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AN ACTOR'S CREATIVE PROCESS IN THE PREPARATION AND PERFORMANCE OF THE ROLE OF Mercutio IN THE PLAY Romeo and Juliet

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### Author

Holbrook, Cade

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

An Actor's Creative Process in the Preparation and Performance of the Role of Mercutio in the  
Play "Romeo and Juliet"

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Drama

by

Cade Holbrook

Thesis Committee:

Professor Andrew Borba, Chair

Professor Cynthia Marie Bassham

Professor Philip Thompson

2023

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## DEDICATION

To

my family and friends

for all they have and will put up with in my pursuits

alchemizing my folly into fortune

*We suffer more often in imagination than in reality.*

(Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life*)

onward, actors

*Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.*

Calvin Coolidge

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT OF THESIS	v
CHAPTER 1: Textual Analysis and Research	1
Historical Context	1
Styles and Themes	3
CHAPTER 2: Pre-Rehearsal Analysis and Preparation	7
Text Analysis-Language, Circumstances, Relationships	7
Personal Connection	11
Character Interaction	12
Character Behavior	13
Character Thought	14
Character Journey	15
Line Learning	16
CHAPTER 3: Rehearsal	17
Focused Preparation and Practice for Each Rehearsal	17
Character Interaction Explorations	17
Physical Explorations	18
Integrating Personal Feeling with Character Thought and Character Behavior	19
Director/Actor Relationship	19
CHAPTER 4: Technical Rehearsal	21
CHAPTER 5: Dress Rehearsals, Opening Night, and the Run	22
CHAPTER 6: Conclusion	23
BIBLIOGRAPHY	24

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## **ABSTRACT OF THESIS**

An Actor's Creative Process in the Preparation and Performance of the Role of Mercutio in the Play "Romeo and Juliet"

By

Cade Holbrook

Master of Fine Arts in Drama

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Andrew Borba, Chair

Shakespeare and his works have been ever-present in my life: my father received an MFA in acting and had a particular love for Shakespeare, so I have been informed and taught it most of my life. In high school when I was cast as Prospero, I partly thought it was because they knew I had a free in-house text coach.

It brings me particular joy to be able to make this famous (or arguably infamous) character the task of my MFA thesis. Mercutio was an honor to become and I am grateful to the faculty of UCI for giving me the opportunity that I will carry with me.

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH:

### Part One: Historical Context:

When approaching character creation it is paramount to have a cornerstone where you can plant your metaphorical feet and start the process. Creating a character that is true to life and full of in-the-moment honesty is a daunting task, and one that is not to be taken lightly, as the goal is to “hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature”—the actor’s task, then, is to craft that mirror with as few warpings as possible.

In the absence of any hard neuroscience training, creating a character’s mind is an exploration in personal experience. I have found that the concept of ‘nature vs. nurture’ is an effective keystone in creating the base layer to explore from. What parts of your character are wholly unique to them? What is genetically gifted to them? Which aspects of their thought processes have been socially ingrained and are they too deep for the character to actively question? To start this process, I gather as much information about the world of the play and its context as possible.

*Romeo and Juliet* does not establish a clear timeframe for itself, but it does provide clues in order to narrow down our range. First, it is announced from the outset in the prologue that we find ourselves in Verona, Italy. Also, the fencing terms sarcastically utilized by Mercutio points us towards the Renaissance. The play includes a Prince figure of Verona, which also helps us with specificity. Verona lasted as an independent city-state until around 1387, when it then became under the rule of Padua. The Renaissance started in Italy in the 14th century (Gaudio). Meaning our play must take place when Verona has a royal figure (pre 1387) and during the 14th century. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the story traditionally takes place during the



local reign of Bartolomeo della Scala II, which was from 1375 to 1381. Based on the context provided and the traditional estimation, I deduced the events must take place sometime in that 6 year window—which is certainly specific enough for historical social context; although, if, as I continue to explore, I find further detail or significant events that may have been prevalent in the world and mind of the character, I will add and adjust accordingly.

Now that I have somewhere in history in addition to somewhere in the world, I can start to build my understanding of Mercutio's world and what would have influenced him. On the world and its influences, Catherine Belsey of *Arden Shakespeare* had the following to say:

And what sort of society is it? Wealthy, evidently, and perhaps extravagant: no expense is spared when Juliet's parents throw a party; anyone is welcome to attend, except their hereditary enemies. Romeo is a total stranger to the servant who, even so, blithely invites him too: 'My master is the great rich Capulet, and if you be not of the house of Montagues, I pray come and crush a cup of wine' (1.2.80–2). The society is hierarchic, as well: all the work seems to be done by servants; young men about town have apparently nothing to do except exchange puns, fall in love – and fight. Is there too much testosterone about and too little useful outlet for it? But above all, this is an autocratic world: a prince gives orders and expects obedience; parents believe they have the right to arrange their children's marriages. (Belsey, 4)

As Belsey states, this is an autocratic, hierarchical world where one follows the word of the one 'above' them. In Verona this reaches its zenith with our Prince Escalus character. Classically, Escalus is portrayed as a male, emphasizing the patriarchal nature of Verona's hierarchy. This is reflected downward into each house as an individual unit: the paternal figures of Lord Capulet and Montague have the final word in all matters regarding their respective families, the elders have power over the younger generation, the men have say over the women, and the nuclear family members have strength of aristocracy over their more distantly related kin or servants. On the note of women, it is an interesting topic this play navigates as there are clearly motifs of

misogyny as well as of feminine wisdom and excellence. The women of the show, particularly Juliet and the Nurse, provide insight and clarity to the audience about the play's happenings.

In the creation of character, it is important to know these contexts not only because they would influence the foundation of the character's mindset, but also to establish in what manner your character interacts with them. For Mercutio, there is clear textual evidence for his mental relationship with women as Robert Shaughnessy points out, referring to Mercutio's speech regarding the medlar tree outside Juliet's abode: "The element of brutality in Mercutio's calculated defilement of Juliet, his fetishistic reduction of Romeo's mistress to her sexual anatomy, reflects one of the attitudes to women and to sex prevalent throughout the world of the play," (Shaughnessy, 138). Mercutio as a proponent of the violent misogyny present is an important detail, but what is more is the motivation thereof: has he simply been infected by societal norms or is there a more interesting, pointed route to take? I will explore that idea later on in this paper.

As a final note on historical context, I would like to address that certain behaviors, ceremonies, or social rituals not mentioned here will become relevant further into this paper as I explore specific moments and choices to be made as an actor, and the historical context will be discussed within that section.

### Part Two: The Play: Style and Themes:

The only play that may have a more ubiquitous standing amongst theater lovers and laymen alike would be *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, another Shakespeare work. Approaching a piece that is as well known, quoted, and referred to as *Romeo and Juliet* can prove to be a unique challenge: the audience is, to varying degrees, familiar with the story and therefore attending

with some preconceived notions of how the story goes, how it ought to be played, and anything else their own creative mind has attached itself to. The effort, then, becomes to create a wholly fresh experience with each run. As our director Andrew Borba put it, “I want the audience to question if Romeo and Juliet are actually gonna die this time.” If the audience can experience uncertainty in a 400+ year old story that they already know, then we as actors have done our jobs in living-in-the-moment effectively.

One way to initiate this fresh experience is to alter the style of the show. It is set in renaissance Italy and is traditionally performed in that setting. Changing the setting to something more modern, as in Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 film, can shock the audience into seeing the story from a new perspective. Another tactic is by changing the language to modern English. Neither of these were our approach.

Before the rehearsal process started, I had several meetings with Andrew Borba to set the truths of the world and our performance of it, as well as initial text work. For the style of our show we were to keep the setting of renaissance Italy and the original text. After all, if you’re performing Shakespeare and translate it to modern English, you are no longer performing Shakespeare; although, you would be engaging with the story in the same manner he did: using the template of the plot and overlaying your own words. Our rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* then had to achieve the freshness of perspective in another manner, and as Borba laid out in these initial meeting stages this was to be done in our mannerisms and physical life. The goal was to keep the integrity of the text and the setting, while allowing our modern physical behaviors and vocal attributes to be the audience’s window of relatability into the story. What may be considered “modern” mannerisms as opposed to archaic ones will be explored further in the “Pre-Rehearsal Analysis and Preparation” and “Rehearsal” sections as they become relevant.

*Romeo and Juliet* has a plot that operates on three main levels: first, that of the ‘star-crossed’ love story; second, the generational struggle of form vs. freedom; and third, the place and societal role of the individual. The first is the clear heart of the play and its conflict, but the latter two became integral in our telling and perspective. Borba had emphasized the theme of generational struggles and differences, and this was to be one of the main topics we discussed throughout the rehearsal process. Other themes present and to be considered are that of rivalry, sex, time, humor, and death.

As previously mentioned, this is a hierarchical world where seniority is a determining factor of great value. As a young person in this society, you are to do as instructed by your elders. This can be seen clearly early in the play, with both Lord Capulet and Montague. They are doling out commands to their younger counterparts like there was a quota. They both make orders to cease the public fighting, that they are not to fraternize with members of the opposing house, and any such command that fits their fancy. The youth, unsatisfied with the strict forms of their fathers, rebel in an attempt to discover personal freedom. Benvolio and Tybalt rebel by scuffling in the streets, Mercutio by being openly brash and crude and displaying an outward fervor for life, and finally Romeo and Juliet by falling in love: the largest and most violent act of rebellion the play contains. A violence not by nature but nurture, for in any other context it would be seen as a beautiful expression of youthful Italian passion, but under the heavy eyes of their elders it is a knowing invitation of chaos. The youth of the show, principally Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio, and Tybalt, fight in their own ways against this oppressive overcast to obtain a mote of freedom and personal expression, and for that they all pay with their lives. Thematically, I believe this is a toll of sorts to the eldest living generation: a tax consisting of their youths for the insistence on outdated ideas and behaviors. A message which the audience is meant to receive,

though the characters themselves may not: at the end of the play, in the face of the price of their greed and halted morals, they choose to erect a gold statue of the titular pair, signifying to the audience by monumentalizing and gilding the pair, the elder generation did not learn their lesson.

Though it is the main theme focused on by our production, there is far more than generational divide going on. Mercutio represents an interesting dynamic which is that of nobility amongst the non-noble. He, although seemingly aligned with Romeo and therefore the Montagues, is not actually a member of their family but, rather, the Prince's. This makes him, socially, above *both* families and yet he places himself within the struggle, most notably right before his demise as he antagonizes Tybalt when Romeo will not. Mercutio was insisting upon a response to a taunt by Tybalt, and so shows a sort of adherence to tradition, good to make note of. This could also be read as merely taking up an available excuse for socially acceptable violence, given his immediate tauntings of Tybalt and that he knows he is present for a pre-established duel between Tybalt and Romeo which is in immediate disobedience of the Prince's (his elder kinsman) orders of pacifism. This act of rebellion proves to cost Mercutio his life, ironically due to Romeo trying to break up the fight. Up to this point the play has a comedic tone, immediately shifting to a clear tragedy: the loss of youth due to bravado in trying to emulate their elders. The young men are upholding "an ancient grudge" and doing so in a traditional duel manner, signifying this way of life is destroying the future.

### PRE-REHEARSAL ANALYSIS AND PREPARATION:

I was notified of being cast as Mercutio on the 26th of September 2022. Our first rehearsal was the 28th of September. I had a familiarity with the story through previous readings as well as several movie and stage versions. I would have liked to arrive to the first rehearsal off-book for two reasons: I have found the rehearsal work moves more freely and improves exponentially when able to be off the page and connecting with your fellow players and the space, and as a third year graduate student in the cast amongst other graduate students and undergraduates I was asked, and expected myself, to be a positive example for working behavior. I was not able to get off-book in the few days before rehearsal but it remained an early priority.

As a note, the text analysis will be only considering the text provided, which was a cut version of the original text.

#### Text Analysis-Language, Circumstances, Relationships:

The first step of text analysis was to read the play. Given that I had a thorough understanding of Shakespearean text (e.g. how to recognize and work with verse vs. prose, or grounding the heightened language) through previous performances and classes with Andrew Borba here at UCI as well as John Schmor at the University of Oregon, I was able to look for several things on the first read. I made note of everything that was said or written about Mercutio, everything he said, and the base action list for his track in the play. This read was incredibly informative. I felt Mercutio was still pretty far out of reach. I learned he was incredibly quick and witty, and yet his humor could be so incredibly base and crude. He loved life and would not let anyone step in the way of his living it, including his friend experiencing the lovesick blues. This friend he spends his days with instead of his brother Valentine, whose

existence is only known to the audience via a formal invitation letter, implying to me his relationship with his brother is mostly formal. All of these things and more contributed to a murky, mercurial man that audiences have beloved for so many years.

The things said about Mercutio throughout the play are few and are as colorful as his humor. From the first said by Romeo, “you have dancing shoes with nimble soles,” (Act I, sc. 4, 14) to the Nurse’s twice repeated “scurvy knave”. The only other thing said directly about Mercutio is after his passing, when Bevolio calls him “brave Mercutio”; however, this is more likely to be a polite epithet in the presence of his kinsman the Prince than an entirely accurate representation of his qualities. What this lack of outside description tells me is that Shakespeare left the audience with the freedom to take him as they will. In order to instigate this reaction, Shakespeare gave Mercutio quite the mouth.

Mercutio has the most unpredictable and borderline inappropriate behavior of perhaps any character in the show. His humor is at its basest in his monologue in the orchard in scene one of act two reducing Juliet’s sexual organs to fruit. However, he is also able to conjure poetic imagery regarding the queen of the fairies on a whim. In Mercutio’s initial scenes with Romeo he is trying to invigorate Romeo out of his lovesick slump. He utilizes a multitude of tactics starting with commanding, “nay, gentle Romeo, we must have you dance,” (Act I, sc. 4, 13); he then tells him to borrow cupid's wings, as he’s a lover at heart, when this fails he guilts Romeo saying he is burdening love itself with his wet-blanket attitude. After a series of quick back and forths between the two, further revealing Mercutio’s wit, Mercutio gets worked up into the famous Queen Mab outburst. This long-winded fantasy combined with a sudden switch into prose (only to use the last few lines to transition back into verse) creates a sudden tone shift which makes the speech so memorable. Since the rhythm that has been thus far maintained and doubled-down on

with their shared verse line tête-à-tête gets suddenly interrupted by a rhythmless prose, I as the actor have freedom to really shift the pacing and cadence of the scene. This will be expanded upon later. The purpose of this speech is to inform Romeo that his feelings of love are the result of his dreams being infected by a fickle being, while also entertaining his friends who are not being a drag. Throughout the speech Mercutio emphasizes over and over how small everything is (Queen Mab is no bigger than an agate stone, drawn in a hazelnut carriage), and considering he is saying this represents the source of Romeo's woes, he seems to be implying Romeo is wailing over small issues that have a source in fantasy anyway. This speech ends when Romeo has heard enough and cuts him off, claiming he is speaking about nothing. Mercutio's last effort in this scene is to say once again that Romeo's problems are made of nothing and that they would go away if he would release his sexual frustrations.

The next time Mercutio speaks is outside the Capulet's orchard, when taunting Romeo to come out from the trees. As mentioned earlier, this scene is where Mercutio reaches his most crude. Since his jokes are a direct tactic to agitate Romeo into responding I believe this is more indicative of a willingness to break convention rather than outright misogyny and objectification. After this we see him with Benvolio (as every other time we see him) trying to find Romeo. Interestingly, Mercutio laments that Rosaline is "hard-hearted" showing he may have more care for Romeo's feelings than he would let on to Romeo himself. This is in line with the theme of masculine attitudes of toughness. After that he learns of Tybalt's challenge toward Romeo, and edifies Benvolio on Tybalt's sword training. He does so in a mocking manner, feminizing the trained fighting persona with quips such as "a very good whore!"

When Romeo finally arrives Mercutio greets him with more insulting word play, but this time Romeo responds in kind. This more invigorated volley lights Mercutio up, as he responds



with “why is not this better now than groaning for love?” This explosion of excitement from Mercutio tells me that this was his goal all along, retroactively affirming that in the earlier scenes my objective as the actor will be to “rescue” my friend from his slump: after all, what kind of Kirk has no Spock? I, as Mercutio, need my best friend to be himself otherwise none of us are having fun, and without fun there is no life, and Mercutio is here to live.

The last time we see Mercutio is in the first scene of the third act. Benvolio asks Mercutio to go home and Mercutio responds by joking with him saying Benvolio is a fight-heavy hothead. This is a direct contradiction to the truth, but he comes up with fake scenarios to support his lie on the spot, all in an effort to make his friends laugh and to delay their stay out on the street. He is clearly smart, and again utilizes it toward his goal of fun and life-giving mischief. Benvolio seems surprised when the Capulets arrive but Mercutio does not, and given he knows of the duel as well as is nobility (and therefore has presumed connections) I find it not unlikely that he was intentionally trying to be present for the duel. I think this is motivated by a need for excitement, not a want for anyone to get hurt.

At the end of Mercutio’s life, he realizes what is coming. He states out loud that he is dying, and in his final moments he can not help but make a joke (“you shall find me a grave man”), as well as bemoan his death at the hands of “a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat”, and finally to curse both houses. This is an insight into how fast his thoughts move, especially when emotionally heightened.

After the first read the process of text analysis became focusing on the details. We worked with Philip Thompson one on one and went over all of our text. It was defining every unknown word, using scansion to find the stressed syllables in the verse sections, using historical research to add contextual information (to make sense of jokes like “the *passado*, the *punto*

*reverso*, the hay!”), finding euphemisms or double entendres, and finally translating most of it into a contemporary equivalent. The idea of translating it was in support of our style choice. In order to underline the modern mannerisms I would explore how I would physicalize the lines if they were in ultra-contemporary English. Then letting that physicalization live on the Shakespearean text moved us toward the tone Borba was going for.

### Personal Connection:

Mercutio is a character famous for entertaining and enrapturing audiences, though performing to be remembered is a trap into reductive, demonstrative acting. I knew that the only way to “fill the shoes” of the character was to make it truthful and make it mine. This meant I had to start looking for ways in, as I did not feel particularly close to Mercutio after the first read.

What helped right away was identifying his deep love for his friends. As mentioned earlier, Mercutio spends his days with Romeo and Benvolio. His largest obstacle before his death is the fact that his best friend is not having fun with him. Mercutio is incensed by his perception that Romeo is not living fully and letting love get him down. I found a connection in that quality of (though rough appearing) empathy for his friends, as I also can not have fun when my friends are having a hard time. I can identify with the need to help your friend out of a slump, in order to connect it into Mercutio, however, I needed to pass it through the filters of social bravado and conversational wit.

I could also connect with his love of entertaining. Though I prefer to keep it in a performance context, I can certainly understand the thrill and enjoyment of entertaining a group of people. To get into his mind I had to let myself enjoy a more day-to-day type of entertainment amongst people in public. I would not usually consider myself a class-clown type, but I could

frame it as more of a campfire story energy, except instead of spooky stories it is making light of myself and others.

The moment that became the most difficult to connect to was his final moments. When Mercutio knew he was dying, and was realizing so out loud to his companions. This is not a state of mind I have experienced or come close to, and allowing your mind to imagine and “accept” death could be incredibly emotionally difficult if not worse. The alternative is to actively fake or perform it, and while this would be “safer” in a sense, it would be in direct opposition to our training in experiencing the character’s circumstances truthfully (based on Stanislavski's method of experiencing). The rehearsal process became invaluable to exploring this connection and finding a safe way to feel the reality of the moment.

#### Character Interaction:

Mercutio predominantly interacts with just Benvolio and Romeo. He briefly interacts with the nurse and Tybalt as well. His interactions with Benvolio and Romeo are of a similar tone. Mercutio tends to be flippant and humorous while pushing for them to live more actively. His care for Romeo and Benvolio is clear to me in his jokes, since he values fun and happiness, he is trying to do them a good by entertaining.

The tone of his interactions with Tybalt and the nurse are quite different. Mercutio takes on a far more antagonistic attitude and prods these two. With the nurse the aim still seems to be to entertain his companions, joking that she is a “bawd” and making dick jokes. However, with Tybalt, Mercutio’s digs seem far more personal. As well as his attitude toward Tybalt when alone with Benvolio at the beginning of scene four of act two. The target of his complaints is Tybalt’s rigid and traditional fighting form. He makes fun of it in two separate scenes. I believe

Mercutio's issue with Tybalt is his acceptance of tradition and blind adherence to the elder's behaviors; Mercutio lives for unique personal expression and freedom, and is then symbolically killed by the figure of tradition.

### Character Behavior:

As has been discussed, Mercutio is an erratic and unpredictable person. We are introduced to him while he is trying to push his friends toward a party hosted by their rivals, sneaking in using his invite. To do so he employs many tactics including a lengthy speech about the queen of the fairies which almost devolves into a strange non-consensual phantasmagoria. The scene after this not yet mentioned is the party scene.

This is scene five of act 1, and although Mercutio has no lines his presence is felt. The reason being is that Borba wanted to use this scene to emphasize the theme of generational struggle. At the top of the scene the music is a single violin player as the backdrop to Mercutio and several other noble youths (including Juliet) participating in a traditional dance. After a few minutes, Mercutio interrupted and played an out-of-setting modern song and led the group in a dance. This was not technically appropriate for the setting but represented the fresh and world-altering potential of youthful vigor, and by having Mercutio lead it, Borba was indicating to me that Mercutio was to be a leader in this movement of freedom.

The next important moment of behavior is when he takes up the sword in Romeo's stead against Tybalt. This could be read as an eagerness to violence, but I think that falls outside the lines for Mercutio. He thus far has demonstrated no violent behavior. Rather I believe he witnesses his friend turn down a duel in the name of love, and fears he is once again losing his vigor for life due to his heart. In an effort to revitalize his friend and shock him back into life, he

starts to toy with Tybalt knowing it will scare Romeo. Borba had me as Mercutio not carry a sword, meaning I had to acquire one off the hip of one of Tybalt's kinsmen. This choice also underlined, in a brief moment, the fact that Mercutio, too, is skilled with a sword. Making this meeting between the two even more dangerous, as both are trained fighters.

### Character Thought:

Character embodiment is a different experience than character performance. The goal is the former, and the key to achieving it is to be having thoughts as the character, rather than thinking as yourself what the character may be thinking. It is a degree of separation to be removed from the process. This is certainly not easy, as you have to be able to fully buy into your character's circumstances and allow your mind to accept that they are yours. I have found a few techniques that help with achieving this.

First, I wrote down what Mercutio has experienced just prior to every scene starting and what he is expecting to happen during the scene. This creates an active current experience and some event to be thinking about when entering the scene, and providing an expectation to think about and eventually have not be met (if designed dramatically). For example, in the first scene the previous event I created was having given Romeo the scrawled out message for him to read at the door of the party, then insisting we all go. The expectation I carried was that they would all be grateful for my preparedness and we would go to the party with fun in our step and mischief on the mind. This was immediately undercut by Romeo's first line, criticizing the speech, creating dramatic tension and something for me to be actively thinking about and problem solving.

Another thing that helped create a mind-space ripe for Mercutio's thoughts was to design a series of images that would help trigger the next image. For a section of text I would have certain images in mind that would morph into the next text-related image, allowing for my experience of the thoughts to be fresh each time (leaning into what that image meant to me in that moment) as well as helping with memorization by rehearsing and ingraining the flow of imagery throughout the text. For example, in the Queen Mab speech it was incredibly helpful to spend time creating a detailed mental image of her transportation situation. Going from her wagon spokes, to the roofing, to the reins, to the horse collars, the whip, to the coachman, and finally landing on the entire chariot. For this moment, it was helpful to start the mental image small and then follow the creation of the image linearly as he zoomed out. To me this is indicative of Mercutio's ability to improvise and entertain on the spot. Since the imagery goes so naturally from one thing to another, I took it as evidence of an incredibly witty train of thought. Creating these images also helped with performance clarity, since I was actively "seeing" what I was talking about it was much easier to make specific and truthful.

### Character Journey:

Mercutio's journey is one that is cut short. In our version of this play, Mercutio represents the youthful force of change. He starts the show encouraging his peers towards fun and then leads the entire party in changing the energy from traditional and hierarchical to chaotic and fun. The next notable event in his life is his death. He does have a couple scenes between the two, but in both he is engaging in his same goal as an agent of entropy and change. His death is the culmination of rising tensions and acts as the catalyst for the tone change in the show and these

character's lives. Mercutio's journey seems to be more about the people around him than his own experience.

### Line Learning:

The process of memorizing lines is not one that can be short-cut. I had two methods of memorizing depending on if it was dialogue or a monologue. For monologues I either wrote them out by hand over and over again, to build that deeper connection, or I typed out the first letter of every word and mentally filled in the rest. This creates an interesting result, since you are not reading the word and still have to remember, but getting the first letter gives you a handhold—I have found that by getting my brain used to filling in the gaps it memorizes it faster.

For dialogue I exclusively used an app called Line Learner. What this allowed me to do was record all the lines and listen to them on repeat like a podcast. I would put a scene on repeat and listen to it while working out, or driving. I could also mute my own lines and just get the cue lines to practice. I find running the dialogue repetitively is best for memorization (while inlaying the objectives and needs, so I am memorizing objectives as I go) and Line Learner allowed me to run the scenes with no partner and any time.

## REHEARSAL:

### Focused Preparation and Practice for each rehearsal:

Before entering the rehearsal process Borba made it clear that we as actors were to come into rehearsal with clear goals and objectives. My process for doing so was to journal after rehearsal each day and make specific note of what was not working that day. This would give me at least one thing to focus on the next day. I also would look at the daily call and find something in the scheduled scene(s) that I could try new that day.

Early in the process, this started as broad choices that were bolder. I was not yet sure who Mercutio was and I wanted to explore and find him in the failures. I also felt through my text analysis that he was a man defined by his friends, so my personal embodiment of him would be dependent on the actors around me. Luckily, the cast was an extremely open and playful group who welcomed any choice or attempt.

As the process moved the rehearsal preparation became more focused. There would be specific moments that were not working or clicking, and so I would either bring in a few new choices or work with an actor during the day prior to our call. Specifically for the Queen Mab speech myself and the other players involved met on our own time and created a multitude of pantomime options for ourselves.

### Character Interaction Explorations:

It is easy to stop listening on stage. You as the actor know exactly what is going to happen and what is going to be said, and yet you need to be able to experience it all as new for the audience. It becomes even easier when you have a director who will not call you out when



you are just going through the motions. This was not my situation. Borba made it very clear when I was not being present and listening. What started as a challenge became a joy, as I allowed myself to *really* pay attention to how my castmates were saying every line. What new intonation from Tybalt could I take offense to? Where else could Romeo cause me to roll my eyes? What is something new Mercutio sees that inspires him this go round? Making it an active exploration of what is new rather than sitting on my heels and letting the scene happen to me was very effective in helping me actually experience the circumstances.

### Physical Explorations:

To match his need for life and excitement, I knew I would need to have an ability to explore a free physicality that is not natural to me. I am a more physically reserved and not very explosive person. This was an area that was going to take work. Borba dared me before entering rehearsal to go too far with the embodiment of Mercutio, not necessarily as a serious challenge but rather to communicate the point that the possibilities for Mercutio are far more vast than I was allowing for.

Throughout rehearsal I pushed myself to follow any physical impulses that arose. I accepted the potential of failure as something to be celebrated and that illuminates the way to the right choice. For example, in the scene with Benvolio right before the nurse enters, Mercutio jokes about sex and I had the impulse to suggestively interact with the stage. This was something that we decided to keep and came about from following impulses.

### Integrating Personal Feeling with Character Thought and Character Behavior:

Given the extensive text work I felt quickly that I had an understanding of Mercutio's circumstances. During the process of rehearsing I would push myself to buy into what was happening more and more. This proved to be easier as more of his needs became ingrained. When I stopped needing to remind myself to need Romeo to have fun, and started really feeling the desperation of having a distraught best friend I found that the emotions of the scene simply flowed. I did not need to think about being frustrated or upset, but I felt all that from pursuing my objectives with need.

The one moment I had a lot of trouble connecting with also proved to be the one moment I lost myself in. In order to better allow myself to experience the circumstance of dying, I found it helped to really let Tybalt work me up beforehand, and then transition that energy into a stunned horror. During one performance, I had bought into the argument with Tybalt a little too much and during a staged scabbard-slap, I hit it too hard and Tybalt's scabbard swung all the way around him. This pulled me out of the moment briefly, really highlighting the delicate balance between assuming the character's mind while maintaining safety for myself and my castmates.

### Director/Actor Relationship:

My relationship with the director, Andrew Borba, goes a few years as he has been my acting professor. Given our experience together in classes, including a Shakespeare performance class, we had a common vocabulary and common ground to work from. I work well with his directing style and I felt like I grew a lot under his coaching. He does not shy away from letting me know when he doesn't believe my work and I appreciate the frank feedback. Throughout the process he continually pushed me to make new choices and be more specific. He made his

expectations clear and within reach. I found our relationship to be effective creatively and professionally.

### TECHNICAL REHEARSAL:

After the bulk of creative exploration on my part is over, we enter technical rehearsals. The process of technical rehearsals are imperative to the theatrical process and their value is clear. After crafting the shape of the show the designers get the chance to tighten up and implement their work. It was an exciting experience to watch all the pieces come together. The requests made by the stage manager were clear and easy to follow, and overall I found the process effective.

Since Mercutio is not present in much of the show, the down time provided me with a ton of opportunities to further my personal exploration. I spent the free time making sure all the text was wholly memorized and embodied, I ran scenes with castmates in new ways, and at times entertained in a manner that would make Mercutio proud. The taxing part of the technical rehearsal process was how slow it moved. It was much slower than I had previously experienced, and required a lot of patience from everyone involved.

### DRESS REHEARSALS, OPENING NIGHT AND THE RUN:

My father once said of performing that you spend weeks building the rollercoaster, when you perform it's time to simply enjoy the ride. I never felt that more strongly than with this show. The mass amount of preparation and the emotional toil spent in exploration really made me feel like I had built the most fun rollercoaster I could have, and my only job left was to ride it and truthfully experience the twists and turns for the audience.

There was one initial spike in performance energy on opening night, we had gone from about a 6 to a 9 in terms of energy from final dress to opening night. The energy and responses of the first crowd were electric. The cast was talking about it immediately following the show. I feel like we effectively maintained the show quality throughout the run, with the main variable being energy: a couple shows were clearly lower in energy than others, I believe due to many factors.

Personally, I felt my performance as Mercutio grew with each run, as I found new little corners of his world to stretch into each night. As I stated above, there was one performance that I allowed my own mind-space to ride backseat to Mercutio's instincts but it was all safe and once I found that boundary it was not passed or met again.

## CONCLUSION:

To summarize the entire experience seems an inherently redundant exercise, I feel as though most real growth experiences continue to affect you in unseen ways years down the road. My path through Mercutio pushed me into a new direction with an old audition piece, which in turn gave me an idea I could have tried with Mercutio's dynamic with Tybalt. There is a way good creative experiences have of burning like a coal. This was a role that asked me to try new things, and I felt safe doing so with the people I was surrounded by.

Each rehearsal I was met by new, generous choices by my castmates which gave me plenty of opportunities to work from. Tim Frangos embodied a touching Romeo that I had no trouble making my best friend. Zalen King, Sittichai Chaiyahat, and Shavonne Grandison were energetic and interesting scene partners. The work of my cohort members Heather Lee Rangel Echeverria and Fiona Rose Palazzi inspired me and gave me mini-lessons when I was able to watch during rehearsals and performances.

I learned a new level of emotional and physical depth and freedom during this process. It was my goal and I specified that early on with Borba, so his support was invaluable and noticeable from the outset. I feel greater permission to push and explore and I will take this into the profession. I believe being open instinctually and able to temper it for camera or stage would be a great asset.

One thing I would like to work on going forward into the professional world would be to get off-book sooner. It took me several weeks, although still before the deadline. I do feel the real work does not start until you are off the page, so for me it felt like a few weeks at about 40%. I would like to improve that.

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