Production Notes: Romeo and Juliet
Introduction

"Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona (where we lay our scene)
From ancient grudge break new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their lives"

So begins Shakespeare's beloved play, *Romeo and Juliet.* These famous lines and the vivid language of this cautionary tale drive director Baz Luhrmann's cinematic interpretation, *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet.* Welcome to Verona Beach, a sexy, violent other-world, neither future nor past, ruled by two rival families, the Montagues and the Capulets. Wealthy, selfish, ruthless and powerful, the enmity between the parents has become the birthright of their offspring.

The film stars Leonardo DiCaprio as Romeo and Claire Danes as Juliet. DeCaprio made his film debut in *This Boy's Life,* opposite Robert DeNiro and Ellen Barkin, and his performance in his next film, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape,* merited an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor. Other features include *The Basketball Diaries* and *The Quick and the Dead,* with Sharon Stone and Gene Hackman, and Agnieska Holland's *Total Eclipse,* in which he played the poet Rimbaud, opposite David Thewlis. He recently completed the screen adaptation of the play, *Marvin's Room,* opposite Meryl Streep.

Danes won a Golden Globe Award and earned an Emmy nomination for her work on the highly-regarded television drama, *My So-Called Life.* She went on to garner praise for her portrayal of the frail, winsome sister, Beth, in Gillian Armstrong's feature film *Little Women*, co-starring Winona Ryder and Susan Sarandon. She re-teamed with Ryder in Jocelyn Moorhouse's *How To Make an American Quilt,* appeared in Jodie Foster's ensemble comedy, *Home For The Holidays*, and recently completed the film *To Gillian on her 37th Birthday*, with Michelle Pfeiffer.

Also appearing in the film are John Leguizamo, as Tybalt, Juliet's cousin and Romeo's sworn enemy and Paul Rudd, as Dave Paris, Juliet's suitor. The actors playing the Montague kinsmen, friends and attendants are Jesse Bradford, as Balthasar, Jamie Kennedy as Sampson, Dash Mihok as Benvolio, Harold Perrineau, as Mercutio and Zak Orth as Gregory. The Capulet counterparts are played by Vincent Laresca as Abra and Carlos Martin Manzo as Petruchio. Paul Sorvino and Diane Venora play Juliet's parents, the sovereigns of the Capulet empire. The rival Montague patriarch and matriarch are portrayed by Brian Dennehy and Christina Pickles. Pete Postlethwaite appears as Father Laurence, Miriam Margoyles is the Nurse and M. Emmet Walsh is featured as the Apothecary.

Director Luhrmann adapted the play for the screen with Craig Pearce, with whom he also scripted the hit film *Strictly Ballroom*. Producer is Gabriella Martinelli, who produced *M. Butterfly* and co-produced *Naked Lunch*, both directed by David Cronenberg; Baz Luhrmann also produces. Associate producer is Martin Brown, who previously worked with Luhrmann on *Strictly Ballroom*. Cinematographer is Don McAlpine, whose 45 films include *Nine Months*, *Clear and Present Danger*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *My Brilliant Career* and *Breaker Morant*. *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* also reunites Luhrmann with other *Strictly Ballroom* alumni, production designer Catherine Martin and editor Jill Bilcock. Kym Barrett is the costume designer and music producer Nellee Hooper, who has worked with such artists as U2, Madonna, Bjork and Massive Attack, is the musical collaborator.

Filmmaker Baz Luhrmann and his creative team earned widespread acclaim with the release of *Strictly Ballroom,* a romantic fable set in the colourful, capricious world of ballroom dancing. The independent feature, which marked Luhrmann's debut as a motion picture director, became a stunning critical and box-office success. It ushered in a new wave of Australian filmmaking, from *Muriel's Wedding* to *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. It also placed the young filmmaker in an enviable position, suddenly vaulting him up Hollywood's "A" list. Deluged with scripts from every major studio, Luhrmann, whose artistic background is dominated by successes in both theatre and opera, turned to Shakespeare. Prior to filming *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, Luhrmann had mounted a highly-lauded production of Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer's Night Dream* for the Australian Opera. This production toured to the prestigious Edinburgh Festival and won the Festival's "Critic's Prize."

"I've always wanted to do *Romeo and Juliet*," Luhrmann explains. "Shakespeare's plays touched everyone, from the street sweeper to the Queen of England. He was a rambunctious, sexy, violent, entertaining storyteller. We're trying to make this movie rambunctious, sexy, violent and entertaining way Shakespeare might have if he were a filmmaker."

Shakespeare intentionally wrote his plays to appeal to a broad audience. Elizabethan theatre-goers, Luhrmann notes, represented all levels of society. Anthony Burgess wrote that the architecture of the playhouse resulted from this multifaceted audience: "The physical structure ... was derived out of the Elizabethan inn, the innyard proving ... to be the most convenient location ... Here, then, was space for the casual groundlings, standing-room only, and, balcony accommodation for the better sort, the ladies and gentlemen staying at the inn." (Shakespeare) Moreover, Shakespeare's works had to hold the attention of guests in various states of drunkenness, for "play performances encouraged the sale of wine and ale... the sale of liquid refreshments was a lucrative adjunct to the art." (Burgess, Shakespeare) Although *Romeo and Juliet* has come to exemplify the ultimate romantic tragedy, there are, in fact, several comedic accents in the play that arose due to the disparate nature of Elizabethan audiences. Luhrmann's movie reflects this mingling of comedy and tragedy.

"We have not shied away from clashing low comedy with high tragedy, which is the style of the play, for it's the low comedy that allows you to embrace the emotions of the piece," Luhrmann observes.

What Luhrmann definitely wanted to avoid was a rarefied, stilted, elitist, stagey version of the classic play. To do so and to underscore and reveal the power of the language and the plot, Luhrmann cast young, American actors as Romeo, Juliet and the opposing Capulet/Montague gangs, inviting them to speak the famous lines in their own American accent. This was a deliberate choice on Luhrmann's part, in keeping with the Elizabethan articulation of the words.

"When Shakespeare wrote these plays, they were written for an accent that was much more, to paraphrase Anthony Burgess, like an American sound. Our general perception of the way that Shakespeare should sound when it is acted is with what is termed in England RP,' or received pronunciation,' which is a sound with lots of round vowels that essentially developed in the last century. So, when you do Shakespeare with an American accent, it makes it very strong, makes the language very alive. It may or may not make the language sound less pretty, but I want to address this piece as a very boisterous, very real and passionate piece of storytelling, the way in which I believe Shakespeare wrote it."

In fact, Burgess noted that "... the American language, especially the north-eastern variety, comes closer to the way Shakespeare spoke than does the thespian of Olivier, Gielgud and Guiness. Combine a Boston with a Dublin accent and you have a dialect very apt for the man from Stratford."

Luhrmann cast two of America's most gifted and promising young actors as the star-crossed lovers, Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. DiCaprio came to the project first.

"I thought that Leonardo was an extraordinary young actor and I thought he'd make a great Romeo. It's important to reveal these eternal characters anew for every generation and Leo is particularly suited for this. He does seem to symbolize his generation. I just thought he'd be a perfect Romeo, it was as simple as that" Luhrmann notes.

Luhrmann invited DiCaprio to participate in several workshops and readings of the script that Luhrmann orchestrated to hone the movie and audition actors. The invitation came with no attached strings; "The deal I made was, Look, don't agree to do it but don't decline it. Come to Australia, work with me for a week at this little rehearsal space I've got in a theatre on the harbor, and see how you like it." DiCaprio accepted the offer, assayed Romeo and Shakespeare's words, went diving at the Great Barrier Reef and departed for America, very intrigued by the project.

DiCaprio returned to Australia so that Luhrmann and cinematographer Don McAlpine could videotape a workshop. It was at this point that the young actor unquestionably convinced Luhrmann that he had, indeed, found Romeo. "When he arrived the first time, I really didn't know how he'd handle the language," Luhrmann recalls. "After the initial read-through, we went through the text very thoroughly and deliberately and when we went back to it, the words just came out of his mouth as if it was the most natural language possible. To me, the language in Leonardo's mouth is a wonderful thing to hear because the words have resonance. He speaks them as if they really are his words and that's something you don't always get in a Shakespearean performance."

Finding Juliet proved to be a more painstaking endeavour. Luhrmann embarked on an "enormous, enormous worldwide search" for her, before he "discovered" Claire. "Not being an American, I wasn't aware of her show (the critically-lauded series *My So-Called Life*)," Luhrmann explains. "When I met Claire, I was really struck by her. Juliet is written as a very smart, active character. She decides to get married, she resolves to take the sleeping potion, she really drives the piece. The extraordinary, unmissable characteristic about Claire is that here is a 16-year-old girl with the poise and maturity of a 30-year-old."

To further enhance and demystify the language, Luhrmann set *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* in what he calls "a created world," a collage of modern and classic images, drawn from religion, theatre, folklore, technology and pop culture.

"The idea behind the created world was that it's a made-up world comprised of 20th century icons and these images are there to clarify what's being said, because once you understand it, the power and the beauty of the language works its magic on you. The idea was to find icons that everybody comprehends, that are crystally, overtly clear. The hope was that by associating the characters and places with those images, then what is being said is freed from its cage of obscurity."

Some of the icons Luhrmann uses to illustrate Shakespeare's poetry are drawn from movies. In fact, the cinema forms much of the created world.

"In fact, what we've done was set the film in the world of the movies. You will notice that the film changes in style very dramatically, echoing very recognizable film genres, from Busby Berkley to 70s naturalism to even European expressionism. These severe changes of style refer to cinematic worlds or looks or ideas that audiences are familiar with on some level; using them to construct this created world' will hopefully produce an environment that can accommodate a stylized language and make it easier for the audience to receive this heightened language."

Luhrmann also turns to the movies to help identify Shakespeare's characters for contemporary audiences. For example, in Shakespeare's play, Juliet's mother, the venerated Lady Capulet is a woman so self-absorbed that she cannot even fathom the emotional gulf between herself and her daughter. Her actions, and to some extent her inaction, contribute to Juliet's death. In Luhrmann's movie, Lady Capulet becomes Gloria Capulet, who Luhrmann describes as " ... a little bit like the quintessential Tennessee Williams southern belle, like Blanche DuBois." Juliet's father, the commanding and volatile Fulgencio Capulet, is blind to his daughter's distress. He tries to speed up the marriage between Juliet and her suitor, Paris, a match that Capulet views as politically, socially and economically expedient. It is a calculated decision that will lead to disaster. Luhrmann envisions Capulet as "... the classic Godfather patriarch." As for Romeo, "... in a way, he was the original rebel without a cause, the first James Dean. He is someone who is a young rebel in love with the idea of love itself."

This use of modern, archetypal symbols not only informs the characters but also permeates the production and costume design as well. In certain respects, the created world afforded production designer Catherine Martin and costume designer Kym Barrett an incredible amount of aesthetic latitude, but their creations were always firmly tethered to Shakespeare's words, story and to some extent, to the playwright himself.

"For me, it (the created world) came down to the fact that Shakespeare's plays were always a bit of a pastiche. They were never one pure period. He never went to Verona and studied in detail the workings of Verona society when he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*. It was his vision, as an Englishman, of this mythical, Italianate country, where everyone was passionate and hot-blooded," production designer Catherine Martin theorizes. "I think the created world is basically about devising situations or environments in which people could believe that the action could take place. I call it The Buy Factor. Do you buy that this could happen, that this could exist, in the context of the script? It's been a really interesting process because if you're true to the script and just try to tell the story as clearly as possible, the created world actually occurs. It evolves organically out of the needs of the script, because, essentially, the Verona in which Shakespeare set his play was a created world itself."

For example, several pivotal scenes in Luhrmann's script take place in Juliet's bedroom. As was the custom during Shakespeare's time, few stage directions accompany the text and certainly, he did not detail the decoration of Juliet's chambers. Martin had to produce a setting that would immediately relay certain elements about Juliet and the Capulets in a visual language that would support the spoken one. The result is a spacious, high-ceilinged, powder blue and pale yellow room, framed by French windows with blue and white filigreed curtains that open out to the famous balcony. A large canopied bed, piled with quilts fills the room, its mahogany headboard placed beneath an ornate altar to the Virgin. Yet a this is very much a young girl's room; a legion of pastel-coloured, porcelain saints keep company with a cadre of fluffy stuffed animals and a collection of dolls. Among the religious votives are tiny, brightly coloured paintings, a smattering of books and photographs, a hot-pink boom box and a bulky, beginner's computer, the sum of which comprises the inexplicably precious treasure of a little girl.

"I've tried to simplify it so that when people see the sets, they think, oh, yeah, rich girl's bedroom with religious iconography in a place where religion is still important and the trappings of wealth aren't embarrassing. The plan was to convey ideas through the sets in a way that wasn't very subtle, that was very clear, so that people will know instantly where they are and will be able to concentrate on the language that the actors are speaking."

Martin compares the created world to the "heightened reality of a Fellini film; the way that Fellini can have this incredible dream sequence in a particular situation that has an exceptional reality about it. They are always extraordinarily well-observed. Even if the circumstance is alien or dreamlike, his observations are absolute, accurate reflections of real-life. I always thought that how ever magnified the situation was, the audience must be able to relate to all the characters and the events happening to them."

Costume designer Kym Barrett concurs with Martin, adding that her contribution to the created world began by visually defining the characters as explicitly as possible.

"For me, this film is a more of a character-driven piece, as opposed to a style-driven piece. What I tried to do, after talking with Baz, was to convey the universal qualities each of these characters possess. Everyone knows these characters. They may recognize them in a different form or age group, but they are figures who appear in every type of society, every social strata, every family. So, what I attempted to do was to impart the subconscious impression of this person, the feeling this person gives out. My job is to make that feeling expand across as wide an audience as possible, so that people will identify with them, so they'll say, Oh, yeah, I get that, I know that character, I know someone like that.'"

Based on Luhrmann's interpretation of Gloria Capulet, for instance, Barrett looked to the 1950s for some of her wardrobe.

"She's fairly high-strung, in a repressed relationship, is probably lonely, feels that her husband doesn't love her and her daughter is growing up and their relationship is strained, but she can't really change her situation because her role is that of the decorative, obedient bride. So, to communicate those things, we looked towards the 50s, to a time when women were oppressed and cosseted, when the husband was boss and religion and social mores dictated your place in life and that was it. We haven't made her into a 50s character but there are certain elements that I've put into the costumes that give a feeling of that period."

Barrett reasons that the use of such apparent details and visual particulars will not only define the characters but also Shakespeare's language.

"The language, for most people, is a little daunting at first. In most movies, what people say conveys the facts, but in this it will take the audience some time to get into listening to the language and relaxing into the rhythm of it. What I tried to do with the costumes was to help smooth the way. The first information they may get is through what they see. The language will reinforce what they see and, sooner or later, the audience, hopefully, won't be able to tell which came first. At one point during the story -- and for everyone, it'll be a different place -- the language and the visual information will become interchangeable. They won't actually have to think what a rose by any other name' means, it will just be clear. That will be the liberation for the audience. It's like the moment when you're learning a new language and one night, you dream in that language and understand it. It's that click of consciousness."

Luhrmann's cinematic translation of the play constantly triggers that "click of consciousness," as classic characters, props and scenes become literal embodiments of Shakespeare's words. "Everything is about revealing the language, making it less distant and more potent," Luhrmann comments. For instance, in the play, Shakespeare alternately refers to Romeo's enemy Tybalt as the "Prince of Cats" and "King of Cats" and alludes to his quick, feral, deadly prowess with the sword. In *William Shakespear's Romeo and Juliet,* Luhrmann retains the words but also describes them visually, outfitting John Leguizamo's Tybalt in ominous, shiny, ebony boots, with thick, slick silver heels, embossed with his trademark cat symbol. Indeed, much of his wardrobe, Barrett notes, "has a feline line to it. The texture of his clothes, the fabric is reminiscent of the shininess of cat fur." Luhrmann also accentuated Tybalt's catlike heritage in the choreography of his much-heralded "swordsmanship." In *William Shakespear's Romeo and Juliet,* modern, specially-designed guns replace the Elizabethan blades, but, as armourer Charlie Taylor points out, "all the guns have names of edged weapons, like sword 22, series S,' or the rapier model or a dagger 9' classification, so we don't have to change the play." As the ruling classes in Shakespeare's time would have decorated their weapons with ornamental trappings, the rival Montagues and Capulets brandish guns with beautiful, idiosyncratic adornments, everything from transparent handles revealing a cache of golden bullets to a pearl grip bearing the family crest to the serene image of the Madonna up against the cold curl of the trigger.

Religion and religious iconography, like the Madonna, become powerful, recurring themes throughout the film. Religion is a vital element in the play, a reflection of its pervasive influence in the Elizabethan world picture. London, Anthony Burgess writes in Shakespeare, "... was the capital not only of Protestant England but of Protestant Christendom." In many ways, however, religion had lost its pious underpinnings. Anthony Burgess writes in Shakespeare that "...one of (Shakespeare's) first surprising sights may have been ... a freshly severed head on the spikes by the law courts." While religion may have been a conspicuous presence in Elizabethan England, its sacred message was considerably corrupted.

Luhrmann reinterprets this religious state. Crosses, Immaculate Hearts and images of the Virgin become fashion accessories, adorning clothes and weapons, while the Capulet mansion, a gaudy, ostentatious, rococo temple to the god of avarice, features huge oil paintings depicting such biblical scenes as Christ ejecting the money lenders from the temple.

Obviously, Romeo and Juliet were the most important characters to introduce to the audience and, in some ways, the most difficult, as Kym Barrett points out.

"Romeo and Juliet were our hardest because there is so much baggage attached to them. Everyone has their own vision of them. So, our first goal was to really concentrate on them, to work out how we could relieve them of all that expectation, so they could have their own life in this film. Ultimately, it seemed that the best thing to do was to let Claire and Leonardo become Romeo and Juliet, that their interpretations would create the personas of the characters. To allow them to do that, I thought that Romeo and Juliet should be different from everyone else in the piece, but they couldn't be so different that they'd be conspicuous or so that the audience would think they were special. The result was that we made their clothes the simplest of all, very clean lines, not embellished at all."

Barrett conferred with the design house Prada. She was attracted to Prada's pure, understated lines, which exemplified Barrett's conception of Romeo and Juliet. The designers ultimately provided the suit that Romeo wears to his wedding.

This subtle approach to Romeo and Juliet extended to the colours of their costumes. Romeo appears in mostly blue tones or pale silvers while Juliet's signature is pure white.

"It happened without intention," Barrett recalled. "Every time I read through a scene and saw Catherine's set and what they would be set against, it just always seemed that they would stand out against the background without being too obvious if they were dressed in bright colours. Also, I thought that simple tones would emphasize that they are, in a way, like spectres, the ones whose hold on life is the most tenuous."

The Montague/Capulet boys, on the other hand, provide a decidedly garish contrast to Romeo and Juliet. Luhrmann envisioned the warring Montague/Capulet children as sharing a common rebel cause: both groups are in defiance of their parents' generation, even if they have accepted their inheritance of hatred. The senior Montagues and Capulets, he says, " ... have more of the 1960s-1970s-Yves-St.-Laurent-Jackie-O. look about them whereas the younger generation has rejected that."

Barrett adds while it was important to delineate this generational difference, it was also necessary to differentiate the Montague and Capulet offspring. This proved to be a tricky undertaking, since she also wanted to indicate that they sprang from the same socio-economic class. The result was that the Capulet's style "is more decorative and the Montague kids are more utilitarian, but both are from the same station. The Capulets wear ornamental pieces of clothing that they buy at a very expensive shop and bullet-proof vests have become required accessories, part of the fashion world. They have them made so the line of them fits the way the gun holster is harnessed on you or buckled inside the vest so a harness isn't necessary. We thought, well, it's a place where guns are the norm, so life and clothing would've changed to adapt to that. The Capulets are more manicured and preening and wear clothes that are extremely well-cut and body conscious."

Barrett teamed up with designers Dolce & Gabbana, whose D&G line especially inspire the Capulets' garb. The Montague attire also sets a novel fashion standard, although it is the antithesis of the sexy, tailored Capulet look.

It is a distinctive, colourful style, peculiar to Verona Beach.

"With the Montague boys, it's sort of a Viet Nam feeling. They carry weapons but they wear whatever they want, like at the end of Viet Nam, when the soldiers wore Hawaiian shirts and shorts and indigenous hats. They invented their own way of wearing clothes, to suit the climate and the surroundings.

The Montagues' holsters aren't as decorative and their weapons are very functional, they wear their hair very short and sport these lush Hawaiian-style shirts, which are very vibrant and colourful, so everyone knows who they are."