



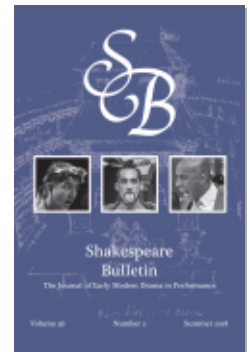
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Romeo & Juliet / Layla & Majnun (review)

Elizabeth E. Tavares

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zer as Henry and Margaret, René Thornton, Jr. continued to build his Richard from the ASC's productions of the earlier parts of the trilogy, and here he laid all the necessary groundwork to take Gloucester into *Richard III*. Thornton's was an appropriately aggressive Gloucester. His reaction to Rutland's and his father's deaths—"I cannot weep" (2.1.79)—was a rebuke to his other brothers, an angry reproof and a challenge. There was no pacifying semi-apology in his words to Warwick—"blame me not" (2.1.157)—and after kissing Edward's hand while declaiming in loud, supposed loyalty, "in despite of all that shall withstand you" (4.2.143), he surreptitiously wiped his mouth and spat his true disgust. Thornton's verse-speaking, always solid, was strongest in his central speech, during which he fondled the throne almost sexually, culminating in the long, drawn-out pronunciation of a multi-syllabic "Tuuuuuuu" followed by a rushed "were it farther off" and ending in a sharp, precisely punctuated "I'll. Pluck. It. Down" (3.2.195).

The production ended with Gloucester's words, not, as the play was written, with Edward's. After the king's (futile) hope for "lasting joy," (5.7.46) he and his court turned to exit. Gloucester turned to the audience instead, and announced, "Now is the winter of our discontent," continuing for the first four lines of *Richard III*, ending "In the deep bosom of the ocean buried" (1.1.1-4). The device neatly teased the next play, and based on the excellence of this one, I look forward to the ASC's final entry in the history cycle.

Works Cited

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Romeo & Juliet / Layla & Majnun

World premiere presented by **Bag & Baggage** at the **Civic Center Plaza**, Hillsboro, Oregon. July 20–August 5, 2017. Adapted and directed by Scott Palmer, with translation assistance by Melory Mirashrafi. Scenic design by Jim Ricks-White. Costumes by Melissa Heller. Fights choreographed by Signe Larsen. With Nicholas Granato (Romeo/Majnun), Lawrence Siulagi (the Sayyid), Cassie Greer (Benvolia), Colin Wood (Newfal/Mercutio), Avesta Mirashrafi (Abram), Eric St. Cyr (Ibn Salam/Paris), Gary Ploski (a

Storyteller), Arianne Jacues (Juliet/Layla), Mandana Khoshnevisan (Lady Capulet), Signe Larsen (Tybalt), and others.

ELIZABETH E. TAVARES, *Pacific University*

There is a vibrant tradition of performing William Shakespeare's playtexts cross-, multi-, and trans-culturally. Such productions help those in positions of privilege to reflect on the paradox of globalization: that to learn about other countries and cultures seems to always require additional labor of the culture that would not be colonized. To learn more about the other so often comes with the request that "they" somehow translate their vantage point to "us." In his Nobel Prize lecture, Gabriel García-Márquez named this burden the "crux of Solitude": "poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable" (García-Márquez). Bag & Baggage's world premiere of *Romeo & Juliet / Layla & Majnun*, a play interested in Shakespeare's text as a shared vocabulary, and in putting that in conversation with other shared cultural vocabularies, was an arresting example of how we can engage other cultures without asking for added sacrifice.

A composite of the Persian epic by Nizami Ganjavi and the English play (collaboratively adapted and directed by Scott Palmer and Melory Mirashrafi, a first-generation Iranian American), this production was sensitive to intersectional concerns at the level of composition, casting, and outreach. The multi-cultural cast was put together with a special interest in featuring those identifying as Middle Eastern. Half of all the proceeds from selected previews went to Defensa de la Dignidad, a new initiative providing public defender services and other resources to those threatened with deportation, with especial attention to the rural Latinx communities surrounding metropolitan Portland, Oregon. At the time of the production, Bag & Baggage was between homes, having been unexpectedly booted from their longtime venue, The Venetian Theatre, due to the skyrocketing prices of any real estate that touches the edges of Portland or the Nike corporate campus, and not yet able to move into its new home at The Vault. The performance was thus held out of doors between a Mediterranean eatery and a major transit stop. Both the text and performance conditions of this mash-up revealed unexpected ways in which Shakespeare's text resonates with the experience of migration.



Fig. 6. Romeo/Majnun, a Bedouin youth (Nicholas Granato), and Juliet/Layla, a Roman lady (Arianne Jacques) in *Layla and Majnun*, dir. Scott Palmer. Bag & Baggage, 2017. Photo by Elizabeth E. Tavares, with permission of Bag & Baggage.

The very title of this adaptation gets to the heart of the cultural collisions within and without the world of the play. Throughout the performance, Romeo was interchangeably called Majnun, and Juliet called Layla. (The advertisements and programs typographically belie the textual equality these conjoined identities enjoyed in performance.) They were not distinct identities, they were merely pseudonyms, synonyms for the woman who is “a jasmine bush in spring” and the man who is “a meadow in autumn.” It posed only a moment of confusion. Once the characters named themselves and each other, one understood that these names referred to the same individuals, whether Italian or Persian, all children of Mediterranean shores.

Staging the performance on the concrete steps of the Hillsboro Civic Center, itself reminiscent of a court house, brought to mind stereotypical prejudices against émigrés of all kinds, whether migrant farm workers, Bedouin, Syrian refugees, Romani, or even the Indigenous peoples displaced by the settler colonialism of the American pioneer movement that so shapes Oregon’s sense of itself within US history. In this production, friction was produced by the Bedouin lord, the Sayyid (Lawrence Siulagi), attempting to make trade and marriage alliances with the embassy from the Roman Emperor Constantine, led by Lady Capulet (Mandana Khoshnevisan). Historians call this *syncretism*: the (attempted) amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought. In this smart and efficient adaptation, syncretism was effected not merely in the mixing of texts and symbolic tropes, but in religious and character conflations made clear through dramaturgical choices wherein visual laminations echoed textual ones.

A particularly compelling example of this visual syncretism was the death of Tybalt, reconceived expertly as a Warrior of the Cross (crusader) who was played by/as a woman, fight choreographer Signe Larsen. To Tybalt, the stakes of Romeo/Majnun (Nicholas Granato) and Juliet/Layla’s (Arianne Jacques) miscegenation are apparent and appalling: not only will their love produce a child of ambiguous religious identification, but it will upset any political ties Lady Capulet might barter in the region. Tybalt thus wielded epithets, such as “Mahound,” conflating the idea of a hound or dog with someone of the Islamic faith, as much as weapons. Once the Roman was killed, a Bedouin warrior, Benvolia (Cassie Greer), was the only one left to give last rites to Tybalt’s body. Despite being enemies, the one woman genuflected over the other in a tent fashioned from an industrial, corporate staircase in an unexpected moment of female community.

The dynamism of the moment was then spiked by the simultaneous appearance of Juliet/Layla above, leaning on the crook of the outdoor staircase that mimicked a garden balcony. While Benvolia administered to the dying Tybalt, Juliet/Layla gave her famous speech of sexual anticipation, wherein “lovers can see to do their amorous rites.” The final rites going on below her created a visual enjambment of sex and death, making other parts of Juliet/Layla’s soliloquy ring anew:

Come, civil night,
 Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
 And learn me how to lose a winning match,
 Play’d for a pair of stainless maidenhoods

“Civil” reminded me as a playgoer of the concrete courthouse stairs I sat on—a space where migrant workers’ lives are routinely disrupted. “A pair of stainless” maidens had just fought and lost beneath her, taking the figurative out of her metaphor and bringing home the sense that the choices of these teenagers were sober, the lovers and their companions fully aware of the violence they courted. It was a beautiful overlap that gave new depth to both Tybalt’s death and to Juliet’s knowing sacrifice of her family alliances and religious allegiances.

One of the most iconic moments of the play is the dovetailing sonnet shared by the lovers when they first meet. Romeo/Majnun’s use of “profane,” “unworthiest,” “holy shrine,” and the simile interlocking lips with pilgrims worked to paint a picture of Middle Eastern piety rather than Protestant individualism. Likewise, when he was rebuked by Juliet/Layla for his excessive “mannerly devotion,” it was made clear that Romeo/Majnun was an upstanding, religious, and morally lauded heir to his community. With the inclusion of the Farsi translations, the language of pilgrims, palms, and shrines conveyed an entirely different picture of the decorous, respectful separation of the genders. In fact, it was Juliet/Layla who made first contact, then pulled back, realizing her transgression when he turned away, shocked at his own lack of discipline.

In this adaptation, therefore, Granato played an unusual Romeo who is respected by his community, whose moral compass is clear, who (as a warrior) might believably win a battle with Tybalt, and, most affectingly, has to be convinced by Juliet/Layla that he deserves love, deserves to be touched, rather than (as is too often the case in contemporary productions) tripping over himself to quell testosterone. On a personal note, I never realized how little Shakespeare’s play encourages me to respect Romeo until Majnun. In any other case, I would anticipate such reverence

to produce a moralizing or sex-negative thrust to the performance. The result, however, valorized both their union—depicted with shadows backlit through a tent against a wine-country sunset—and the seriousness with which the young lovers approached their sexual and cultural intimacy.

The production—a project initially foisted by a donor on Palmer—became a critical success with the local press and subsequently sold-out the remainder of its summer run. (With the Oregon Shakespeare Festival five hours south, it is a particular feat for any Portland Shakespeare to garner attention, not to mention suburban Shakespeare.) Based on that success, Bag & Baggage has instituted the new Problem Play Project, a three-year initiative funded by the Meyer Memorial Trust. The company plans to commission an Oregon-based playwright of color to adapt one of Shakespeare’s “problem plays” with an inclusive lens and multi-ethnic cast in mind. In the wake of the Bundy brothers’ contentious acquittal and the fatal attack on two Muslim women riding a light rail train in Portland not two months earlier, this production offered a never-more-urgent rallying cry for fresh interrogations of Oregonians’ liberal, inclusive sense of self.

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Die Fremden/Der Kaufmann von Venedig

Presented by the **Theater Muenster, Germany**. November 4, 2017–April 10, 2018. Directed by Stefan Otteni. Set design by Peter Scior. Costume Design by Sonja Albartus. Translations by Angelika Gundlach and Frank Günther (*Die Fremden*). Dramaturgy by Barbara Bily. With Zainab Alsawah (Jessica/Prince of Morocco), Sandra Bezler (Portia), Garry Fischmann (Lorenzo/Prince of Kazakhstan), Ilja Harjes (Gratiano/Prince of Hanover), Natalja Joselewitsch (Nerissa), Christoph Rinke (Shylock), Christian Bo Salle (Antonio), Carola von Seckendorff (Love/Duke of Venice), and Bálint Tóth (Bassanio).

MARLENA TRONICKE, *University of Münster, Germany*

For obvious reasons, *The Merchant of Venice* is a play directors and theater-makers have long considered too problematic to stage within the German theater landscape, but in 2017/2018 not only the Theater