



Unless philosophy  
can make a Juliet

## Description

# Les Grands Ballets dances Shakespeare in love

By **Robert Kilborn**

The most famous love story of all time endures because it is far more than a love story. It endures because it gives tangible and visible form to a vision of life, of society and politics, of violence and war, of meaning, of philosophy, of poetry, even of religion.



Shakespeare would go on to write much greater, more

metaphysically robust, and more ecstatically intense drama in *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. But here we have him at around age 30, after *Richard III*, and about the same time as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, exploring with lyrical rapture and uncanny sagacity the nature of love and violence, the rival potentates of our world, opposites indivisible, yin and yang, dark and light, life and death.

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The deadly feud between the Capulets and the Montagues represents the eternal and inevitable vendettas between (and within) families, states, and civilizations everywhere and at all times. The love between Romeo and Juliet represents the momentary reconciliations that implant the blood-irrigated fields of eternal war with the flowers of civilization, art, learning, and poetry. The strange (and, for many, insufferable) paradox is that love cannot exist without hate, peace without war. The paradox of war is that you have to kill people in order to stop people from killing each other.



## The triumph and failure of love

More paradoxes. Juliet's maniacally controlling father, supine mother, and frenemy nurse curse her with their earthly, selfish egocentricity. The scene where Juliet sees her nurse for the beast she is, when the latter counsels her to abandon Romeo and (bigamously) marry Paris—a wealthy young Veronese count forced on her by her despotic father and defective mother—is a revelation made all the more poignant when we remember that Juliet is a girl two weeks shy of 14. Yes, the comic and engaging nurse fools us all; Shakespeare's cunning moral psychology st, and a bawd who would happily corrupt her charge first with *brio*.



Ditto the dashing and impossibly witty Mercutio. He is rightly seen

as this play's most thrilling character. But all of Shakespeare's work on him is, again, paradoxical. It is said that

when a man curses someone, he characterizes himself. What Mercutio curses (violence, poor judgement, the fashions of the the day) he embodies: he lives belligerently, judges others for doing so, and then instigates the swordplay that both kills him and seals Romeo’s fate. His actions parallel those of the nurse. The nurse betrays Juliet by wavering in loyalty and devotion to her. Mercutio betrays Romeo by sinking him in the abyss of ancestral honour and revenge.

The sympathetic-seeming character of Friar Lawrence, the man who secretly marries the lovers, but out of fear abandons Juliet at the moment of her greatest need, is particularly illuminating. His well-intentioned actions, as (superficially) positive as they may seem to a casual reader or playgoer, are in the end as deadly as those of Juliet’s parents, Mercutio, and the Nurse. Juliet is abandoned *even by religion*.

But above and illuminating the blood-soaked horizons of permanent violence and war, love rises. Immune to the grubbing for money or power, love confounds the “honour” of families. It even subverts the authority of the state. And, superior to social expectations, love ultimately transcends both the claims of religion and the truths of philosophy:

*Romeo.* Unless philosophy can make a Juliet,  
Displant a town, reverse a prince’s doom,  
It helps not, it prevails not. Talk no more.

Some will object: “But love doesn’t last.” But in Renaissance as in Japanese, Hindu, and many other cultures, all of creation—from flowers to empires—symbolizes the ephemerality of life, the pathos of passing things, the transient triumph and failure of love.



## Dance like it’s 1595 (or 2016)

French dancer and choreographer Jean-Christophe Maillot was a star of the Hamburg Ballet until an accident



ended his career at age 23. He subsequently discovered his dancemaking talent, and since 1993 has been the artistic director of Les Ballets de Monte Carlo. He admires William Forsythe, Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham. His post-classical-avant-garde-eclectic ballets are performed by companies around the world.



in the dance. And dance suffers when it gets too far away

Numerous masters—Frederick Ashton, John Cranko, Sir Kenneth

MacMillan among them—have choreographed *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Grounded in the episodic character of Sergei Prokofiev's classic score, Maillot's 1996 version of the play structures the action cinematically, using slow-motion, freeze-frames, and flashbacks. It emphasizes character and ambivalence over the socio-political strife of opposing clans.

Poetry suffers when it gets too far away from the dance. And dance suffers when it gets too far away from poetry. In Jean-Christophe Maillot, we have a poet-dancer-choreographer who, in ballet, the most fleeting of arts, makes Shakespeare bristle and quill with blood and poetry. He achieves his goals with the energy and precision of a master—and a lover.

*Roméo & Juliette* by Jean-Christophe Maillot / Performed by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal / Starring Valentine Legat and Christie Partelow (Juliet), Raphaël Bouchard and Troy Herring (Romeo) / Music by Sergei Prokofiev performed by Les Grands Ballets Orchestra.

**Roméo & Juliette, October 13 to 28** at 8 pm, Théâtre Maisonneuve, Place des Arts, Montréal  
[grandsballets.com](http://grandsballets.com)

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**Robert Kilborn** has written for the *National Post*, the *Montreal Gazette*, *La Scena Musicale*, *Westmount Magazine*, *Cult Montreal*, *Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art* (New York), and *Tuck Magazine* (London, England). He is a former professional singer, English teacher, *Don Draper*, and General Manager of one of Canada's leading modern dance companies, *Anna Wyman Dance Theatre*.

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### Category

1. Dance
2. Review

### Tags

1. ballet
2. Jean-Christophe Maillot
3. Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal
4. Robert Kilborn
5. Roméo & Juliette
6. Romeo and Juliet

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