No Fear Shakespeare* to translate the English, just to then translate it back to the Spanish. Had we had a Spanish-speaking dramaturg or a vocal coach or even someone to work on dialect, we might have been able to use this version, but given that we were all volunteers, this script was not working. Thus it became very tedious. After a couple rehearsals, the cast asked whether there was another translation we could use.

At that point, I decided to bring in Ángel-Luis Pujante's 1993 version. As one of the leading Spanish translators of Shakespeare, Pujante's craft is evident. The difference was like night and day. Coincidentally, several actors shared that they had read that version when they were in middle school or high school, which was a revelation to me. Personally, growing up in Spain, I had not read Shakespeare's work before I came to the United States. In contrast, several of the actors came from Latin American countries whose governments mandate (translated) Shakespeare as part of the curriculum. The Pujante script helped unify the cast. It was written in the most universal, approachable language and was thus easier for the cast to memorise. It also provided useful Spanish annotations. I kept the Colección Letras Universales version available as well, though, for its annotated notes and side-by-side translation. This working method with the two scripts proved useful for the actors who did not speak Spanish fluently.

After the table work, we started our rehearsals. Since we were performing in the park, our rehearsals were outdoors. This led to a consistent challenge in Miami, where the rainy season extends from April to July, and the hurricane season extends from June to November. June to July is the intersection of these two seasons, when the frequent midday storms can last up to four hours. Unfortunately, our rehearsals (which took place in the late afternoons and early evenings, after the actors were done with work or school) often coincided with these storms. We were lucky, however, in our choice of rehearsal location. Rather than rehearsing at Tropical Park, where the performances would take place, we rehearsed at Peacock Park (site of previous Shakespeare at the Park productions), which was closer for everyone involved.² Fortunately, Peacock Park not only had a rehearsal space similar to the two-storey stage that would be built for the production; it also provided us with refuge during the rain. Tropical Park had no such sheltered spaces.

Rain or shine, the show was going to happen! Unfortunately, the weather did not want to cooperate. The set was built a week before opening, and its construction was followed by daily bouts of rain. It rained so much that our first performance was cancelled. Although the rain had stopped by the scheduled start time, there was so much water accumulated in the soil that no audience member would have wanted to sit in the mud for three and a half hours to watch a production of Shakespeare – even a free one.

Fortunately, we opened the next day, 21 July 2006, and we were able to perform three shows for the community. Hundreds of people showed up. They brought their blankets, chairs and bright smiles. The *Miami Herald* wrote a feature on us, describing our production as the focal contribution to *Noches Tropicales*, what would become a centre for cultural arts in West Miami-Dade. Thanks to our production, *Noches Tropicales* was officially launched. Although *Noches Tropicales* has not since produced another Shakespeare in the Park, the programme is in its thirteenth year as of 2020, and it still brings free Latinx arts to audiences in the park.³ More importantly, this experience brought the cast closer together, and many of us have kept in touch to this day.

Overall, the process of mounting *Romeo y Julieta* was an incredible learning experience: from casting Spanish-speaking actors from across the Americas, to spending weeks finding the perfect translation for the cast, to mounting a production in the park in the middle of the rainy season in Miami. All the challenges were worth it, in the end, in order to mount Miami's first ever free Spanish-language Shakespeare in the Park.

Notes

1. *Stars at the Park Noches Tropicales* is an annual programme of Miami-Dade Parks that provides local communities with culturally relevant entertainment for families.
2. Tropical Park is a 275-acre park west of South Miami near Palmetto Expressway and Bird Road, whereas Peacock Park is a 9.4-acre park in Coconut Grove closer to Biscayne Bay.
3. Colleen took a break from producing plays and rebranded the Miami Shakespeare Festival as Shakespeare Miami. She still produces plays in the park, but she has not since produced one in Spanish.