

In Filmed Corona, Where We Lay Our Scene: How a Pandemic Production Cultivated a Hybrid Format and Became a Memory Film

In 1915, psychologist Hugo Münsterberg had already realised the importance of the new art of photo-plays and the way it allowed a new approach to beauty, specifically one that differed from the stage: “They give an art which must develop in paths quite separate from those of the stage. It will reach the greater height the more it learns to free itself from the shackles of theatre and to live up to its own forms” (24). The introduction of the photo-plays, nowadays better known as films, caused quite the stir upon their introduction; one of the main critiques was that it was a mere extension, or even a cheap knock-off, of theatre plays. Münsterberg claimed that those who could afford the “true theatre” saw it as below them to “indulge in such a cheap substitute which lacked the glory of the stage of spoken words” (22-23). He was afraid that if the photo-play would stay within the shadow of theatre, it would neither gain freedom from its stylistic banality, nor get a chance to fully develop as its own art form.

This attitude has changed drastically over the last century, and up to this day the stage and the screen seem to find new ways to work together. Whether that is through reinventing acting from stage to screen or by transforming the theatre into a cinema space for a modern-day live broadcasted theatre production. Each medium has their own affordances and their own sets of rules to adhere to, yet there remains a shared understanding between the two that a narrative spectacle works when it is aimed at a collective audience. The liveness of the stage performance lends itself well to most screens, both those

in the privacy of one’s own home as well as those in the public setting of the cinema (Auslander 5). Such stage-to-screen adaptations have been taking place since the live television broadcasts in the 50’s (Boddy 80) and the present time of pandemics and social distancing is no exception to this rule.

One way to look at these theatre-to-film adaptations is through the notion of ‘cultural memory’, explained by Astrid Erll as “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (*Cultural Memory Studies* 2). This umbrella term allows a wide-ranging understanding of different phenomena as objects of cultural memory studies. In this case, it means that stage-to-screen adaptations can also be seen as objects that hold cultural memories, especially when there are memorable aspects to a production – such as recent productions that documented the challenges that come with producing a play during a global pandemic in a lockdown. A particularly illuminating example of this is the National Theatre’s April 2021 modern-day adaptation of *Romeo & Juliet* directed by Simon Godwin. This made-for-television film acknowledges the challenges it went through by ending on a simple black screen with text reading: “*Romeo & Juliet* was filmed in an empty theatre, over seventeen days, during a global pandemic” (Godwin). This approach to recording differs from the television plays seen previously, as this play was not quite a live television performance, nor a recording of a live theatre play. This production instead strikes a balance between the two. On the one hand, the intended television audience creates a sense of intimacy, as the

play is broadcasted right into their living room. On the other hand, there are clear elements akin to a live theatre broadcast, as it is still a play performed in a theatre, on and even off stage. Godwin recognised that the hybridity of this format opened up new creative opportunities. For instance, he was able to use flashbacks and flash-forwards, which add to the foreshadowing fates of the play. He disclosed in an interview that he “wanted to celebrate what [a television film] could give us that the theatre cannot. Its hybridity is its greatest strength” (Akbar). This production had to deal with the highs and lows in these uncertain times, and memorably managed to use these hurdles to its advantage. Therefore, Godwin’s production of *Romeo & Juliet* illustrates how a new, hybrid format cultivated during a global pandemic can become a memory film.

The Stage vs. The Screen

Throughout the last century, many scholars have pondered about the differences between the stage and the screen. Münsterberg was one of the first, but certainly not the last to put these musings on paper. There are two main differences that stand out in the case of transitioning from stage to screen. The first difference is acting, which became clear when actors transitioned from acting on-stage to acting on-screen with the introduction of the photoplay. The second difference is when and how the performance is experienced by the audience, as the stage and the screen both situate a performance differently.

Not long after Münsterberg saw his first photoplay, other writers began to speculate on what distinguished the theatre actor from the film actor. Film theorist Siegfried Kracauer wondered what made the acting that worked so well on stage come across so wrong on the screen. He found that the theatre actor must *convince* the audience of the character, whereas the film actor must *become* the character. This comes down to the fact that the stage is usually exclusively human, whereas the screen is not. On stage, the action is revealed by and through the actors: what they do and say creates the context. They are the play. Or in Kracauer’s words: “On the stage, man is the absolute measure of the universe” (203). On-screen, the actors are often important, but only as long as they are not eclipsed by the surroundings. A film almost always focuses on the sets or the props more than on the characters itself. Kracauer emphasises that “the subject matter of the cinema is not so much the purely human as it is the visible flux of infinite phen-

omena impinging on the human” (203). This is the main difference between the stage and the screen actor, according to Kracauer. The stage actor carries the entirety of the play on their shoulders, whereas the film actor shares it with the screen.

Apart from the acting, the stage itself has also changed throughout the years. Nowadays plays are not just experienced in a theatre; instead they are seen and broadcast in cinemas all over the world. Live broadcasted theatre, also known as cinemacast, live cinema theatre, or outside broadcasting, is at its core the experience of watching a recorded theatre performance in a cinema setting. These broadcasts are usually consumed as if they are feature films, however the audience is treated as if they are in a theatre. Before the performance begins, the lights remain on and shots of the theatre auditorium are shown, giving the cinema audience the experience of being part of the theatre audience. In her study of live cinema theatre, Lilia Nemchenko iterates how important the theatre experience is, explaining that “while the semantic concepts of performance, the acting techniques and the theatre’s mission [undergo] constant change, theatrical pragmatics has remained almost constant” (459). The theatre and its performance have remained consistent, yet how and where these performances are consumed have changed throughout the years. Additionally, Janice Wardle explains how the cinema and theatre experience come together in the space of the cinema, as the “creation of a heightened awareness of the shared, public occasion in these ways made a distinction between [a] live broadcast of a theatrical event and other ‘normal’ cinematic experiences” (138). Wardle emphasises that a live theatre broadcast is not to be compared to a normal feature film, as they are two distinct experiences pertaining to two different media. The live theatre broadcast is shown in the cinema, yet it is not treated as such.

Hence the acting and the space of consumption play an important part for the audience experience. However, there are new ways emerging to both produce and consume. Especially during the special circumstances that the world now finds itself in during the global pandemic, the stage and the screen showcase their resilience to create new, hybrid productions.

Romeo & Juliet on the Small Screen

An example of the changing nature of (live broadcasted) theatre can be seen in the National

Theatre's production of *Romeo & Juliet*, starring Josh O'Connor as Romeo and Jessie Buckley as Juliet. Originally, this production was scheduled to play at the Lyttelton theatre during the summer of 2020. The production could not continue in the planned format due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting lockdowns. However, that did not deter Godwin to continue with the play, albeit in a different manner. The production decided to use the theatre during the time that it was officially booked, and shoot a made-for-television film instead. As a result, they had to shorten and adapt the play to make sure



Fig. 1 Still from Godwin, *Romeo & Juliet* (29:37).

it fit within the 90 minute time slot that is usually reserved for television films. Speaking on the experience of making the film, Godwin revealed that there were discussions between the producer who created National Theatre Live and the artistic director of the National Theatre “about transforming the space into a studio and doing something digital in a way that kept the essence of the stage” (Akbar). This is where the idea began to use the entirety of the theatre as the backdrop for the television production.

The two main actors wholeheartedly agreed that it was a unique experience that brought the play to life on the small screen. O'Connor reiterated the hybridity of the production, as “it was a discovery for all of us because it's not like film and it's not like theatre, so we were all relearning” (Akbar). Buckley similarly focused on the unique artistic qualities of the film: “The film itself is trying to capture the journey of performance and what it feels like. You'd be silly to not acknowledge what this was in its own unique way. It was beautiful to see the innards of the theatre behind you. That was part of the tapestry of it” (Akbar). Both of these aspects can clearly be seen in the film, as there is a sense of hybridity and uniqueness that shines through in everything, ranging from the *mise-en-scène* to the soundtrack. It is a made-for-television film that manages to keep the essence of

the stage. Godwin highlights this when he cross-cuts the monologues of Romeo and Juliet from act 3 scene 1 and 2, putting them in dialogue with one another. Juliet is heard speaking the words “when I shall die, take him and cut him out in little stars” (Godwin) over a medium close-up of Romeo's blood covered hands holding the knife that he just killed Tybalt with. The continuation of Juliet's romantic monologue into a voice-over is juxtaposed with the horrific deed Romeo has just committed, the one that is seen on screen. This illustrates not only how Godwin plays with the affordances of the television film to

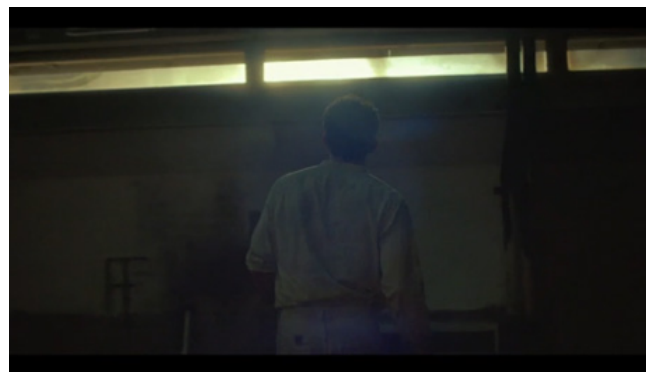


Fig. 2. Still from Godwin, *Romeo & Juliet* (1:22:11).

strengthen the imagery of the play itself, but it also highlights just how entangled violence and love are in this play.

The characteristic aspects that are usually found on screen, whether it is the big or the small screen, are harder to find in a theatre production. This specific production played with these characteristics and affordances to create a different atmosphere, while keeping the feeling of the theatre. As Buckley stated, the innards of the theatre are now on display for all the world to see, as most scenes seem to be shot on-stage, out in the wings, in the green room, and possibly in a loading dock of the theatre (see figures 1 and 2). The prologue is uttered on a fully lit stage, with all the actors in a u-shaped formation in their everyday wear, surrounded by different, seemingly random set pieces, costumes, and props (see figure 3). Similarly, Romeo's banishment later in the play leads him to usually unseen parts of the theatre, as he wanders into what seems to be the loading area while a door slowly closes in on him; he is literally closed off from Juliet, who is on-stage (see figure 4). The prologue thereby announces that this play will take place on-and off-stage, and this new hybrid setting is where they lay their scene.

As a whole, none of the play's sets are quite discernible as a specific place, with the exception of



Fig. 3. Still from Godwin, *Romeo & Juliet* (01:20).



Fig. 4. Still from Godwin, *Romeo & Juliet* (1:01:58).

the Capulet residence, which could very well be a leftover set from a different production. The majority of the scenes are filmed on a dark set, whether that is on stage, out in the wings, or back in the loading area. To illustrate, the Capulet party only needs a fog machine, some strobe lights, and coloured LEDs to make the partygoers stand out against the dark, under-lit stage (see figure 5). This party is also a turning point, as suddenly the stage is not the stage anymore: it has transformed into a lively club, with the actors' jeans and sweatpants replaced by suits, dresses, and elaborate Venetian masks. These masks further serve as a subtle nod to the current, real-life social circumstances requiring everyone to wear a facemask in public. This Capulet party is filmed on a relatively bare set, and provides a stark contrast to the narrative importance of Romeo and Juliet meeting for the first time. The simplicity of this scene proves that not much is needed to provoke the viewer's imagination and set the story in motion.

Similarly, when Romeo first speaks to Juliet and starts his famous sonnet about his lips being two pilgrims, they are on centre stage lit by LEDs and surrounded by dancing partygoers. The beginning of the conversation is shot through over-the-shoulder close-ups, putting the audience almost uncomfortably

close to the couple, before cutting to an extreme close-up of their hands intertwining. The soundtrack also seamlessly transitions from a bass-heavy party track to a softer, ethereal track, with the bass now resembling a heartbeat. The conversation continues, however only the dialogue is heard over the music in a montage of them chasing each other, once again dressed in their jeans and sweatpants. They are now on a fully-lit stage, where the dancing crowd has been replaced with racks of props, costumes, and set pieces (see figure 6). Eventually the scene cross-cuts between the couple being surrounded by the crowd and the pair being alone together in their own world. Godwin thereby uses the different settings of the stage to illustrate the mental state of Romeo and Juliet: they are in their own world from the first time they meet, and it is beautifully illustrated by the production's newfound ability to use the stage to its full capacity.



Fig. 5. Still from Godwin, *Romeo & Juliet* (05:19).

Another scene that stands out because of the dark, barebones setting – which appears to be shot in the green room – is the wedding scene. This scene sees every flat surface covered in burning candles as far as the (camera)eye can see. The only set piece in the scene is the altar, which consists of two trestles, a plank, some candles, and a few other knick-knacks to cover the makeshift table. A dark room illuminated by candlelight is all that is needed to flesh out the space and create a romantic, intimate atmosphere. Ironically, this scene is mirrored, as the same room seems to be used as Juliet's tomb at the end of the play (see figures 7 and 8). This time the dark room is not filled with lit candles; instead Juliet is laid out on a dais in the middle of the room, surrounded by flowers that provide the only colour in the scene. The stairs that were once alight with flickering candles are now a pale, bare backdrop for the horrors that are to come. This goes to show that a little creativity goes



Fig. 6. Still from Godwin, *Romeo & Juliet* (19:35).



Fig. 7. Still from Godwin, *Romeo & Juliet* (34:52).

a long way, and that all the nooks and crannies of a theatre can be used as a possible backdrop capable of inciting meaning. Whether it is to represent Romeo's and Juliet's mental spaces, or to highlight that their marriage was also their death sentence, Godwin uses the theatre and its innards to its full potential.

Mitigating Circumstances

There is no doubt that the production of *Romeo & Juliet* had to overcome a number of hurdles that would not have been present a mere two years ago. The National Theatre has put in an incredible amount of effort to be able to create a television play - or a pandemic production - in times of social distancing. They even managed to use these restrictions to their advantage, by utilising the entirety of the now empty theatre. O'Connor explained that they had to wear masks most of the time and they had to get tested for COVID-19 twice a week. He elaborates that "immediately after we got the results back, Jessie and I had a three-hour window to get intimate" (Akbar). A three-hour window inevitably would have increased the pressure on the actors, as seventeen days to shoot a film is already a tight schedule without the necessity of a medical test to determine when the main actors could be within touching distance. This is just one example of how the circumstances hindered this pandemic production, as a time restriction to get intimate sounds disastrous for a play so well-known for its intimacy. Nonetheless, Godwin and his cast and crew managed to express the play's intimacy and yearning by utilising the theatre and all of its different settings in new, ingenious ways.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the production of *Romeo & Juliet* remains hard to access, almost as if the National Theatre is gatekeeping their own production. In a time where streaming services

are pushing out traditional broadcasters faster than ever before (Smith and Telang 63), the National Theatre initially chose to only broadcast the production twice. One broadcast was in the UK on Sky and the other in the US on PBS. The only ways to watch the production, according to the National Theatre, are to watch it online in the UK with a NOW TV entertainment pass or Sky subscription, in the USA on the PBS Video app, or in selected cinemas in the UK and Ireland on the 28th of September 2021 ("*Romeo & Juliet*"). This is neither the most accessible, nor even the most profitable way to offer this production to the public, as it is limited to people in the UK, Ireland, or the US with the right television subscription. Only recently have they added a fourth option to access the production, namely to stream the play online.

These accessibility issues are particularly questionable because the National Theatre rolled out their own streaming service, National Theatre at Home, in December 2020. Nonetheless, it took them six months to release *Romeo & Juliet* on this platform, which finally occurred in October 2021. Why would a theatre company put a disproportionate amount of effort into a unique television play, and then choose not to offer it worldwide on their own streaming service until half a year later? This decision is especially unfortunate because of how this pandemic production functions as an object of cultural memory for its viewing audience, an object that provides a time capsule of what theatres resorted to in a global pandemic during lockdown. This choice to withhold the play from a global audience for an extended period of time reveals that the National Theatre's choices may have deeper, and as-of-yet less obvious, motivations than mere enthusiasm for the arts.

Indeed, this decision-making process contradicts the fact that there is an audience willing to pay the National Theatre directly for their performances



Fig. 8. Still from Godwin, *Romeo & Juliet* (1:25:23).

through their streaming service. In the summer of 2021, an Instagram post of the National Theatre about *Romeo & Juliet* had accumulated over 11,000 likes and the nearly 200 comments were littered with questions from people all around the globe asking when and where they could watch this production (““Did my heart love till now?””). This interest is further highlighted in a later post where the National Theatre announced that they added the production to their streaming platform, as that post amassed almost 7000 likes and nearly 50 comments within 24 hours (“Juliet and Romeo risk everything”). These responses demonstrate that there is an audience for this production, specifically one that had to wait half a year to be able to see it. Leaving only more questions as to why the National Theatre withheld this production from their eager audience.

Nonetheless, this is not a clear-cut case: while this restricted access hindered many people from watching the film when it first aired, it also raised suspense about the production. The more the National Theatre shared snippets and teasers from the production, the more the hype increased and the more people became interested in watching it. The sheer number of people engaging with the National Theatre on Instagram illustrates that keeping this pandemic production behind closed doors for a while increased the anticipation with which it was received. It made it more memorable once people did finally get to watch it, and find out if the suspense was worth it in the end.

Romeo & Juliet as Cultural Memory

The accessibility issues notwithstanding, this production does serve as a prime example of cultural media memory, particularly considering the circumstances in which it was made. Astrid Erll explains that

cultural memory is unthinkable without media, specifically the cinema of cultural memory, which is founded on the production and dissemination of memory films. These can either focus on the concepts of memory (e.g. *Memento* (2000)), or disseminate images of the past (e.g. *Schindler's List* (1993)). There are three notable dimensions related to studying these memory films: technological, aesthetic, and social perspectives. First, from a technological standpoint, “one can address different mnemonic qualities of analogue and digital filmmaking or the significance of filmic remediation” (*Memory in Culture* 137). Secondly, there are specific formal and aesthetic strategies which contribute to memory-effects in film. Thirdly, these aesthetic strategies could mark a film as a medium of memory, however “they can only endow it with a *potential* for mnemonic effects. This potential has to be *realized* within situative, social and institutional frameworks” (*Memory in Culture* 137-138 emphasis in original). In other words, for a film to become a memory film, it must be viewed as a memory film. If a film is not watched, it might still provide the most interesting images or perspectives of the past or the working of memory, however, it will not ultimately have any effect on memory culture.

Thus, both the film and its reception play an important part in determining whether or not a film becomes a memory film. The context is crucial for the cinema of cultural memory, according to Erll, especially the context in which films are prepared and received as memory-relevant media (*Memory in Culture* 138). This clearly applies to *Romeo & Juliet*, a film made in an entirely new context that heavily draws on the surrounding social circumstances of its production. On a technical level, the fact that it is a play that works with flashbacks, flash-forwards, and different settings situated throughout the entirety of the Lyttelton theatre sets the film apart from other television plays and live broadcast theatre productions alike. These aspects endow *Romeo & Juliet's* make-shift aesthetics with the potential to create a mnemonic effect, as it is a memorable production on multiple levels.

While the television film itself can display as many interesting links to film, television, and theatre alike, in the end this production is still inherently linked to a particular space and time. It is a result of the unforeseen circumstances the world found itself in during the pandemic, and the production exudes this from every angle. However, the crux lies in the fact that the audience has to decide that this is that this is indeed a memorable production that serves

as a cultural memory of the circumstances of the pandemic lockdowns. The praising words of the reviews do seem to point towards such a decision: “Audacious and fleet-footed, it is a rare example of an adaptation that turns its limitations to its advantage. Filmed in the empty spaces in the Lyttelton [...] this production has all the verve of a slickly edited movie, yet still exudes an aura of raw theatricality” (Clide). Overall, the reviews praise the hybridity of the production and applaud the final result: “what an accomplished example of pandemic-style drama: a sleek fusion of theatre and film” (Clapp), or they highlight the television and theatre aspects, as “it forges a new hybrid between stage and screen, using all the resources and exploratory power of theatre and the beauty and fluidity of film to create a fleet-footed and thought-provoking 90-minutes” (Crompton). There appears to be a consensus that the production managed to capture something memorable on screen. As a result, this television play is not only a hybrid production, but also a memory-relevant media that remembers the COVID-19 pandemic and the resilience of the people affected by it.

Conclusion

All in all, *Romeo & Juliet* proves to be an intriguing and one-of-a-kind production. The medium not only plays with affordances from different media, but actually combines the entirety of a theatre with the modalities of a made-for-television film. The innards of the Lyttelton theatre literally shine on-screen, and it ties this unusual hybrid production together. Apart from the National Theatre’s questionable choices on how and where to distribute the film, this pandemic production managed to create something new out of seemingly insurmountable challenges related to COVID-19. *Romeo & Juliet* is unashamedly a product of its time, and can thereby productively be considered as a memory-relevant medium, documenting how setbacks can be transformed into new opportunities. The arts have shown their resilience through the hurdles of the pandemic, or as renowned theatre actress Dame Hellen Mirren eloquently puts it: “[Maybe the] present insecurity has made [artists, technicians and craftsmen and women] more able to survive this pandemic with wit and courage. Their imagination has already translated itself, in these new circumstances, into inventive, entertaining and moving ways to communicate”. (Mirren). The theatre, as well as cinema and television, have managed to stay afloat so long

that a worldwide pandemic can be seen as a creative opportunity instead of an artistic devastation. Thus creating new hybrid formats that will go down in both theatrical and cinematic history as cultural memories of a moment in time that no one living today is likely to forget.

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