

## 179. ICONIC CHARACTERS: ROMEO AND JULIET

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WHEN *ROMEO AND JULIET* by Brazil's Grupo Galpão (dir. Gabriel Villela) was performed at the Globe theater in London in 1992, it was said to have brought back a new freshness to Shakespeare. That was probably because the performance was conceived for the street – the world of fairs, pubs, and squares – where, side by side, one finds the politician and the laborer, the businessman and the peddler, the student and the prostitute, the public officer and the unemployed, children and old people, just as it used to happen at the English inns of old where the Elizabethan theater developed.

### SHAKESPEARE IN A POPULAR UNIVERSE

This popular universe is like Shakespeare's: metamorphic, dynamic, and unpredictable, like a circus. (See Figure 230.)

This circus world regulates the swift, internal movement of actions, feelings, and metaphors of Shakespeare's work, and the quick changes and nimbleness that guide the tragedy of the couple from Verona. In this tragedy, we find the circumstances necessary for fortune's blows to fall more poignantly on the characters and the audience involved with the story. This production echoes claims that have been made about these two iconic characters since the eighteenth century: we have, side by side, joy and tears, balm and poison, swords clashing and the soul trembling in endless alternation. And we see in this production the long-standing claim about Shakespearean character and story that it is in the situations of the common man that Shakespeare finds the universality of the human being and

his eagerness to confront and construct his fate. There is no dichotomy between the erudite and the popular. One interacts with the other and means nothing without it, just like what happens between the couple's love and the hostility that dominates Verona.

Romeo and Juliet are permanently in danger and throw themselves headlong into the tense and unpredictable game of love and death. As they move beyond the archetypal characters of the Nurse, the Friar, the Prince, the villain (Mercutio), and others, Romeo and Juliet go forward toward their fate as if they were walking along a tightrope at the same time as they progressively exile themselves from Verona and the banalities of its conflicts. The higher they reach, the more they oscillate and the closer they are to falling. The *mise-en-scène* of Grupo Galpão was prepared by having the actors walk along boards three meters above the ground so that the risk of falling and the effort to maintain their balance like trapeze artists in a circus might be incorporated in the words cast into space. (See Figure 231.)

The actors' bodies impress on the words the tension and the vibration with which they must be pronounced and received by the audience as they watch, tense with suspense, as if they were around a circus ring. And it was a moving arena set up on squares, fairs, and crossroads that the car used in this performance of *Romeo and Juliet* was turned into in order to *mambembar* through the heart of Minas Gerais and then Brazil and throughout the world. In Brazil the African words *mambembar* and *mambembe* ("faraway place") refer to itinerant circus performers



230. Eduardo Moreira of Grupo Galpão, in *Romeo and Juliet* (1992). Photo by permission of Magda Santiago.



231. Chorus/Shakespeare (Antônio Edson) moves toward Juliet (Fernanda Vianna) and Romeo (Eduardo Moreira) during the Capulet party. Photo by permission of Magda Santiago.

or theater players. They move around just as “strolling players” did in Shakespeare’s time, setting up their stage anywhere, in places such as fairs and squares of country towns, where they perform before moving on to another locality. (See Chapter 209, “Shakespearean Players in Early Modern Europe.”)

At the end of the performance, after money had been put in the hat, the circus was pulled down and the stage once more metamorphosed into a car to take the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* to other places. Everything in Shakespeare is metamorphic, like a child’s magic world. Shakespeare knows that such magic, which the science of his time was beginning to lose, continued nevertheless in the soul and the mystery of the human imagination.

#### REWRITING SHAKESPEARE REWRITING AN ITALIAN ORIGINAL

Shakespeare’s play is a rewriting of previous versions of the tragedy of Verona. The adaptation by Galpão is also a rewriting of the Bard’s text that galloped on the rhymes of Onestaldo de Pennafort’s translation, influenced by the lyrical, dreamlike, and playful universe of the baroque and the popular culture of Minas Gerais. In the same way that Shakespeare introduced the character of the nurse, this production introduces the narrator, who, using the language of novelist Guimarães Rosa and that of the rural areas in Minas Gerais, contextualizes the play and uncovers new meanings and environments in which to develop it. As the lovers are in conflict with the town and their families and are later divided by the exile imposed on Romeo, they only find consolation and solidarity in the cosmic. In this production, it is to that idea of the cosmic

that they address their complaints, their despair, their confessions, and their anguish. In keeping with this approach, Galpão performed its adaptation, in open spaces, turning the mountains, the twilight, the stars, and the public into a privileged audience for the characters’ solitude. The natural landscape enters the production, participates in it, and directs the voice, the gaze, and the bodies hurtling toward the cosmos.

#### FROM THE STREETS OF MINAS GERAIS INTO THE STREETS OF THE WORLD

This circus-like, tragic, and youthful universe is echoed in Rosa’s “sertanês” (a dialect created from the language peculiar to Guimarães Rosa, the famous writer from Minas Gerais), goes vertically through the “seresta” music from Brazilian folklore, and is highlighted in the faded clothes worn by Romeo and Juliet, whitened like the walls of the houses and churches of Minas Gerais, which contrast with the dark clothes of the other characters. The growing conflict between the couple and Veronese society – more than the conflict between the two families awakened in the end by the deaths of the two young people – gives movement to the dramatic course of Shakespeare’s play. To remake it in the Brazilian context and to steep it in the circus-like, popular universe typical of the streets is to find anew Shakespeare’s meaning today (Leite 1999, 92–120).

The iconic figures of Romeo and Juliet carry the popular claim of universality today in part because the play makes us rediscover a kind of love that is free, a way for us to construct our humanity and our fate, which we are responsible for in a world dominated by business and by pragmatic, banal, and utilitarian relationships. Such love,

no matter how *mambembe* it is, is really what must also be performed in our twenty-first-century Veronas.

#### SOURCE CITED

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## 180. ICONIC CHARACTERS: FALSTAFF

Michael Dobson

TO SAY THAT SIR JOHN FALSTAFF has an unorthodox relationship with time would be an understatement. Exempt from any dynastic posterity of his own (too addicted to sherry-sack himself to produce the sons he imagines addicting to it in *2 Henry 4* [2*H4* 4.1.469–72]), he sometimes claims to have been small enough, when young, to have crept into an alderman's thumb ring (1*H4* 2.4.274–75), but at other times he claims still to be in the vanguard of youth (2*H4* 1.2.134–35), and at others he claims never to have been young at all but to have been born “at about three of the clock in the afternoon, with a white head and something of a round belly” (2*H4* 1.2.147–48).

An inhabitant of Shakespeare's greatest chronicle plays, his fortunes intimately bound up with those of the historical King Henry V, he manages nonetheless to escape mere history and mortality altogether: during the battle of Shrewsbury at the climax of *Henry IV, Part 1*, after apparently being killed as dead as Hotspur, he stages a gloriously life-affirming resurrection. Immemorial and anachronistic – able to return from his misadventures in medieval London and the Cotswolds to star in a very Elizabethan comedy, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* – Falstaff, for all his tangible everyday squalor, behaves more like a local divinity than a mortal. Fleeing from the disguised Hal and Poins, he lards the lean earth as he walks along (1*H4* 2.2.90); during the sylvan, nocturnal finale of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, he is dressed as Herne the Hunter and assailed by de facto fairies (*Wiv.* 5.5.1–95); and even his supposedly real and final death in *Henry V* takes place only offstage, where he does not so much perish as experience a peculiarly old English apotheosis: “He's in Arthur's bosom,” reports Mistress Quickly, “if ever man went to Arthur's bosom” (*H5* 2.3.8–9).

#### ESCAPES FROM THE TEXTS

Given Falstaff's defiance of the historical time and narrative structure of the plays in which he appears, it is not surprising that in popular culture he should so thoroughly

have escaped from Shakespeare's texts. After the Globe was closed in 1642, Falstaff persisted, surviving undercover in the Interregnum in an abridgement of *Henry IV, Part 1*, consisting solely of the highway robbery scenes: significantly, this piece, performed at suitably low-life venues such as taverns, does not bear the name of a king but is simply called “The Bouncing Knight” (See Figure 19, from Francis Kirkman's *The Wits* from 1662, which bears an early likeness of Sir John on its title page.) This playlet marks the inception of one major and enduring tendency in the popular dissemination of Falstaff, that of transforming him from the future Henry V's upstaging sidekick into the designated star of his own show.

Giuseppe Verdi's 1893 operatic adaptation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which instead of being called *Le allegre comari di Windsor* is simply called *Falstaff*, is only the greatest example of this (see Chapter 254, “Opera”): others include Orson Welles's film adaptation of *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, *Chimes at Midnight* (1966, which in many countries was released under the title *Falstaff*) (see Chapter 272, “World Cinema”) and Robert Nye's *Falstaff: A Novel* (1976). William Kenrick probably rates as the boldest of Sir John's authorial recyclers. Taking the struggle with bourgeois morality dramatized in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* one stage further, in 1760 Kenrick wrote a sequel to *Henry IV, Part 2*, called *Falstaff's Wedding*.

*Falstaff's Wedding* was dedicated to a great stage Falstaff, James Quin, destined to be succeeded by many other actors for whom padding became a second skin, including Stephen Kemble, Samuel Phelps, George Robey, Ralph Richardson, and John Woodvine. By Quin's time, the physical bulk that makes Falstaff so recognizable in the theater (“I have a whole school of tongues in this belly of mine,” he laments, “and not a tongue of them all speaks any other word but my name” [2*H4*.4.1.369–71]) had already begun to endear him to other popular arts, too. Porcelain figurines, originally sold as likenesses of Quin as Falstaff but ultimately becoming iconic representations of Falstaff per se, continued to be mass produced by Derby and Chelsea potters well into the nineteenth century (see