COLLABORATING WITH SHAKESPEARE: RECENT REWRITINGS OF ROMEO AND JULIET ON THE ROMANIAN STAGE

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Abstract

The paper investigates the factors contributing to the recent surge in popularity of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet on the Romanian stage. One possible explanation lies in the play's adaptability and relevance to present-day concerns coupled with the opportunities for creative reimagining offered by its canonical Romanian translation. The article posits that directors and playwrights have engaged in a fruitful “collaboration with the dead” (Leitch 19), breathing new life into the classic text by means of different forms of rewriting. Specifically, the paper discusses two recent versions of Romeo and Juliet staged in Bucharest, at Teatrul Mic in 2018 and at Teatrul Odeon in 2021, and focuses on the process of rewriting Shakespeare's text in the form of a theatre adaptation and of a radical appropriation.

Keywords: Romeo and Juliet, contemporary Romanian productions, rewriting, translation, appropriation

The recent past in the Romanian theatre has witnessed a renewed interest in Romeo and Juliet. There have been three different productions in Bucharest: the first at the Metropolis Theatre (2016), under the direction of Victor Ioan Frunză,
with a translation by Adrian N. George; a second at the National Theatre of Bucharest (2018) directed by Yuri Kordonsky, featuring a translation by Violeta Popa, and one at Teatrul Mic (2018), under the direction of Liliana Pană, with a translation by St. O. Iosif. Four years later, a radical appropriation, Juliet without Romeo, directed by Bogdan Theodor Olteanu (2021), was offered at Teatrul Odeon. All productions have been using to a larger or lesser extent the canonical Romanian translation of the play, written by St. O. Iosif over a hundred years ago. The inevitable question that arises is: what may account for the popularity of the play, let alone of an ‘old’ translation, at a time of fast-paced changes in the cultural make-up of Romanian audiences? One answer that the present article is offering is the adaptability and topicality of Shakespeare’s play (Cerdá, Delabastita and Gregor 3) and the possibilities for rewriting that its canonical Romanian translation has been providing. As we shall try to argue, directors and playwrights have been engaged in a process of productive ‘collaboration with the dead’ (Leitch 19). In the present paper, we shall focus on two versions of the play as produced at Teatrul Mic and at Teatrul Odeon. Of particular interest will be the rewriting of the text, be it in the form of a theatre adaptation (Teatrul Mic) or of a radical appropriation (Teatrul Odeon).¹ We have decided on employing the term rewriting rather than ‘the blanket term’ adaptation, which ‘now dominates as a default for the entire practice of rewriting itself’ (Saunders 5), as it allows us to look and compare the processes at work in what Ton Hoenselaars describes as a ‘sliding generic scale’ (15) of rewriting. Hoenselaars points out that ‘the borderline between translation and adaptation is extremely difficult to draw, certainly since, in recent years, translation itself has come to be looked upon as a form of adapting and rewriting [...] perhaps we ought to concentrate on the degree of rewriting and the alleged or implied objectives of the go-between’ (15).

¹ For the definition of ‘appropriation’ as a more ‘decisive journey away from the informing sources into a wholly new cultural product or domain’ (26) see Julie Sanders Adaptation and Appropriation (2001). For a discussion of appropriations of Shakespeare’s plays and their controversial status see Margaret Kidnie, Shakespeare and the problem of Adaptation (Routledge 2009). For the notion of ‘radical adaptation’ or ‘radical revival’ which is ‘a risk-taking, innovative remake within the framework of a significantly different reconstruction’ see Jozefina Komporaly ‘Radical Revival as Adaptation: Theater, Politics, Society (4).
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Romeo and Juliet - Teatrul Mic (2018)

The Teatrul Mic production has been an uninterrupted success for four years, frequently with sold-out performances. The key to this success might lie in the balance that the process of rewriting both Shakespeare’s text and St. O Iosif’s translation has struck between the desire to be ‘faithful’ to Shakespeare’s play and the endeavour to retailor it in order to cater to the tastes and expectations of the 21st-century public.

The production has also benefitted from the theatrical experience of Liliana Pană,² an esteemed actress who not only has undertaken the role of director but also the silent one of adapting Iosif’s translation. Despite the availability of subsequent translations, including some specially commissioned for the theater, Iosif’s rendition has remained a favourite among Romanian directors, notwithstanding its inherent imperfections and archaic language (Cinpoes, ‘Romeo and Juliet – The East Side’ 187). This version admired by theatre practitioners for its poetic and prosodic qualities has nevertheless become subject to an ongoing endeavour of modernization and revision. The rewriting efforts have aimed at rendering the text palatable to a contemporary audience no longer accustomed to listening and comprehending poetic texts. Numerous concerns have been expressed by Romanian theatre professionals regarding the limited theatrical and cultural competences observed in modern audiences in comparison to previous ones (Dabija, 2023). These debates in the Romanian theatre resonate with recent positions on the translation, adaptation, and performance of foreign (French) plays for the English stage, which emphasise the necessity for a continuous process of ‘compromise and negotiation’ (Hand 159). This process, however, does not involve a rigid approach that ‘strips away over-specified details’ or mollifies any potential risks to comprehension (Hand 159); rather, it entails a multifaceted practice of ‘redrafting and rehearsing’ (Upton 33), where the collective efforts of the director, translator, and actors focus on theatre-specific aspects such as ‘performability’, ‘speakability’, ‘breathability’ (Snell-Hornby 107), and ‘understandability’ (Johnston 37).

² This is not the first time that L. Pană has ventured on directing and adapting Shakespeare for the stage. In 2012, she took on a similar triple role when she directed the performance ‘Hamlet: an exercise’ with an independent company of young actors, ‘Shakespeare Company.ro’, founded by her and dedicated to experimenting with Shakespeare’s texts.
In the production by Teatrul Mic, the retailing of Shakespeare’s text for the stage has entailed the implementation of structural cuts, including reductions in the number of roles\(^3\) and within specific acts, resequencing of scenes, and micro-editing at the level of individual lines. The alterations made to the list of roles, notably the deliberate exclusion of characters such as the Montagues (Romeo’s parents) and numerous secondary figures (Chorus, Samson, Gregory, Friar John, Apothecary, Watchmen, etc.), along with the removal of specific scenes (such as the Prologue and the final reconciliation between the two feuding families), have resulted in a shifting of focus towards other characters who have been expanded upon and given greater prominence on stage. As we will show, Friar Laurence, the Nurse, and Lady Capulet assume more significant roles. In a similar vein, these structural cuts, coupled with the curtailment and delay of the initial brawl, alongside a tendency to amplify the comedic elements of the play, collectively contribute to a decrease of the degree of violence within the production (in contrast to the National Theatre performance, where the representation of violence was excessively emphasized.)

In this theatrical adaptation, Shakespeare’s story is retold from the perspective of Friar Laurence (Rareș Florin Stoica), who merges with the Chorus and assumes an omnipresent presence on stage. In his attempt to justify his actions and gain deeper comprehension of the tragic events that have unfolded, he recounts the plot through a series of flashbacks that emphasize the timeless romance shared by the ill-fated lovers. This repurposed cinematic technique serves to make the representation of Shakespeare’s Verona more relatable to contemporary audiences, who may be more familiar with previous film adaptations of the story.

Furthermore, the process of retailing Shakespeare’s text has yielded a shift in gender dynamics, leading to a heightened emphasis on the female characters within the play. This transformation is accompanied by a reduced focus on the primary male figures in positions of authority, such as Prince Escalus and Lord Capulet. Thus, the Prince, who originally serves in the play as the primary source of political and social authority remains virtually absent from

\(^3\) If we compare the reductions made in the list of characters in the three Romanian productions mentioned above, we notice a gradual decrease in the number of roles (30 at Metropolis Theatre, 16 at the National Theatre and 12 at Teatrul Mic).
the stage. His interventions are limited to two brief appearances as a disembodied recorded voice (Victor Rebengiuc) that chastises the brawlers for their misbehaviour but fails to have any authoritative impact in restoring order.

The roles of the Nurse (Liliana Pană) and of Lady Capulet (Ruxandra Enescu) have been expanded, assuming stage centrality and asserting dominance. Both characters embody powerful, bold women, equally, though differently, in charge of Juliet’s life. By reimagining the dynamics within the Capulet family, this interpretation challenges traditional gender roles and explores the complexities of familial relationship. Lady Capulet is portrayed as a domineering wife as well as an emotionally distant mother, whose relationship with Juliet lacks any intimacy and affection. Her primary concern lies in securing a financially advantageous marriage for her daughter, which leads her to manoeuvre backstage the plans for Juliet’s wedding to Paris. She assumes the role of decision-maker in the household, while Lord Capulet is reimagined as a submissive husband who is completely under her control. Lady Capulet’s display of affection and profound regret is limited to a solitary moment in an emotionally charged scene when she mourns over the seemingly lifeless body of Juliet.

The relationship between Juliet (Alina Rotaru) and the Nurse serves as a striking contrast to Juliet’s relationship with her own mother. While Lady Capulet is portrayed as emotionally distant, the Nurse, now a central character, assumes the role of a nurturing and affectionate maternal figure in Juliet’s life. She acts as an intermediary between Juliet and her mother, fulfilling a dual role that combines tenderness with resolute guidance. Unlike the subservient position often associated with servants, the Nurse in this production does not occupy a subordinate role within the Capulet household. On the contrary, she wields a significant degree of authority in Juliet’s life, akin to that of a ‘third parent’; she is a mediator between Juliet and the world around her. The bond between Juliet and the Nurse is predominantly characterized by a sense of warmth, trust, and genuine affection. However, it is also marked by Juliet’s assertion of independence and her tendency to question the Nurse’s authority as it becomes evident in the tension-filled scene, wherein the Nurse imparts the news of Tybalt’s death and Romeo’s banishment to Juliet. We first witness both of them collapse on their knees and embrace each other, while the Nurse repetitively exclaims ‘Oh God, oh, God, we are undone, we are undone!’ Juliet,
assuming a vulnerable foetus-like position, initially seeks solace in the comforting embrace of the Nurse, as she desperately attempts to comprehend Romeo’s actions ‘O serpent heart hid with a flowering face!’ (3.3.80) However, the atmosphere suddenly changes, not only in Juliet’s demeanour but also in her physical posture, as she transitions from the foetal-like position to a towering stance over the Nurse, upon hearing the Nurse’s statement, ‘I wish Romeo were dead’ (a more dramatic rendition of ‘Shame come to Romeo’ (3.2.89). Eventually, the Nurse’s change of heart and her ultimate decision to seek out Romeo, thereby affording them the opportunity to spend their wedding night together, reinstates their affectionate bond, which is once again exemplified by a change in their physical positioning: as Juliet visibly brightens up, she eagerly leaps into the Nurse’s lap. In line with this understanding of the Nurse’s character, the depiction of her act of betraying Juliet when, later in the play, she cynically switches sides and advises Juliet to marry Paris, is curtailed and modified in order to lessen the sense of betrayal.

As we have mentioned in the beginning, a significant aspect of the process of retailoring Shakespeare’s text resides in the micro-editing that occurs at the level of individual lines. Liliana Pană’s rewriting is self-consciously geared towards the mise-en-scène and aims to re-shape Iosif’s translation in order to make it performable and easily accessible to the Romanian audience. Consequently, preserving the verse form or the rhetorical and poetical features of Shakespeare’s text was not considered a priority, as they were deemed to be a hindrance for contemporary audiences. This approach aimed to make the actors’ speech as lively and natural as their physical actions on stage.
As it can be noticed in the example provided in the table in Fig. 1, which includes three different translations of the initial part of the balcony scene, Pană’s primary objective was to produce fluent dialogue in spoken Romanian that relied on direct and concise exchanges. Unlike the other two translations, which preserve the Shakespearean text in its entirety as well as its poetical and rhetorical structure, Pană’s adaptation provides an abridged and simplified version of the scene; her version omits particularly those lines of Juliet’s most famous ‘What’s in a name?’ soliloquy that focus on a philosophical understanding of ‘the relation between onomastics and ontology, words and things, signifier and signified’ (Maguire 50). The result of these liberties taken
with the language and the text was that the dialogue did not appear studied or contrived but rather reflected the natural idiom of the characters, managing thus to achieve a balance between the stage text and the actors’ performance (Snell-Hornby 17). This is a method à la Zeffirelli, who is known to have prioritized authenticity at the expense of verse, in his 1960 stage production of the play at Old Vic and later in his renowned film adaptation of Romeo and Juliet (Weis 79).

It is noteworthy that the production at Teatrul Mic endeavours to retrieve what may be perceived as ‘lost’ in terms of poetic and metaphorical language by employing non-verbal elements in the performance. These theatre-specific features encompass lighting, live music, props etc. Notably, the live flute takes on a significant role by accompanying and signaling crucial decision-making moments throughout the play, such as Friar Laurence’s decision to support the two lovers in their plight or the Nurse’s decision to locate Romeo after his banishment, ultimately facilitating the consummation of their wedding night. Additionally, props like the white sheet assume metaphorical significance, symbolizing the intricate interplay between love and death as it serves as both a wedding bed and a death shroud. Furthermore, the enchanting sound of little birds chirping gracefully evokes Juliet’s omitted lines on the skylark’s song in the aubade scene, effectively transforming them into an auditory image.

Juliet without Romeo – Teatrul Odeon (2021)

In the latter part of this essay, we turn from the theatre adaptation at Teatrul Mic to the radical appropriation Juliet without Romeo (JWR from now on) at Teatrul Odeon, which is placed only a short distance away from Teatrul Mic in Bucharest. JWR was first performed in 2021 and is still currently playing as successfully as the production at Teatrul Mic, thereby evidencing both the Romanian public’s appetite for Shakespeare’s arch-canonic play and their readiness to experience a more radical rewriting. JWR is the result of the collaboration (sic!) work performed during the restrictive pandemic period between, an experienced theater and film director, Bogdan Theodor Olteanu, and a rising star from the Theater Academy, Alex Mircioi. The question that we are going to ask refers to their ‘collaboration’ with Shakespeare: how much are they haunted by this author, who ‘lived one thousand years ago’, as one character puts it in the play, yet who is still very much alive and revered in the Romanian cultural space? In
what ways can they figure out a break with him such as would still be acceptable to a traditionally minded audience?\(^4\)

\(^4\) JWR could be said to continue the focus on the female characters in the production at the Teatrul Mic: it expands the cuts that Liliana Pană has introduced, with the result that the new production excludes all male characters and only the trio of women already foregrounded in the Teatrul Mic production is present on the stage (Romeo is only discursively present). The appropriation further operates a relocation of the action to an unnamed provincial town in the Romania of our present times, with two of the characters being renamed – the Nurse is now called Sonia (Ruxandra Maniu), she is an experienced actress coaching Juliet for the entrance examination to the Theatre Academy. Lady Capulet becomes Marta (Elvira Deacu), wife of a nouveau riche called Alexandru, a provincial baron whose business competitor and enemy is Romeo’s father, unnamed in the play. JWR can be said to preserve much of the architecture of Shakespeare’s play, which serves as a foil for the unexpected twists in the plot and for the iconoclastic meanings injected in the play.

The major intervention into this architecture aims at what Dympa Callaghan has called the ideology of romantic love, and which has been lying at the core of all Romanian readings of the play.\(^5\) The love between Romeo and Juliet is relegated to the margins of the plot and is questioned both dramatically and discursively. In a self-referential conversation about Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, Marta (the new Lady Capulet) and Sonia (the new Nurse) discard the love story as blatantly unrealistic and challenge its iconic status as well as the prestige of its author. Juliet is the only one to defend the romantic love in Shakespeare’s play. Her own love experience with Romeo, however, is the very negation of the Shakespearean utopian spirit.\(^6\) In the end, Romeo proves totally helpless and

\(^5\) Callaghan argues that the romantic love in the play should be seen as a ‘Classic instance of false consciousness’, observing that among its oppressive effects, the dominant ideology of (heterosexual, monogamous) romantic love ‘secures women’s submission to the asymmetrical distribution of power between men and women’ (Callaghan 60 quoted in Lupton 88).

\(^6\) For the utopian spirit in Romeo and Juliet see Hugh Grady on the play’s cultivation of ‘a space in which love and desire persist even when they are represented as defeated by larger forces’ (Grady 228).
unworthy of her and dying for him comes out of the question. However, the play maintains and further develops the issue of Juliet’s struggle for freedom and self-realization; albeit it is no longer to be achieved through the ‘lovers’ self-recognition’ as Paul Kottman puts it in his important essay ‘Defying the stars...’ (37). According to him, the tragic structure of Romeo and Juliet turns around ‘two individuals who actively claim their separate individuality, their own freedom, in the only way they can, through one another’ (Kottman, 6) (my emphasis).

The appropriation JWR suggests another alternative for Juliet to claim her individuality and attain self-realization, namely by embracing a public career: going to Bucharest, becoming an actress and being independent emotionally and financially. The option for this self-empowering line of action can hardly amount to any shocking news to a post-feminist twenty-first century audience. Nor is the very idea of an iconoclastic commitment to an acting career passed off as original, as the text is full of allusions to other famous plays, dear to the Romanian audience, such as Cekhov’s The Seagull and Uncle Vanya, the latter being literally quoted in the play. What is novel however, next to the displacement of the love story, is the metatheatrical gesture of producing a revisionary appropriation of Shakespeare that explicitly questions the relevance of ‘the masters’ and their continuing hold in the theatre. The dominant attitude in the Romanian theatre is still one of reverence for Shakespeare, even if his work is radically appropriated, as Alexandru Dabija did in Pyramus and Thisbe 4 You (2009) or Matei Vişniec in Richard III Will Not Take Place (first performed in Romanian in 2005). The acclaimed director Alexandru Dabija confessed in an interview that he feels quite at home with Shakespeare and that the Bard should retain his ‘natural’ place in the Academy of Theater (Cinpoes, ‘Pyramus and Thisbe 4 You’ 118). The plot in JWR thus offers a dramatic enactment of the metatheatrical gesture to break away from Shakespeare and aim for independence. Shakespeare’s play becomes an object that the appropriation investigates. The feud between the two families triggering off the plot in Romeo and Juliet is rethought as a conflict between generations, between past and present and ultimately, between an adaptation and its source text. In keeping with the dominant trend in modern drama, the new adaptation dismisses the tragic ending of Shakespeare’s play and operates a shift in genre from tragedy towards drama. Juliet no longer dies (Romeo is abandoned as a lost cause), she just breaks away from home into the public world of the Romanian theatre and
According to Lupton, ‘[Juliet] chooses to practice a more secretive bravery whose immediate consequence is not to expand her capacities for action by setting her loose in the world (Cordelia to France, Helena to Italy, Hermia to the forest, Imogen to Wales, Marina to the sea and the city) but instead to induce the most rigid passivity: a sleeplike death that delivers her inert body to a tomb’ (Lupton 9).
of Theatre, which Juliet studies with her coach Sonia. It further becomes an occasion for the metatheatrical discussion of various ways of performing Juliet in our times as well an opportunity to consider various aspects of the construction of feminine identity of both Shakespeare's Juliet and the Juliet of the appropriation. The play thus offers an example of not only thinking about Shakespeare but also thinking with Shakespeare as Shakespeare appears to be helping the modern heroine to come to terms with her own femininity. As the proof of the pudding lies in eating it, Juliet delivers this speech in front of her own Romeo, also an offspring of the provincial nouveau-rich, who wears Versace. Romeo is highly impressed and is fully appreciative of her performance. Sonia, however, mistrusts the young lover's competence to evaluate it and is still sceptical about Juliet's success in front of the examination commission. The re-enactment of the famous lines in real life situations is thus dismissed as irrelevant. Judging by Sonia's views, i.e. a theatre practitioner's, Shakespeare's play does not seem to have any purchase in our world. But can Sonia's judgement be fully trusted? Have theatre practitioners developed a kind of prejudice against rendering Shakespeare's lines in an unabridged version, fearing the negative response of young audiences?

Sonia's character, just like Juliet's or Marta's, is a playful modulation on the Shakespearean blueprint, another instance of collaborating with Shakespeare in a recontextualized situation. Just like the Nurse in Shakespeare, she displays 'the self-interested pragmatism shaped by her status quo as a subordinate' (Lupton, 6). Even though she is now a mildly successful actress and, consequently, financially independent, her father used to be a driver and her mother a cleaning maid in Juliet's household and she is fully aware of her social inferiority within the Family. She can easily be prevailed on (she is practically bribed) to take the Family's side and to dissuade Juliet from her dream to pursue an acting career. Not unlike the Nurse in Shakespeare's master text, she betrays and abandons Juliet. Sonia plays the role of the pragmatic, level-headed mediator between Juliet and Marta, but also between Shakespeare and our world. She is highly relatable, uses the idiom of Romanian sitcoms, and chats with the audience. At the same time, it is Sonia who asks the most difficult

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8 In this respect JWR establishes another intertextual relationship recalling a very successful rock opera adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, staged in 2009. For more details on this production see the discussion in Cinpoeş (‘Romeo and Juliet – The East Side’ 187).
questions about the relevance of Shakespeare and of other canonical playwrights, ‘all long dead’. If Juliet is refigured as a rebellious youngster, who pugnaciously claims her independence against the traditional institutions of patriarchy, Sonia is the sharpest critic of theatrical practices in Romania and of the authority ‘old dead masters’, such as Shakespeare and Chekhov, still hold. She voices her iconoclastic views in a series of direct addresses to the audience, speaking in a colloquial, humorous tone and exuding the confidence of ‘ordinary’, practically minded people. As Sonia seems to represent the theatre world in the play, is her contestation of Shakespeare’s cultural authority to be taken as indicative of the stance of present-day theatrical practitioners? Or is she merely challenging the audience to contradict her and reassert Shakespeare’s iconic status? No definitive answers are provided. The major merit of the appropriation lies in asking difficult questions on Shakespeare’s afterlife in the present and on the possibilities of ‘collaborating with him. This is what the present essay has been trying to achieve as well.

Our focus on various degrees of rewriting has enabled us to tease out similarities and differences of versions of Romeo and Juliet that have been co-exexisting and potentially interacting with each other within a given spatial-temporal frame -- the Bucharest productions from 2017 to the present. Collaboration with Shakespeare seems indeed to have been highly productive and promising.

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135