

MOVIES

Shakespeare dominates in 'Romeo,' 'Twelfth Night'



**JOHN
MONAGHAN**

The kids, for the most part, were exhilarated by this modern

mix of iambic pentameter and in-your-face filmmaking. The adult chaperones walked out exhausted. As one aptly put it, "it reduces the beauty of Shakespeare to the level of Quentin Tarantino."

My own feelings fall somewhere in between. The movie is visual fast food: crass, noisy, junky, with a shelf life due to expire by Christmas. But for now, as an accessible approach to the Bard for its teenage target audience, it works like crazy. Immune from critical slings and arrows, it spent its opening weekend at number one.

Leonardo DiCaprio, who is making a career out of troubled youths, was a good choice for this pistol-packing Romeo. Smooth in his Hawaiian shirt, wisps of blonde hair falling across his face, he and his Montague Boys are a sharp contrast to the swarthy, darker-skinned Capulets, who mix it up on the beaches and boulevards of Verona Beach, Florida.

The opening is a dizzying (often headache-provoking) display of phaky camera and lightning-fast editing. The story is now framed by a newspaper report as we see the stately fami-

lies of Montague and Capulet as Mafioso lordling over a violent urban landscape.

Romeo and Juliet first make eye contact at a garish costume party thrown by the Capulets. He has crashed the party with the help of best friend Mercutio, a Dennis Rodman-style party boy with connections almost as extensive as his wardrobe, aware but unfazed by the disaster that could come from diddling with his enemy's daughter (Claire Daines, from "My So-Called Life").

The balcony scene now takes place around and inside the Capulet's swimming pool. Paris, who Juliet's parents want her to marry, is a bachelor-of-the-year patterned after JFK, Jr. and a horrible dancer. The mixed up letter that further seals the lovers' doom is a Federal Express screw-up. If you didn't recognize the Friar as a holy man, just look at the full-size cross tattooed on Pete Postlethwaite's back.

Religious imagery dominates the film, not used as a coherent symbol as much as a broadly painted backdrop. The church may stand between the Capulets and Montague high rises, but it's also on the handles of the gang's guns, which are branded Longswords and Daggers to make 17th-century lines like "hand me my long sword" and "O happy dagger" fit with the '90s visuals.

About half of Shakespeare's original words are used in the film. The director, Baz Luhrman, who made the equally dizzying (if overrated) musical "Strictly Ballroom," prefers to tell the story with the camera and, for the most part, conveys it well. He even improves on it a bit, heightening the drama of the final scenes, leaving the audience literally mouthing warnings to the characters on screen.

A week later I spent an evening with another Shakespeare adaptation in virtual silence — a bad sign for a comedy. "Twelfth Night," at the Birmingham and Maple Theatres, is far more tasteful, better cast, truer to the original text, and, for the most part, a great bore.

It opens with a storm where Viola (Imogen Stubbs) and her brother are cast to the sea. Thinking each other dead, they make their way through a potentially hostile foreign country. Viola thinks she'll have a better chance for survival as a man, so she lops off her hair and pledges service to Count Orsino, who she has a crush on.

He sends his new "boy" to deliver messages of love to Olivia, (Helena Bonham Carter) but she falls for Viola instead. The romantic complication is one of the funniest and most bizarre in all of Shakespeare, working to



Drama: *Leonardo DiCaprio as Romeo and Claire Danes as Juliet in "William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet."*

A great deal of screen time is spent with Sir Toby Belch (Mel Smith) and friends, who drink, exchange witticisms, and play vicious tricks on stuffy houseman Malvolio. He's played by Nigel Hawthorne, the respected Shakespearean actor and Oscar nominee ("The Madness of King George") and to me too old for the part.

The broad comedy doesn't inspire the desired laughs, despite the best efforts of Ben Kingsley's wise fool, who has a definite poignancy beneath his typically intense brow.

Trevor Nunn, who has spent at least 130 years directing Shakespeare, probably thinks he's radical by staging the 15th-century play in the Victorian era, but only academics will appreciate the difference. A general audience will still see it as stuffy classical actors in old clothes spouting dialogue only half understandable.

Shakespeare is vying with Michael Crichton and Jane Austen as the screen's most popular sources of material. Al Pacino's free-wheeling "Looking for Richard" remains at the Main while Kenneth Branagh's new "Hamlet" opens around Christmastime, just a few years after Mel Gibson made it with Franco Zeffirelli.

What the Bard would think of the Rap and rolling "Romeo and Juliet" is anyone's guess. Before anyone labeled him as England's greatest poet and playwright, Shakespeare was an entertainer, trying to capture the attention of rowdy Elizabethans at performances that often turned into free-for-alls.

Would Shakespeare turn around in the theater and tell the movie's young audience to settle down and be quiet? He'd have to be at least partially pleased at how well his words, even backed by explosions and gunplay, still have the power to charm.

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