

Ballet: Romeo and Juliet

Choreography: Jean-Georges Noverre (first known)

Composer: Sergey Prokofiev

The Story

"Romeo and Juliet", one of William Shakespeare's most renowned tragedies, is a timeless tale of forbidden love, set against the backdrop of two feuding families in the city of Verona, Italy. The story begins when Romeo Montague crashes a party held by the Capulets, his family's sworn enemies. It is here he first lays eyes on Juliet Capulet, and the two fall in love at first sight.

Their love, though fervent, is fraught with danger due to the ongoing feud between their families. Despite this, they decide to marry in secret with the help of Friar Laurence, who hopes their union might bring about peace between the Montagues and Capulets. Unfortunately, their bliss is short-lived as a street brawl results in the death of Romeo's best friend, Mercutio, at the hands of Juliet's cousin, Tybalt. In a fit of rage, Romeo avenges Mercutio's death by killing Tybalt, thus earning a death sentence and banishment from Verona.

While Romeo hides in Mantua, Friar Laurence devises a risky plan to reunite the young lovers. He gives Juliet a potion that simulates death, intending to send a message to Romeo about the plan. Upon waking from her deathlike slumber, Juliet would escape to Mantua with Romeo. However, the message never reaches Romeo, who receives news of Juliet's 'death' from another source.

In despair, Romeo returns to Verona and visits Juliet's tomb, where he drinks poison to join his beloved in death. When Juliet awakens and finds Romeo dead by her side, she stabs herself with Romeo's dagger. Their tragic deaths ultimately reconcile the Capulets and Montagues, bringing an end to the family feud but at an unimaginable cost.

The History of the Shakespeare Play

"Romeo and Juliet," one of the most popular plays written by the acclaimed English playwright William Shakespeare, was believed to be penned between 1591 and 1595. This time period, often referred to as Shakespeare's 'early period,' was when he also wrote other notable plays such as "Richard II," "Henry VI," and "The Comedy of Errors." The play is a tragic love story, inspired by an Italian tale translated into verse as "The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet" by Arthur Brooke in 1562.

Shakespeare's adaptation of the story for the English stage, however, brought Romeo and Juliet to life with unprecedented depth and complexity. While the base narrative remains the same, Shakespeare's retelling incorporates various themes such as the cruelty of fate, the folly of feud, and the purity of love. The characters are meticulously constructed, and the dialogue, particularly the monologues and soliloquies, showcase Shakespeare's linguistic prowess.

The play was first performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a company of actors for which Shakespeare wrote for the majority of his career. "Romeo and Juliet" was well-received, and its popularity continued to grow throughout Shakespeare's lifetime. The first quarto version, believed to have been an unauthorized version, was published in 1597. The second quarto, considered more authoritative, was published in 1599.

The recurrent themes and relatable characters have contributed to the play's enduring popularity. Today, "Romeo and Juliet" is one of the most frequently performed Shakespearean works and has been adapted into various mediums, including ballets, operas, films, and television series, with diverse interpretations and settings. Despite the tragic ending, the play's exploration of young love, family ties, and societal pressure continues to resonate with audiences worldwide, making it a timeless piece of literature.

The History of the Ballet

The ballet adaptation of "Romeo and Juliet" has a rich history that spans centuries and continents. The first known ballet rendition was performed in 1785, staged by French choreographer Jean-Georges Noverre. However, it was the 1935 adaptation by Soviet choreographer Leonid Lavrovsky that truly brought Shakespeare's tragic tale to the ballet world. Performed by the Kirov Ballet, Lavrovsky's version was emotionally charged, faithfully following the original story and making full use of Prokofiev's powerful score.

Sergey Prokofiev's score for "Romeo and Juliet" is now considered a masterpiece. Initially, it was met with resistance and was deemed undanceable due to its complex rhythmic structure and modern tonality. Despite this early skepticism, Prokofiev's score eventually won over critics and audiences alike and is now integral to the ballet's enduring popularity.

In the 1960s, British choreographer Sir Kenneth MacMillan reimagined the ballet for the Royal Ballet in London. MacMillan's production was groundbreaking in its realistic portrayal of the star-crossed lovers' story, featuring passionate pas de deux sequences that emphasized the characters' emotional journeys. This version has since been performed by numerous ballet companies worldwide and is often hailed as the definitive "Romeo and Juliet" ballet.

The ballet has continued to evolve, with contemporary choreographers putting their unique spin on the classic tale. In 2007, choreographer Christopher Wheeldon created a version for the National Ballet of Canada, setting the story in the tumultuous era of the Italian Renaissance. Similarly, Alexei Ratmansky, a former artistic director of the Bolshoi Ballet, choreographed a version for The National Ballet of Denmark in 2010, harkening back to the original Lavrovsky version, but with a fresh and modern interpretation.

Today, "Romeo and Juliet" remains a staple of the ballet repertoire, continually drawing crowds with its timeless story, emotionally charged choreography, and Prokofiev's stirring score.