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SHAKESPEARE REIMAGINED IN PETR ZUSKA'S ROMEO AND JULIET (OR QUEEN MAB AND FRIAR LAWRENCE)
Dancing with decolonial partnership opposites

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Abstract - Within the interdisciplinary critical framework of partnership and decolonial studies, this paper examines Petr Zuska's innovative choreographic adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which premiered at the National Ballet Theatre of Prague in 2013. Drawing inspiration from Mercutio's monologue, the Czech choreographer reimagines the Bard's text by shifting the focus to Friar Lawrence and introducing a pivotal new character: Queen Mab. In Zuska's ballet, Queen Mab emerges as the true protagonist, a dancer both angelic and cruel, who influences the characters' choices and seal their tragic fate. As in many of Zuska's works, the tension between good and evil lies at the heart of his "performative" praxis (Schechner 2002), expressed through a continuous interplay of intertextual references and corporeal symbolism (Adshead-Lansdale 1999). These elements probe the depths of human desire, vulnerability, and moral fallibility. The battle between Queen Mab and Friar Lawrence reflects the broader conflict among Romeo and Juliet's families and peers, while their physicality and gestures offer a powerful meditation on the human condition – suggesting that suffering, both rational and irrational, is inescapable. Building on Riane Eisler's theory of "partnership" (1988) and Madina Tlostanova's declination of the "decolonial option" (Mignolo, Escobar 2010; Mignolo, Walsh 2018) as it applies to Central and Eastern European space, this analysis first explores Zuska's original portrayal of opposing forces, and then his reinterpretation of the tragedy through neoclassical dance, using movements rich in symbolic meaning. The paper concludes with a brief analysis of the lovers' *pas de deux*, which embodies a more liberated vision of existence – an idea already latent in Shakespeare's text – and underscores how love, partnership, and acceptance are the only pathways to transcend destruction, misunderstanding, and violence.

Keywords: Choreographic adaptation; Romeo and Juliet; Queen Mab; neoclassical dance; Petr Zuska.

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers.
(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, prologue, 5-6).

1. Introduction: decolonising Shakespeare through dance and partnership

Considered one of the most ephemeral and transient forms of art, ballet or dance can hardly be described through simple words. Indeed, this creative expression speaks through the body or a fusion of gestures, facial expressions, and technical movements that allow the dancer to convey a message or meaning, or to "embody" (Block and Kissell 2001) emotions, feelings, and even entire characters. It is this intrinsic quality – the translation or better adaptation of semiotic elements into something intangible, fluid, and *unwritten* –

that makes ballet malleable, multi-layered, and an inherently "ambivalent"[1] or "complex"[2] form of text. Indeed, if we refer to intertextuality (Allen 2011), and in particular to those dance scholars who have recognised a connection between source-text and body-text, the performance is:

> […] an open construction, having the fluidity and enigmatic quality of art. A description then becomes a text; other texts can similarly be constructed and this practice sets competing views in opposition or creates complementary structures. The reader is subject to the play of codes – indeed both choreographer and audience become 'readers' – equally dependent upon an ability to identify the conventions within which a work is constructed and operates, and to reflect on their own use of such conventions. (Adshead-Lansdale 1999, p. 7)

The art of dance, like other artistic expressions such as figurative art, music, and sculpture, shares the beauty of *immediacy*, evoking awe and surprise in its spectators. Many critics argue that within the performative praxis (Schechner 1988, 2002), the viewer plays a fundamental role in the process of signification, acting as an agent of codification and meaning construction[3]. However, ballet possesses the unique ability to dismantle and make vanish, in an instant, what it has so meticulously presented – except through recording processes or instant video capture. These technological means allow dance to be crystallised and, after centuries of appreciation mostly within élite circles, made accessible to the general public. Yet, even in recorded form, the essential nature of dance remains unchanged: it cannot be fully contained, because it is fleeting, ephemeral, forever escaping.

From another perspective, ballet typically relies on several key reference features, such as dramaturgy, music and choreography, stage design, and costumes. Yet, all of these elements ultimately refer back to a primary source, which is often a narrative or a literary text. This is where literature intersects with dance. Over time, ballet has adapted the works of countless authors from the canon of world literature[4], but one writer stands apart in terms of sheer number of adaptations and reinterpretations: William Shakespeare. The Bard remains one of the most frequently invoked and reimagined sources of inspiration for ballet choreographers[5]. This comes as no surprise. Shakespeare's work is timeless,

[1] In the introductory chapter of her edited collection of essays title *Dancing Texts: Intertextuality in Interpretation*, Janet Adshead-Lansdale highlights how dancing texts reflect "theoretical ambivalence", particularly given that "'its texts' have always been fragmentary, and not only in the sense of being 'performed' texts, but in its records, its documentation and its often metaphorical status, [as] revealed in the way [they are] drawn in to illuminate poetry, literature and music". (Adshead-Lansdale 1999, p. 9)

[2] De Marinis argues that a performance text is "a complex discursive event, resulting from the interweaving of several expressive elements, organised into various codes and subcodes (which together constitute a textual structure) through which acts of communication and signification take place, while also taking into account the different pragmatic contexts of enunciation". (de Marinis 1993, pp. 1-2)

[3] Again, for de Marinis, as well as for Adshead-Lansdale and other dance critics, the spectator of a dance or performance is an "active creator of its meanings [or even] the only producer of the semantic and communicative potential of the performance text". (de Marinis 1993, p. 158)

[4] I am referring here to literary texts such as Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which inspired the eponymous ballet, or Heinrich Heine's *De l'Allemagne* and Victor Hugo's *Fantômes* from *Les Orientales*, which inspired Théophile Gautier and Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges' libretto for the ballet *Giselle*, among many others.

[5] As Lynsey McCulloch and Brandon Shaw argue in their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Dance*: "Shakespeare's relationship with dance is long-standing and extraordinarily varied. His works have been adapted in multiple countries and into multiple dance genres, from classical ballet to contemporary dance, jazz to physical theatre, folk dance to hip-pop". (McCulloch, Shaw 2019, pp. 2-3)

offering characters and narratives that continue to resonate across generations. His figures have become archetypal representations of human consciousness or simply symbols that inspire artists, directors, and choreographers alike (Thornton Burnett *et al.* 2011), who continuously seek to reinvent and challenge them through ever more intricate experimentations, adaptations, and reworkings (Chevrier-Bosseau 2020; Isenberg 2016).

This essay examines Petr Zuska's original interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*, the most frequently adapted of Shakespeare's tragedies in the world of dance (Edgecombe 2011, p. 215). The former director of the Ballet of the National Theatre in Prague, Zuska premiered his version of the story with the Czech company in 2013. Multiple elements intertwine to create the complexity of his adaptation: from what I believe to be autobiographical and historical references to despotism and authoritarian control during the Communist era, to the reimagining of the star-crossed lovers' tale through an innovative modern-dance technique and symbolism, and finally, to the physical embodiment of a particular textual reference − Shakespeare's allusion to Queen Mab. In Zuska's version, Queen Mab emerges as the true protagonist of the adaptation, transforming her evanescent allusion in Mercutio's monologue into a central and dynamic presence on stage.

I will employ two theoretical frameworks or modes of reading the Bard's text and Zuska's balletistic rendering of *Romeo and Juliet*. The first is the "decolonial approach" (Mignolo 2003, 2011a, 2011b, 2012), an original *decentering* of the "modernity/coloniality" Western European and North Atlantic "matrix of power", as proposed by Latin American scholars at the dawn of the 21st century (Mignolo, Escobar 2010; Mignolo, Walsh 2018; Quijano 2007). Within its various interpretations, I will focus particularly on the work of Madina Tlostanova, a key figure in decolonial thought, especially in relation to Central-Eastern Europe and post-Soviet spaces[6]. Throughout her scholarship, Tlostanova advocates for the use of decoloniality as both a form of dissidence[7] and a paradigm shift[8], emphasising its relevance to Eastern Europe, a region that has undergone a double colonisation: first by Western Europe and later, after World War II, by the USSR. In her analysis, Tlostanova characterises Central-Eastern Europe as a liminal space, neither fully Western nor entirely Eastern, caught between a tendency to adopt the West as a model and a lingering nostalgia for its socialist past[9]. In this essay, I will explore how this dichotomy manifests in Zuska's work, which represents a true

[6] As Tlostanova, Thapar-Björket and Koobak argue: "The postsocialist temporality is different from the postcolonial one because it is viewed as an abrupt historical rupture with the discredited socialist modernity, rather than as a slow progression within capitalist 'Western' modernity, as in the case of postcolonial temporality. Thus, terms such as the 'return to Europe', 'transition' and 'transformation' have inadvertently informed much of the politics in the postsocialist space". (Tlostanova *et al*. 2019, p. 83)

[7] In *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas*, Tlostanova and Mignolo advocate for the necessity of 'learning to unlearn' from what they even define as a "deviant modernity". (Tlostanova, Mignolo 2012, p. 123)

[8] Like most decolonial thinkers, Tlostanova also views the arts and artistic practices as powerful tools for change, particularly in light of her recognition that narratives today are "de-centered, multiplied, and subjectivized in [their] complex relations with history and memory and in various canonical counter-discursive practices often grounded in the destabilizing of Eurocentric Orientalist assumptions". (Tlostanova 2015b, p. 13). See also: Tlostanova 2018; Elliott *et al*. 2016.

[9] Tlostanova adds: "The invisibility of the post-Soviet social sciences for the West is not only a product of the global epistemic structural asymmetry. The kind of social sciences produced in the USSR or its remnants today with very few exceptions are really mediocre and derivative, mostly reproducing the outdated Western methods and tools […]. Such studies seldom appear in global academia not because they are Russian, but because they are insulated from the global scholarship on their own initiative". (Tlostanova 2015a, p. 49)

experiment in challenging the Western choreographic "norms" of ballet. His adaptation introduces a unique vocabulary that merges tradition with a distinct Czech sensibility while simultaneously engaging with the Soviet past, particularly expressed through various metaphors and allusions embedded within the performance.

In a second interconnected direction, I will draw upon the "partnership approach" propounded by Riane Eisler (1988, 1995, 2002; Eisler and Fry 2019) as a methodological framework for rethinking identity representations (Riem *et al.* 2010) and our relationships with ourselves, others, and the broader world or community[10]. Eisler, who personally experienced displacement under a dictatorship, having fled Nazi oppression during World War II, has emphasised the necessity of a "cultural transformation" (Eisler 1988, p. 17) at the core of societies. She advocates for egalitarianism, peaceful "dialogic dialogue" (Panikkar 2007), and mutual understanding as fundamental principles for socio-cultural progress. In particular, Eisler's model of the expanding circles of partnership urges us to reconsider our relationships not only with other humans but also with the environment, the more-than-human world (Riem and Hughes-d'Aeth 2022; Riem and Thieme 2020), and our spiritual and physical or corporeal dimensions (Eisler 1995). Her work foregrounds love, beauty, and the acceptance of one another as key elements of this transformative perspective. It is through this lens that I will examine the singular force of regeneration and change present in both Shakespeare's tragedy and Zuska's adaptation: the love between the star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet. Indeed, in Zuska's production, they emerge as the only truly innocent protagonists, the ones who have grasped life's ultimate purpose: to love and accept the *other* unconditionally. With these premises and these critical, multimodal (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Norris 2004) frameworks in mind, my essay will proceed in a threefold direction.

First, I will analyse Zuska's innovative reconceptualisation of Shakespeare's main characters, highlighting the tension that emerges from an almost omnipresent dual perspective, such as good and evil, masculine and feminine, rational and irrational, which ultimately underscores both division and completeness. In a paradoxical interplay of contradictions, Zuska depicts the constant merging of opposites, allowing them to intertwine and overlap. While this creates a sense of estrangement, it is also a defining signature of his choreographic style, which frequently explores the division and simultaneous encounter between fundamental dichotomies such as Life and Death, Love and Hate[11].

Second, I will examine Zuska's distinctive modern-dance technique, which fuses highly demanding neo-classical steps with movement vocabularies drawn from various dance traditions. My focus will be on two key choreographic motifs in his adaptation: the crossing of arms in a diagonal, which plays a significant role in the internal geometry of the dance, and the sharp, cutting motion of straight arms in front of characters' faces, particularly in moments of death. I will also highlight specific passages in the performance where these features become particularly meaningful, such as the ball scene where Romeo

[10] Over the years, Riane Eisler's partnership model has evolved into various forms and has been adopted in educational, cultural, social and research contexts. The Partnership Studies Group, founded by Antonella Riem in 1998 at the University of Udine, applies Eisler's methodology to the interdisciplinary study of texts from various disciplines, recognising language as a powerful tool for transforming the *status quo*. See: https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it/.

[11] *Sólo pro tri/Solo for three*, for instance, is a ballet that retraces the lives of three iconic singer-songwriters and dissenting voices of the 1960s and 1970s – Jacques Brel, Karel Kryl, and Vladimir Vysotsky. Their words, rich with longing for freedom, are juxtaposed with the constant presence of Death and repression, embodied by a female figure. For a complete overview of Petr Zuska's productions, see: https://www.petrzuska.cz/en/dilo/romeo-a-julie.

and Juliet first meet, as well as the depiction of the dynamics of division between the two families.

Finally, my analysis will conclude with a close examination of Romeo and Juliet's balcony *pas de deux*. This moment is crucial for two reasons: first, because it is traditionally one of the most anticipated and scrutinised sequences by dance critics when assessing the success of a Shakespearean ballet adaptation; and second, because, in my view, it represents the only instance in the entire ballet where the audience can experience a glimpse of hope and true "partnership".

This multimodal analysis (Kress 2010; Jewitt 2014) will be anchored in a continuous dialogue with Shakespeare's tragedy, as the interpretations of the ballet's dance passages will consistently refer to the literary text. The first section will explore the characters of Queen Mab and Friar Lawrence in relation to their Shakespearean counterparts, the second will examine the images of division and patriarchal control that pervade the play, and the third will delve into the theme of hands, gazes, and love as expressions of Romeo and Juliet's eternal bond.

2. Dual forces in Zuska's *Romeo and Juliet*: the re-imagining of Queen Mab and Friar Lawrence

In Zuska's ballet adaptation of Shakespeare's most famous and frequently performed tragedy, the true protagonists are not Romeo and Juliet but rather Friar Lawrence and a newly, central character: Queen Mab, who, in Shakespeare's play, appears only as a marginal figure. It is no coincidence, then, that these roles are performed by the company's first soloists[12]. In this way, Zuska departs from the traditional characterisation of Shakespeare's protagonists, choosing instead to foreground the opposing forces that propel the tragedy to unfold and take shape. Romeo and Juliet are, in fact, victims of opposites, or, more precisely, of the dynamic continuum between Life and Death. This thematic focus is a distinctive feature of Zuska's work, a personal signature that recurs throughout many of his productions, as I previously discussed. It is a process that allows him to explore the dynamics of human passions, desires, and fates through the expressive, embodied language of his dancers, who not only convey the story but also reflect the emotions of the audience. In short, Zuska has always been interested in portraying the duality of human nature: our capacity for magnificent, loving acts as well as our ability to fight, destroy, and erase what we have built. In my opinion, this worldview is shared by many Central and Eastern European choreographers, whose perspectives were shaped by the socially challenging decades of communist dictatorship, and it continues to be reflected in their work today.

Apart from Friar Lawrence and Queen Mab, who represent good and evil respectively, Zuska highlights other significant dichotomies and human contradictions in his version of *Romeo and Juliet*. These include the contrast between black and white, symbolised most notably by long white and black gloves; the division between men and women, represented by the *corps de ballet*, whose separation also embodies the warring

[12] In the video-production kindly made available to me by the National Ballet Theatre of Prague, these roles are performed by Viktor Konvalika as Friar Lawrence and Nikola Márová as Queen Mab. For a comprehensive account of the two premieres of the production, please see: Dotlačilová 2013, or access the review here: https://www.tanecniaktuality.cz/en/reviews/romeo-and-juliet-actually-lorenzo-and-mab (15.01.2025).

families; and the opposition between Lady Montague and Father Capulet – the only parents depicted as counterparts in Zuska's adaptation. As the choreographer explains on his website:

> [My] ballet rendition of William Shakespeare's immortal love story, to Sergey Prokofiev's music, in the spirit of neoclassical dance [is] imbued with additional meanings and symbols […]. Against the backdrop of [a] great love and death, [there is a focus on] the unceasing conflict between the male and female principles – the rational and irrational aspects, well-considered plans and the things that are beyond our control and thwart such plans. The conflict between Friar Lawrence and Queen Mab, the ruler of dreams and shadows. (Zuska 2013, https://www.petrzuska.cz/en/dilo/romeo-a-julie)

For Zuska, Queen Mab represents the player, joker, or trickster, the true ruler of the world. She creates a dream-reality in which humans exist merely as small parts of a larger plan, manipulated by greater forces as if they were puppets – another recurring theme deeply rooted in Central and Eastern European culture and folk heritage.

These elements are evident from the very beginning of the performance, where it is Queen Mab who introduces the production's central oppositions: Romeo and Juliet, Mercutio and Tybalt, Lady Montague and Father Capulet, and the rival families, embodied by the divided male (Montague) and female (Capulet) dancers of the *corps de ballet*. A distinct feature of Zuska's opening is Queen Mab's presentation of these thematic contrasts, which appear as projected words on the stage backdrop while she dances:

> DAY and NIGHT (DEN a NOC), REALITY and DREAM (VĚDĚNÍ a SNY), SUN and MOON (SLUNCE a LUNA), CREATE and DESTROY (PLÁNY a ZMAR), ORDER and CHAOS (ŘÁD a CHAOS), REALITY and FANTASY (ROZUM a CIT) and LIFE and DEATH (ŽIVOT a SMRT)[13].

If we closely examine Mercutio's famous monologue in Act I, Scene iv, where Queen Mab[14] is first introduced, the idea of division, ambiguity, and dark, destructive power is already strongly present in Shakespeare's text. Queen Mab is indeed depicted both as a fairy and as a cynical, sinister force:

> MERCUTIO
> O, then, I see, Queen Mab hath been with you.
> She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
> In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
> On the forefinger of an alderman,
> Drawn with a team of little atomies
> Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep
> […]
> And in this state she gallops night by night
> Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love;
> […] This is that very Mab
> That plats the manes of horses in the night,
> And bakes the elf-locks in foul sluttish hairs,
> Which once untangled much misfortune bodes:

[13] During the performance, as well as in the video version used for this analysis, these opposing concepts are displayed in Czech on the stage backdrop, with an English translation projected above for non-Czech-speaking audience.

[14] For a thorough account of the history and presumed provenance of Shakespeare's Mab, see Reeves 1902. For a more recent and insightful study on the origin and role of Queen Mab in later literature, see also: Young 2021.

> This is the hag […]
> (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I, iv, 53-92)

Mercutio's Queen Mab is an ambiguous and shifting figure, a fairy who visits sleepers to make their dreams seem real, but also a hag, a dark force that brings nightmares. Shakespeare frequently portrays uncanny and mysterious transformative women or spirits, as seen in the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* or Titania, the fairy queen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Likewise, Zuska's Queen Mab is an ambivalent character. She is both creator and destroyer, a maternal figure and a malevolent force, as well as Friar Lawrence's double and opposite. This is why I believe that, in some way, Zuska drew inspiration from his experiences under communism to shape her character. This interpretation gains validity if we view Queen Mab as an allegory for the USSR after World War II, an ostensibly benevolent *mother* figure promising happiness and justice while keeping her subjects trapped in a dystopian dream of false hope and freedom.

Zuska skilfully employs three additional symbolic devices to reinforce the interplay between opposing forces. First, the stage backdrop features a narrow opening, a crack in the wall, that, when opened, reveals two silhouettes. This is the passage through which Queen Mab enters and exits the stage. Dancers I spoke with interpreted this as a symbol of division – between the feuding families and between Romeo and Juliet. I would take this interpretation further, suggesting that the crack represents a keyhole, a gateway to another dimension. This idea resonates with Shakespeare's Queen Mab as well as the fixation on doors and their opening and closing during communist times in Czechoslovakia, a survival strategy for a population living under constant suspicion, escaping a fictional reality by locking themselves within their homes.

Second, in Zuska's adaptation, dancers use two-sided masks, painted red on one side to represent the Capulets and purple on the other for the Montagues. These masks appear not only in the ball scene but also at the end of Act I, where Friar Lawrence observes Romeo and Juliet's blossoming love, manipulating the masks in an uncanny manner that foreshadows the inevitable tragedy.

Finally, there is the recurring motif of long gloves, one white and one black. The white glove is used by Queen Mab to bring death, first to Mercutio, then to Tybalt (opposites themselves), and later to Romeo and Juliet. The black glove is first worn by Juliet to feign death, and later by Queen Mab, who transforms it again into a white one to deliver the final blow. This scene, typically marked by despair, feels less tragic in Zuska's version because Queen Mab dances first with Romeo, then with Juliet, cradling her like a mother before laying her beside her lover, thus suggesting that she is both a maternal figure and Death itself.

Fig. 1
The opposing families embodied by Mercutio (and the male dancers of the *corps de ballet* in purple costumes) and Tybalt (with female dancers of the *corps de ballet* in red costumes) in Petr Zuska's dance adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.
By courtesy of the National Ballet Theatre of Prague.

In contrast to Queen Mab, Zuska positions Friar Lawrence, a relatively secondary character in Shakespeare's tragedy, as the embodiment of rationality and wisdom. His dances are grounded, almost earthly-based and subdued, while Queen Mab's solos, though performed on *pointe-shoes*, feature dynamic jumps and *pirouettes* or turns more commonly associated with male dancers. Friar Lawrence is always aware of Queen Mab's presence but arrives too late to prevent the deaths, despairing at her destruction and attempting, unsuccessfully, to fight her.

Friar Lawrence is the benevolent and truly positive guiding force of the entire story, appeasing the quarrels in Verona and marrying Romeo and Juliet when they ask him to seal their bond. In Shakespeare's text, it is precisely Friar Lawrence's awareness that even well-intended actions (such as his secret involvement in Romeo and Juliet's love) can lead to disastrous consequences, that reinforces the theme of duality. In Act II, Scene iii, Friar Lawrence reflects on this duality:

> Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied;
> And vice sometimes by action dignified.
> Within the infant rind of this small flower
> Poison hath residence and medicine power.
> For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part;
> Being tasted, slays all senses with the heart
> Two such opposed kings encamp them still
> In man as well as herbs, grace, and rude will;
> (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II, iii, 21-28)

It is the same Friar who warns the two lovers not to let themselves be torn apart and consumed by passion and intense emotions:

> These violent delights have violent ends
> And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
> Which, as they kiss, consume […]
> Therefore love moderately; long love doth so;
> Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow

(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II, vi, 9-15)

Living a moderate and well-balanced life is Friar Lawrence's ultimate message and aspiration. Through his words, Shakespeare warns of the dangers of unchecked passion and emotional excess, which can lead to folly, misery, and even death. Similarly, in Zuska's adaptation, Friar Lawrence represents human rationality and prudence. Yet, he is also the character most tormented by the burden of this very wisdom, as life – both in Shakespeare's play and Zuska's interpretation – is unpredictable, ever-changing, and ultimately uncontainable. As human beings, we cannot be restrained in our capacity to love passionately or in our pursuit of a full, and at times contradictory, existence.

2. The X and the stop movements: embodied oppositions in Zuska's choreography

As I previously explained, Zuska's choreographic language in his adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* is rooted in neo-classical ballet, which blends the precision of classical technique with the fluidity and expressiveness of modern and contemporary dance. According to several dancers from the production, including Giovanni Rotolo and Francesco Scarpato, whom I interviewed for this essay, Zuska's technique is extremely complex and physically demanding. If one watches the entire ballet, it becomes evident that the choreography requires a constant interplay between classical and modern-dance movement dynamics. The dancers must transition seamlessly between *pirouettes en-dehors* and *en-dedans*[15], jumps, *tours en l'air*[16] finished in second-position *plié* for male dancers, and *piqués en tournant*[17] finished in *arabesque*[18] for female dancers, just to mention a few of the most technical sequences. The choreography also includes highly intricate lifts, floor work, and modern-dance influences, such as fall-and-recovery techniques, swings, and sways – elements that are rarely seen in traditional ballet interpretations of the tragedy[19].

[15] A *pirouette* is a "whirl or spin. A complete turn of the body on one foot, on point or demi-pointe. Pirouettes are performed *en dedans*, turning inward toward the supporting leg, or *en dehors*, turning outward in the direction of the raised leg". https://www.abt.org/explore/learn/ballet-dictionary/ (15.01.2025).

[16] It is a "turn in the air. This is essentially a male dancer's step although contemporary choreographers use this tour for girls. […] The dancer rises straight into the air from a demi-plié, makes a complete turn and lands in the fifth position with the feet reversed. The turn may be single, double or triple according to the ability of the dancer". https://www.abt.org/explore/learn/ballet-dictionary/ (15.01.2025).

[17] *Piqués en tournant* or *pirouette piquée* "is a pirouette in which the dancer steps directly onto the point or demi-pointe with the raised leg sur le cou-de-pied devant or derrire, in attitude, arabesque or any given position. This turn is executed either en dedans or en dehors". https://www.abt.org/explore/learn/ballet-dictionary/ (15.01.2025).

[18] This is "one of the basic poses in ballet, arabesque takes its name from a form of Moorish ornament. In ballet it is a position of the body, in profile, supported on one leg, which can be straight or demi-plié, with the other leg extended behind and at right angles to it, and the arms held in various harmonious positions creating the longest possible line from the fingertips to the toes. The shoulders must be held square to the line of direction". https://www.abt.org/explore/learn/ballet-dictionary/ (15.01.2025).

[19] As Dotlačilová adds: "Choreography of the production has been created in an eclectic style that combines neoclassical ballet and modern dance techniques. Female dancers perform in pointe shoes, but their bodies are formed to unusual shapes and steps combinations. The male dancers perform big jumps and classical spins, combined with some rather acrobatic figures. Sharp, angular and almost jerky movements contrast with rounded shapes, such as swaying the upper torso and hips. Partner dancing is very demanding,

I will focus on two recurring movement motifs that stood out to me for their symbolic, choreographic and textual significance. The first being the crossing of arms, forming an 'X' shape, which is performed multiple times throughout the ballet, especially by the *corps de ballet*, and particularly in the ball scene, where female dancers are lifted while crossing their arms in this manner (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2
The 'X movement' in Petr Zuska's dance adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.
By courtesy of the National Ballet Theatre of Prague.

This repeated gesture serves as a visual and symbolic representation of the central theme of Zuska's adaptation, which is the constant crossing, merging, and parting of oppositional forces. The 'X' shape, indeed, embodies the structural foundation of the dance itself, emphasising the interconnected yet conflicting destinies of the protagonists. Furthermore, Romeo and Juliet themselves frequently replicate this symbol, underscoring how their individual paths continue to diverge and intertwine throughout the performance. When performed by the *corps de ballet*, instead, this symbol is usually accompanied by the use of masks as if the individual/dancer becomes no one, or a X, a process that recalls the intersection and final destroying of opposites. It is no coincidence therefore that neither Romeo nor Juliet wants to wear these masks but rather avoid using them. After Tybalt's death, and before taking the decision to feign her death through the help of Friar Lawrence's potion, Juliet is forced to wear one in order to come back to her senses and conform to her roles and duties.

From a linguistic point of view, the X motif may refer – intentionally or involuntarily from Zuska's side – the famous recurring use of Shakespearians' chiasmus, a highly recurring rhetorical device in the Bard's text, especially in his depictions of moments of contrast between love and hate, order and passions, fair and foul.

A significant and prominent chiasmus is portrayed in the ball scene when Romeo and Juliet, after their first encounter and decision to run away from their roles and 'masks' together, are followed in turn by the opposite running diagonals and exchanges of Tybalt-Mercutio, Lady Montague-Father Capulet and Queen Mab-Friar Lawrence. In these

frequently there are many lifts in quick succession, while in some scenes the partners have to dance with full face masks. […] Petr Zuska often claims that in his choreographies every note should be danced". (Dotlačilová 2013)

exchanges Zuska is very precise, following the X and chiasmus' structures, thus reinforcing again his deconstruction of the ballet unity and geometries, which are essential in classical ballet. A strategy employed also by Shakespeare who uses his sonnets and plays to dismantle the hypocrisy and fake "order and degree" (Tillyard 2011) dictated by Elizabethan society and culture.

The second motif that I want to foreground is Queen Mab's sudden and forceful stopping gesture, where she sharply halts her arm and hand in front of the protagonists before they die (Fig. 3). This moment is particularly impactful because it disrupts the overall smoothness and fluidity of the choreography. Unlike the sweeping and lyrical quality that defines much of Zuska's neo-classical ballet style, this abrupt action stands out for its brutality and stark finality.

Fig. 3
The 'death stopping gesture' in Petr Zuska's dance adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.
By courtesy of the National Ballet Theatre of Prague.

A particularly intriguing aspect of this motif is that the dancers of the *corps de ballet* as much as Romeo and Juliet do not see Queen Mab: she exists as an external force, unseen yet omnipresent. The only character who perceives her is Friar Lawrence, whose gentle demeanour sharply contrasts with Queen Mab's relentless and inescapable interventions. This creates a choreographic tension between movement and stillness, reinforcing the idea that Queen Mab embodies fate's silent, inevitable force.

Additionally, this stopping gesture functions as a "silent moment" within the language of movement – akin to a pause in speech, where meaning is heightened through *absence* rather than *presence*. These unexpected stoppings recur inevitably during the tragic deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt, and later Romeo and Juliet. These choreographic "interruptions" aligns with Queen Mab's fluid, ever-changing role throughout the ballet, making these rare moments of stillness all the more chilling and significant.

From a literary point of view this act of severing and breaking, which is very powerful in Zuska's version may be not represented only through the dichotomy life vs death but also in the breaking up with formalism and tradition about love. A theme that aligns perfectly with the Bard's tentative to align his production to the changes of Elizabethan times and also his coup of genius for a literary endeavour that has no parallels in the history of English literature.

Zuska's ballet employs movement as a narrative force, making motifs like the crossed arms (X) and Queen Mab's stopping gesture not just choreographic choices but integral to the storytelling and deeper thematic structure. The first represents the entanglement of fate and free will, while the second is the inescapable presence of destiny itself. These elements elevate the ballet from a mere adaptation into a multi-layered exploration of power, control, and inevitability – themes that resonate deeply within both the Shakespearean text and Zuska's choreographic vision.

4. The *pas de deux* of fate: love, partnership, and the shadow of Queen Mab

Apart from a brief moment at the beginning of Act II, where Zuska introduces the beggars (once again performed by soloist dancers) and their daughters in a small dance sequence – alongside an innovative theatre within theatre retelling of the lovers' story[20] – the balcony scene remains the only moment where the choreographer allows union, partnership, and love to fully manifest. Even in this instance, the dance is once again introduced by a gloomy Queen Mab. Yet, Romeo and Juliet overcome their differences and family divisions, allowing themselves to meet, merge, connect, and love. In this way, as in many other dance adaptations of the story, they represent the only hope and chance for a better future.

Juliet emerges from the right-hand walkway, which frames the entire scenography and has now become the balcony. Romeo arrives from the left-hand structure and promptly leaps down to follow her. As Prokofiev's famous refrain of the lovers' *pas de deux* begins, Juliet walks toward the edge of the walkway, while Romeo, beneath it, follows her steps with his hands. Their gazes finally meet, only to part again before they fall to their knees and finally unite: Juliet bending from the balcony while Romeo climbs toward her. What follows is a continuous play with hands, a motif that also appears in Shakespeare's text, as I have already analysed in another essay (Mantellato 2020, p. 14). Alongside the simpler sequences, the dancers also perform crisscrossed straight-arm movements, a motif that not only recalls the distance embodied by other couples in the show but also anticipates the choreographic structure of the final scene, where Queen Mab manipulates the lovers into replicating this rigid geometry, thus symbolising their inevitable submission to the dominator power structures that will ultimately destroy them and their love.

As it occurs in most ballet adaptations of the tragedy, Romeo performs a highly technical solo, employing expressive hands and arms gestures, both to conceal himself and to symbolically "liberate" his emotions. When Juliet reappears on the walkway, the lovers roll toward each other (Juliet above, Romeo on the floor). At the climactic moment of Prokofiev's musical *pas de deux*, which typically marks the meeting of the lovers, Zuska introduces a striking choreographic choice: Romeo and Juliet extend their arms lying on their back, facing the ceiling, while Queen Mab glides forward in a *bourrée en pointe*[21],

[20] In Dotlačilová's words: "The second act begins with a scene of comedians on the street of Verona, two adults and four children perform in a nutshell the whole story of Romeo and Juliet with the difference that Romeo does not poison himself in the end and everything ends well. This directorial innovation is original and students of the preparatory ballet school are cute, however, the scene is somewhat superficial". (Dotlačilová 2013)

[21] "Whether a dancer is in regular ballet shoes or on pointe, bourrées' are usually done in fifth position or relevé. The dancer has her feet tightly together and quickly moves either the front or back foot and then

reaching toward Juliet with an outstretched hand. At this precise moment, Juliet leaps toward Romeo, who catches her. This moment symbolises a transient escape from the inevitability of fate, as they surrender to one of the most powerful and enigmatic forces of existence: love.

However, their fate is immediately suggested by the continuous presence of Queen Mab, who keeps on dancing on the walkway. Under her spell, Romeo walks toward the audience, holding Juliet in his arms as if she were lifeless, foreshadowing their tragic fate. Some dancers interpret this moment differently, seeing it as a total surrender to love. Regardless of interpretation, after this central episode, Queen Mab momentarily vanishes, allowing the lovers to live their dream – but not without making them perform a highly emblematic gesture. As they place their hands on each other's faces, she mirrors them from the walkway, signalling that her return is inevitable.

At last, the lovers can fully express their longing for completion, their search for wholeness in one another. In the central section of the *pas de deux*, their movements finally synchronise, and they perform a sequence of demanding lifts and intertwining passages, using both hands and arms. For these duet sequences, Zuska employs the aerial and ethereal quality of classical ballet. This choice is significant, as it marks one of the rare moments in the entire performance where the dancers are perfectly in tune with one another, contrasting with the conflicting dynamics explored in the previous sections.

Beyond the technical complexity of this sequence, one of its most striking features is the simplicity of certain movements. These include lying on the floor or taking brief pauses to gaze into each other's eyes. This ever-changing rhythm allows the dancers to explore their growing connection, in stark contrast with the other couples in the production, who remain constrained by their roles and masks. Additionally, this physical discovery mirrors their transition into adulthood, a theme that also aligns with Shakespeare's original text. Many Shakespearean critics have observed how the play's language shifts after Romeo and Juliet's first meeting, as if the old, idealised, courtly love no longer applies to them. Instead, they become the embodiment of real, lived, and tragic love.

The *pas de deux* progresses – like in most ballet adaptations – with a crescendo of technical steps, movements, and lifts. However, an intriguing element in Zuska's choreography is the repetition of movements, first performed by one lover, then the other. This is particularly evident in *grand jetés*[22], which serve as a symbol of liberation from oppression and violence. Another compelling moment occurs when Romeo and Juliet run toward the audience, openly declaring their love, only for Romeo to hide behind Juliet and cover her eyes. She immediately removes his hands and falls backward into his arms, a moment of both trust and vulnerability. This inward retreat is followed by a separation, as the lovers move in different directions through iconic *piqué arabesques*, only to return to centre stage for a *promenade attitude en dendans*[23], before once again parting.

following with the other foot as quick as possible". https://writing.colostate.edu/gallery/fogelson/terms.html (15.01.2025).

[22] A *grand jeté* is a "large jeté forward. A big leap forward preceded by a preliminary movement such as a pas couru or a glissade, which gives the necessary push-off. The jump is done on the foot which is thrown forward as in grand battement at 90 degrees […]. The dancer tries to remain in the air in a definitely expressed attitude or arabesque and descends to the ground in the same pose. It is important to start the jump with a springy plié and finish it with a soft and controlled plié". https://www.abt.org/explore/learn/ballet-dictionary/ (15.01.2025).

[23] A *promenade* is a "turn in a walk. A term of the French School used to indicate that the dancer turns slowly in place on one foot by a series of slight movements of the heel to the required side while maintaining a definite pose such as an arabesque or attitude. The turn may be performed either en dedans

Following this, Romeo helps Juliet return to the walkway, and they gently touch each other's faces in a farewell gesture. Meanwhile, from the crack in the wall at the back of the stage, Queen Mab re-enters, retracing the lovers' movements before allowing herself to dissolve into a serpentine motion of the arms – a symbolic gesture indicating that she will soon unravel and undo their love. One of the clearest indications of her destructive force occurs when she executes a *grand jeté*, mirroring the lovers' movements, only to follow it with sharp, cutting gestures, as if severing an invisible thread. This thread, of course, represents the bond between Romeo and Juliet, now woven but soon to be undone.

As Queen Mab retreats backstage, she pauses, her attention caught by the entrance of Friar Lawrence, who arrives carrying two masks. These masks, which will later serve as a symbol of division, are now at the centre of his focus. For the first time, Friar Lawrence sees Queen Mab, and he rushes toward her – but just as he reaches her, the crack in the wall closes. Unable to stop her, he turns toward the audience, just as Romeo and Juliet reappear, running from opposite sides – Juliet again on the balcony, Romeo below her. In a highly symbolic and visually significant moment, they recreate the beginning of their encounter: Juliet walks to the edge of the balcony, while Romeo follows her steps with his hands from below. This time, however, when they finally meet, they no longer gaze into each other's eyes. Instead, they kiss (Fig. 4), sealing their eternal bond, affirming their magnificent yet tragic partnership, and fully embracing the mystery and power of love.

Fig. 4
'The star-crossed lovers' kiss' in Petr Zuska's dance adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.
By courtesy of the National Ballet Theatre of Prague.

Even in this fleeting moment of union, their separation is inevitable. As they part once more, they recall the hand motif, mirroring their earlier gestures, an ominous reminder that Queen Mab will soon return for them. The *pas de deux* concludes with Friar Lawrence, standing centre stage, gazing solemnly at the masks. He lowers them to the floor, then

or en dehors. In a pas de deux, the ballerina on point holds her pose and is slowly turned by her partner who walks around her holding her hand". https://www.abt.org/explore/learn/ballet-dictionary/ (15.01.2025).

covers his eyes with his hands, a hauntingly evocative gesture that could signify despair, but also an acknowledgment that his dream, or nightmare, is finally coming to an end.

5. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, Zuska's ballet adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* is now recognised as one of the most innovative and technically demanding dance interpretations of Shakespeare's play, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, though not exclusively, where multiple companies have invited the choreographer to re-stage his production.

The key to this success is undoubtedly Zuska's vision of Queen Mab as the protagonist and central force of the ballet, a figure who appears as the queen of fairies and love, yet simultaneously embodies death, despair, and division. Friar Lawrence is also a pivotal character, a balanced, gentle, and luminous soul who does everything in his power to help the two lovers, including assisting them in their secret marriage.

Zuska's choreographic technique deserves recognition for its unique fusion of neo-classical ballet and modern dance movements, as I have demonstrated throughout my multimodal analysis.

In this adaptation, the lovers represent the only positive force of escape from the ongoing battle between good and evil. Yet, as in many versions of the ballet, and, I would argue, in Shakespeare's original text, it is the darker side of the story that ultimately prevails. Still, in the end, the two lovers become symbols and embodiments of an alternative reality, a true dialogic and compassionate encounter that has the potential to save not only their world but also our own.

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