

SIN FRONTERAS, CON LÍMITES: A ROMEO & JULIET FOR TODAY

By Miranda Purcell



The cast of the Mobile Theater production of *Romeo & Juliet* in 1957.

DESPITE WHAT WE REMEMBER, caution does not begin with the stranger in the alleyway or the hand hovering over a hot stove. It begins earlier, almost tender in its delivery—folded into bedtime stories, carried in scripture, in the knowing turn of a page by someone who has already seen the ending. A girl in a red cloak strays from the path. A boy flies too close to the sun. A garden closes forever because someone reached for the forbidden fruit.

We learn danger first as narrative. Not as experience, but as inheritance.

William Shakespeare, literature's immortal, understood that story is never gentle. His worlds do not warn so much as expose—whether through the mind's paralysis, the souring of affection, or seduction of persuasion—how easily the human condition can be tipped. It is curious, then, that when we think about *Romeo & Juliet*—arguably one of his most enduring works—we so often pin its collapse to untempered passion: two young people who meet, who choose, who refuse to wait. And yes, there is something dangerous in the way that a feeling can eclipse the universe that contains it. The ending, after all, is no secret. The prologue tells us plainly: they will die.

But tragedy, like caution, rarely belongs to a single cause.

In this production of the feuding Montagues and Capulets—directed by Saheem Ali and mark-

ing only the third production of *Romeo & Juliet* in Free Shakespeare in the Park's 64-year history at The Delacorte Theater—the scales are restored to a fuller accounting: What remains after the final tableau is not merely a broken happily-ever-after, but the architecture that made it possible.

"We remember our ancestors when they have something to teach us. This play is about recognizing that the cost of conflict can be our own children—because they are the ones who will suffer out on the streets," Ali says. ➤



Cynthia Nixon and Peter MacNicol in The Public Theater production of *Romeo & Juliet* in 1988.

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There is, for many of us, a first encounter with Shakespeare under fluorescent-lit classrooms, where someone biting a pencil recites "Romeo, O, Romeo," half-reclined in their wooden chair. For Kenyan-born and raised Ali, it occurred around the time he was 17. He and his friends had just staged a barebones musical adaptation of *Grease*—built more on instinct than instruction—when, from the audience, an invitation arrived: to play Mercutio, Romeo's friend of all wit and volatility, in what would become his first professional production.

"We were young. Black and Brown kids speaking the language with our own dialect. We weren't pretending to be anyone or to be anywhere else. We were embodying ourselves," he recalls.

The star-crossed experience would become—for the now Tony Award-nominated director, with a career defined by groundbreaking Shakespeare in the Park productions of *Merry Wives* and *Twelfth Night* as well as *Buena Vista Social Club* on Broadway—an origin point: the creative process as an act of translation. You cannot claim those grandiose words, or lyrical prose, until you make them your own.

He would come to understand this in practice when he came to the United States for his undergraduate studies at Northeastern University. The clash was immediate: Boston-area productions featured predominantly white casts and

British-leaning accents. It raised the question that has driven him since: how do we keep these texts from hardening into artifacts, and instead sustain them as a living exchange?

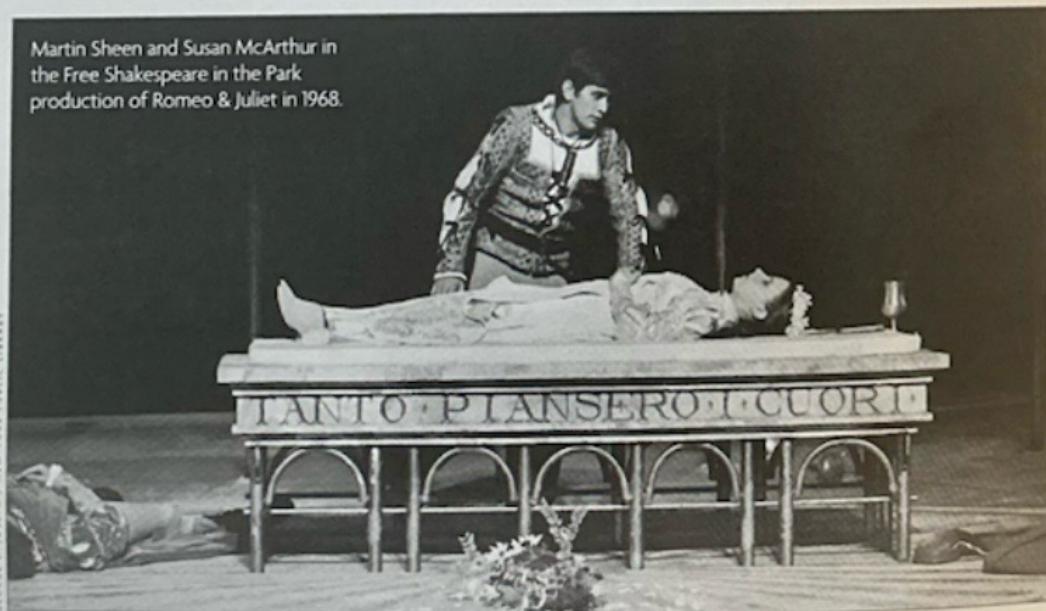
And so, in this production, authenticity meant serving as a mirror of the nation itself.

"I've been ruminating on the violence that we've been experiencing in this country," Ali says, "very specifically around identity—who is considered American who is allowed to be here and who isn't. We've witnessed the Department of Homeland Security forces going into cities and hunting down undocumented immigrants, with permission to use lethal force."

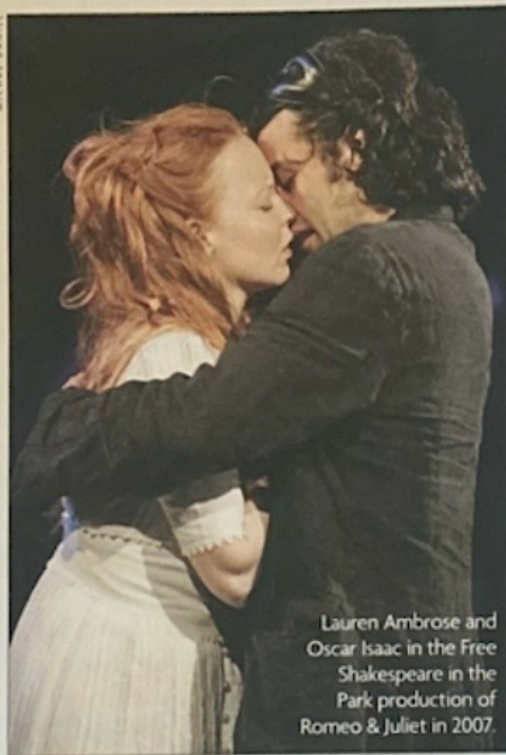
The image that kept circling in his mind was the southern border: a rigid, man-made line meant to separate "us" from "them." He traced the outlines of the issue—the politics and the rhetoric surrounding migration—as he understood them, where Trump's first-term rallying cry, "Build the Wall," became emblematic, in his view compressing a complex and charged reality into a slogan. Previous administrations, Clinton and Obama, had extended the barrier in silence, though to him it registered as something done without a defining language to frame it.

Further shaken by the recent deaths of Alex Petti and Renee Good in Minneapolis—fatal shootings by ICE—it became clear he had something to say. ➤

Martin Sheen and Susan McArthur in the Free Shakespeare in the Park production of *Romeo & Juliet* in 1968.



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Lauren Ambrose and Oscar Isaac in the Free Shakespeare in the Park production of *Romeo & Juliet* in 2007.

"I decided to use the border wall as the backdrop... to make it about the Left and Right arguing over the wall, when it's really a metaphor for what is wrong with the way we are having this debate," he says.

His Verona—already a city of impassable divides—is filled with border patrol officers, protestors, and "Defund the Wall" and "El Muro Mata" signs: contemporary signifiers that make the stakes immediately legible. And to root the production more firmly in place, Ali places Spanish at the center.

"I wanted the lovers to speak it [Spanish] to each other, and I wanted it to be a language of intimacy and connection, not a language of division," he says.

The romance tongue of cascading vowels, melodic flow, and variations of "te quiero," "te amo," "te adoro," becomes native to the Montague family. Yet Romeo cannot speak it freely in public, echoing instances in Texas schools where speaking Spanish has, at times, led to reprimand or, on the streets, sometimes carried the threat of arrest. Juliet Capulet learns it through her own curiosity and rebellion, discreetly rehearsing it with her nurse's servant, Pedro.

The balcony scene—Act II, Scene II—is rendered in it, a private cocoon of vulnerability and secrecy. Ali compares it to the intimacy of speaking Swahili with his family—an idiom he has also carried into his work, including his 2025 production of *Twelfth Night*, where it is spoken by Viola and Sebastian when they are reunited—a habit comprehended fully only by those who are multilingual, like shedding a cloak after a day's labor. The audience, he says, is not meant to catch every word.

"I love experiencing films and music in different languages. As long as I can feel the emotion, I am tapped in. That for me is the experiment of this production," he says.

What, after all, is in a language? Would not that which we call a rose—by any other name—smell as sweet? It may be precisely why we return to *Romeo & Juliet* despite the passage of time: not because the story is ours exactly, but because it pulses with the fractures, losses, and grief we still carry today. And if we do it with the consistency that makes a classic, well, a classic, it may be because we continue, almost irrationally, to believe there is something worth protecting: love.

"For me, theater is about illuminating the ways in which we are more alike than different," says Ali. "The cast will look like America. I want identification on all levels because I think that when we consider other people and their plights, it engenders empathy."

Could it be that it is not love that undoes us, but the responsibilities we refuse? As Ali's interpretation might suggest, we may not choose whom we are bound to, but we are still—whether consciously or not—shaping the space in which those connections are allowed to live or wither. And if we are culpable when they are starved, warped, or extinguished, then we are also, fortunately, capable of repair.

Miranda Purcell is an actress and journalist working across film, theatre, and communications in Puerto Rico and the U.S. She is a 2025 TCG Rising Leader of Color and an alum of the National Critics Institute and the Jose Solís' BIPOC Critics Lab.