WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

Baz Luhrmann's 'William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet'

CONTEXT SHEET 1

The film text

Before you view the film, read the information in this context sheet carefully, then complete Activity Sheets 1 and 2.

Background to production

Having explored a range of film interpretations of 'Romeo and Juliet' you will now have a good knowledge of the play and some of the different ways it has been presented on screen. Your study of extracts from the films will have given you a sense of how filmmakers take decisions about how to create meaning from the text. It's now time to analyse a whole film of the play.

One of the most original versions in recent times is Baz Luhrmann's 1996 'William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet'. You will need a DVD of this version of the film for your work on this section.

'Romeo and Juliet' has been performed on stage for more than 400 years and film versions of the play have been around since the advent of cinema a little over a hundred years ago. Cinema is a young art form in comparison to theatre and is constantly changing and adapting in response to technological advances, as well as wider social and cultural influences. If you consider the Baz Luhrmann film version was produced some 90 years later than the silent version you have seen, you would expect the two to take very different approaches.

The concept

The following synopsis of the 1996 film version gives a sense of how Baz Luhrmann chose to interpret the play:

The film 'Romeo and Juliet' is set in the created world of Verona Beach - a violent, other world set neither in the future nor in the past where the Montagues and Capulets share an enmity that has become the birthright of their offspring. These wealthy, selfish, ruthless and powerful parents rule this created and frequently corrupt world of businessmen and politicians against which unfolds the well-known love story.

Stylistically, the film deliberately echoes recognisable film genres with which a modern cinema-going audience is familiar. The film also attempts to link the language of the original play with modern-day themes such as violence in society, love in dangerous situations and the cult of personality. In making the film, Luhrmann adopted a style very much of its time with action scenes, fast-paced edits and a contemporary soundtrack, but with the actors speaking Shakespeare's lines. Before you watch the film you should think about how this version might differ from the film interpretations you have seen so far.

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

CONTEXT SHEET 1 cont.

The created world

To enhance and de-mystify Shakespeare's language, Baz Luhrmann set 'Romeo + Juliet' in what he calls a created world: a collage of modern and classical images drawn from religion, theatre, folklore, technology and pop culture.

Read through the following interview transcripts before watching the film and summarise the information in three key points:

' …it's a made-up world comprising twentieth-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 overtly clear. The hope was that by associating the characters and places with those images the language would be freed from its cage of obscurity.'

Luhrmann and his scriptwriting partner, Craig Pearce, decided that although they didn't want to set the film against an Elizabethan backdrop, they agreed that the social, religious and political aspects of Shakespeare's time certainly influenced the play.

Pearce explains the process:
'When we started to describe the created world we considered Shakespeare's views on Verona. In the research we found that he was not historically or geographically accurate in his depiction of Verona. To Shakespeare and to Elizabethan audiences, Verona was a hot, sexy, violent, Catholic country. So we needed to find a place that exists in an equivalent way for our audience. It didn't necessarily have to be naturalistic but we wanted it to ring true. Essentially, we wanted to create heightened circumstances where the characters do the real things.'

The filmmakers finally decided on Mexico as the location for the created world.

Pearce continues: 'There are textual facts in 'Romeo and Juliet' connected with Elizabethan society that exist in Mexico. For instance, during Shakespeare's time religion was involved in politics and there was a very small percentage of great wealth with a large population of poor. It was violent and people were openly armed. We've interpreted all of these Elizabethan things in the context of the modern created world. In fact, much of this occurs in modern-day Mexico, in varying degrees…It has a mysticism about it and for me it's exotic.'

Leonardo DiCaprio, who plays Romeo says:
'The created world really helped me as an actor. It heightened everything which made it more dangerous, more interesting and more liberating. It gave me more freedom to try different things with the character and the scene because we were not held down by traditional rules.'

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

CONTEXT SHEET 2

Film language

Before you view the film, read through the following information then complete Activity Sheets 3 and 4.

Filmmakers use the term 'film language' to mean everything they can use to deliver the story most effectively to the audience. In this section you will explore how the director of the 1996 film version of 'Romeo and Juliet', Baz Luhrmann, used elements of film language to make meanings for the audience.

Cinematography

The essential elements of cinematography are lighting, cameras and lenses. The way moving images are photographed is crucial in a film and the position of the camera is of key importance. For example, if a camera is looking down on its subject its position is one of power. By manipulating camera angles the filmmaker can tell us a lot about the relationship between two characters looking at each other. The camera can also take on a character's point of view and allow the audience to identify with that particular person.

When choosing camera shots and lenses filmmakers have to decide what is more important to bring across the desired meaning. The Film Language Glossary on the Romeo and Juliet CD-ROM has further information to refresh your knowledge and give you the vocabulary to express your ideas clearly.

Cinematographer Donald McAlpine explains the approach the filmmakers took in creating Baz Luhrmann's vision for the production:

'I guess the problem in doing Shakespeare is that most people know it as a highbrow, stage piece called a 'classic'. We wanted to get away from any hint of a stage. We also tried to develop as much movement and change of perspective as possible using every cinematic trick we can think of to make it look as much like a movie as we can. What we're not using is the classic two shot followed by an over-the-shoulder type coverage. We rarely used the usual Hollywood language of the classic, matching singles. The movie, while true to the story and language of 'Romeo and Juliet', flies in the face of what is considered classical Shakespeare and we attempted to echo that in the construction of the cinematography.'

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

CONTEXT SHEET 2 cont.

Mise en scène

When we watch a film everything we see on screen is enclosed within a film frame. Sometimes it is as if we are looking through a window and a scene is passing naturally in front of our eyes. In fact, the director of the film has carefully arranged what we are looking at within that frame. The director chooses where to place people and objects within the frame in order to give us a particular point of view or understanding of what is going on in front of our eyes.

'Mise en scène' is a French term which refers to the arrangement of actors, props and action on a film set. It is used to describe everything that can be seen in a frame: the setting, lighting, visual composition, costumes and the action. The director controls the mise en scène and sets up the scene for the camera. The composition of the individual frame can strongly influence the way we understand a character's behaviour. The setting, lighting, costumes and make-up etc. all contribute to the meaning of 'mise en scène' and to our understanding of filmmaking. Every scene that we see on the screen could be filmed in a different way according to the meaning the director wants to convey to the audience.

Location and sets

Few stage settings accompany Shakespeare's written text. In film, however, setting is much more than simply a container for the action: it can greatly influence the meaning of a scene. The setting can be designed to create a particular mood, or can reflect the emotions of the characters in a scene. Colours can also be used to give a certain feel to a scene. The director of a film has to decide between using a studio set or a real location. This is not just a question of money but also of the overall desired effect. A studio construction gives the director almost total control over decor, weather conditions and colours. On the other hand, a real location conveys an atmosphere and character which is hard to recreate in a studio. (A period drama, for instance, set in medieval times, is best filmed on location in order to achieve historical authenticity.)

Costume and make-up

Costumes and make-up play an important role in providing information about characters, their motivations and their significance within the story. Characters are often dressed to underline their personality and mood, and this helps to explain why they act in a certain way. When choosing the costumes the filmmaker has to decide whether it is more important for the characters to look natural and realistic, or whether their significance can be better conveyed through a more stylised and exaggerated look.

Cont...

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

CONTEXT SHEET 2 cont.

Costume designer, Kym Barrett explains:

'Shakespeare's 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 languag and relaxing into the rhythm of it. What I tried to do with the costumes was help smooth the way.'

For example, Shakespeare refers to Romeo's enemy Tybalt as the 'Prince of Cats' and 'King of Cats' and alludes to his *'…quick feral and deadly prowess with the sword.'* Luhrmann keeps the words and also describes them visually. Throughout the film, the 'Montague Boys' and the 'Capulet Boys' are given an identity through their costumes, props and styling as well as their actions and interaction. The designers, Dolce and Gabbana, were the inspiration for the Capulets' clothing; the Montagues, on the other hand, are quite different. They have a distinctive, colourful style with Hawaiian shirts and short hair.

Casting

Actors not only bring to films their physical presence but an 'image' from other films they have previously appeared in. Stars have images that they might have acquired through publicity (good or bad press) relating to a particular life style or by playing similar lead character roles in other films. When an actor appears in a certain film we cannot help associating the character they play with this image.

Baz Luhrmann, the director, cast young American actors in the roles of Romeo and Juliet and invited them to speak Shakespeare's lines in their own American accent. This was a deliberate choice on Luhrmann's part as he rationalises:

'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 wanted to address this piece as a very boisterous, very real and passionate piece of storytelling - the way in which I believe Shakespeare wrote it…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…I just thought he'd be a perfect Romeo. It was as simple as that…to me the language in Leonardo's mouth is a wonderful thing to hear because the words have resonance. He speaks as if they really are his words and that's something you don't always get in a Shakesperean performance.'

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

CONTEXT SHEET 2 cont.

Lighting

The way a lighting director lights objects and characters on a set can greatly influence our understanding of a scene. A brightly lit object, a gesture or facial expression important to the storyline, whilst keeping other details in darkness, can guide our attention. An evenly lit room with few shadows can convey a feeling of calm and security, whereas highly contrasted light and shade can create fear or unease. Lighting can be used to create a sense of place, atmosphere and the state of mind of the character.

Editing

When films were first made, filmmakers set up their cameras and kept the film rolling taking one continuous shot of an event so the time it took for the action to really take place was the amount of time that the event was shown on screen. As cameras were developed to take more film, filmmakers realised that their audiences were becoming more sophisticated and experimented with putting together different scenes, editing together strips of film showing different scenes. They saw that audiences did not need to be shown an event in real time, consequently a technique of editing a film together began to emerge. Filmmakers could build up the narrative using different sequences not necessarily in chronological order.

Sound

On a film soundtrack we hear voices (background conversation, voiceovers), sounds and sound effects as well as music. Sound effects are used to create a feeling of realism and they can also act as clues, so we may hear a sound before we know where it is coming from. Sound can anticipate action or let us know that something important is about to happen.

Music is a powerful tool in creating and enhancing mood and atmosphere and Nellee Hooper and Baz Luhrmann carefully chose pieces and recorded songs to underline and pinpoint the mood and meaning of particular moments in the story. Market research has shown that music is a key feature in making films appeal to a young audience. The compilation album for 'William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet' reached number two in the American album charts and was a key part of the film's identity.

Viewing the film

Having looked at all the different ways in which a director might suggest meaning, it's time to see how Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film interprets Shakespeare's play text.

Activity sheets 4, 5, 6 and 7 should be used as you watch the film to help focus your responses.

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

ACTIVITY SHEET 1

Background to production

In the one hundred years or so since the advent of cinema, many different film versions of Romeo and Juliet have been produced. The four film versions you have already looked at were made decades apart, but they all take the same play as their source. So what factors might lie behind the differences in film interpretations of the play?

Between 1905 and 1996, some major changes occurred: historic events, such as world wars; technological changes affecting the cinema; changes to the way people spend their time. Social and cultural changes also had a significant effect on audience's expectations when they come to the cinema.

a) The table on the next page helps you see how much time separates the different film versions you have studied from each other, and from where we are now. Working with a partner or in a small group, add suggestions to the second column to help you think about the changes that have occurred in the last one hundred years or so. Some examples have been given to get you started. Compare your notes to other groups, adding to your table as you do so.

When you have finished, think about world events since Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film was made. What idea could you suggest for a version of Romeo and Juliet that bring in these events?

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

ACTIVITY SHEET 1 cont.

Decade	Social/cultural changes, technological factors and historical events
1900s (1905 – Vitagraph)	
1910s	1914-1918: First World War
1920s	
1930s (1936 - Cukor)	1939 Second World War begins 1939 Introduction of technicolour in mainstream cinema
1940s	1945 Second World War ends Alan Turing at Bletchley Park – World War 2 British government code-breaker [Enigma machine]. Beginning of computerised age.
1950s (1954 – Castellani)	Slow motion [over cranking] effects possible in film
1960s	The Beatles form and have a big impact on 'youth culture'
1970s	Introduction of non-linear editing
1980s	
1990s (1996 – Luhrmann)	Internet established worldwide.
2000s	'War on terror'
2010s	

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

ACTIVITY SHEET 1 cont.

The first part of this activity invites you to consider the changes that have taken place in the last one hundred years and how these may have impacted on film production. Despite these changes in technology, culture and society, filmmakers through the generations have revisited and reworked the plays of Shakespeare.

b) Now discuss the following statements in your group and decide which you agree and disagree with:

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT SURE
Filmmakers who continue to rework Shakespeare's plays regard Shakespeare as the best writer in the English language.			
Shakespeare's plays contain ideas, emotions and storylines that are relevant to all human beings living anywhere at any time.			
Films are produced in order to make money. Shakespeare's plays are tried and tested. Filmmakers play safe when they adapt Shakespeare for film as they know it will make money at the box office.			
Filmmakers try to express ideas in original ways. By using a traditional story, there are opportunities to surprise audiences with a new perspective on an old tale.			
Filmmakers are all different. They choose to rework Shakespeare's plays for lots of different reasons.			
Shakespeare films only appeal to people who have been to university or people who want to be seen as intellectual. They are not usually aimed at ordinary people.			

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

ACTIVITY SHEET 2

The concept

Baz Luhrmann's film 'William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet' is introduced to the audience as a segment from a news bulletin. Read through the following transcript of an interview with Luhrmann and answer the questions that follow:

"I've always wanted to do 'Romeo and Juliet'. The themes it explores, the tragedy that is born of a prohibited love in a world of learned hate is one of those primary myths that appeals to all people. 'Romeo and Juliet', like all of Shakespeare's plays, touched everyone from the street sweeper to the Queen of England. He was a rambunctious, sexy, violent and entertaining storyteller. We've tried to make this movie rambunctious, sexy, violent and entertaining the way Shakespeare might have if he was a filmmaker…Everything that's in the movie is in the play. Violence, murder, lust, love, poison, even drugs that mimic death - it's all in there. It's just that we have come to associate productions of 'Romeo and Juliet' with a certain style of speaking and certain types of costumes. In fact, those costumes tend to be 19th century Victorian interpretations of Shakespeare, or even Renaissance versions. When Shakespeare staged his productions the actors wore their street clothes or costumes from the previous season…He is just such an extraordinary storyteller…What I really loved is that he had this dilemma in terms of audience. He had to knock dead those people selling pigs, the prostitutes and the nobles because they were all in the same theatre. They had to have a different experience of the material but enjoy it equally…That's what is so phenomenal about it - everyone can experience his work albeit in different ways. That's an incredible accomplishment. Everyone, from a child to an adult can have a very rich experience from 'Romeo and Juliet' and I think that's why it's still performed and why it's worth doing. Shakespeare had an amazing genius for capturing who we are and revealing it to us. My job is just to re-reveal it."

- *'It's just that we have come to associate productions of 'Romeo and Juliet' with a certain style of speaking and certain types of costumes.'* What do you think Luhrmann means by this comment? Can you give examples based on the other film versions of the play you have seen?
- In this interview, Luhrmann uses the word 'rambunctious' twice. From the other words in this sentence, try to work out the meaning of rambunctious. Search online or use a dictionary to check your answer. Can you explain in your own words what type of film Luhrmann was trying to make?
- *'Shakespeare had an amazing genius for capturing who we are and revealing it to us. My job is just to re-reveal it.'* What might Luhrmann mean by 're-reveal' it? What does this suggest about the public's knowledge of, and appetite for, Shakespeare plays?
- Describe the target audience to whom you think Luhrmann wants to reveal the 'genius' of the play?

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

ACTIVITY SHEET 3

Cinematography

Read this extract from an interview with Baz Luhrmann's cinematographer, Donald McAlpine, and then work on the tasks below:

We wanted to get away from any hint of a stage. We also tried to develop as much movement and change of perspective as possible using every cinematic trick we can think of to make it look as much like a movie as we can. What we're not using is the classic two-shot followed by an over-the-shoulder type coverage.

1) A 'two-shot' is simply a camera angle that shows two characters in the 'frame'. An 'over-the-shoulder' shot is where the camera is literally over the shoulder of one character, showing us the character they are talking to or looking at. It gives the viewer a sense of the interaction between two characters with a focus on one character in particular.

Can you find examples of 'two-shots' and over-the-shoulder shots' in the extracts you have seen from older film versions of 'Romeo and Juliet?'

2) These shot types are very commonly used in television soap operas during conversations between characters. Some critics have compared Shakespeare's plays to modern-day soap operas, claiming that in Shakespeare's time the plays were just as popular as soaps are today. Would you agree or disagree with this idea? Explain your reasons.

3) Get your copy of the play text for Romeo and Juliet, and remind yourself of Act I, Scene V and Act II, Scene II. Look for a section in either of these scenes that you might expect to see as a 'two-shot' in a film version of the play – that is, a moment where two characters are interacting with each other. Pick a section like this that is about ten lines long.

4) Using the lines of text you chose above, think about how this scene could be filmed to make it as interesting to watch as possible. For example, could you add to a viewer's understanding by using an extreme close-up? A cut-in (a focus on one detail, such as a character's hands) or a cutaway (a shot of something other than the immediate action)? How else could you add extra visual information to what we see in the text?

5) Now storyboard these ideas in six to eight shots and explain the intended effects of your choices.

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

ACTIVITY SHEET 4

Film language

As you will have seen from reading Context Sheet 2: Film Language, there are many different elements a director can work with to convey their vision for a film successfully to an audience. Some of the aspects of film language are listed in the following table: you will need to pay close attention to these as you watch the film.

Taking these aspects of film language one at a time, think of a question that would help you to focus your ideas as you view Baz Luhrmann's version of the film. Some examples have been provided to get you started.

Leave the third column blank for now; you can fill it in when you watch the film a little later on.

Aspects of film language	Questions on viewing Baz Luhrmann's version	Notes during viewing
Cinematography	How is the prologue presented?	
Mise en scène		
Location and sets		
Costume and make-up		
Casting	What effects does the casting of Mercutio have on the production?	
Lighting		
Editing	What pace of editing do you see in the fight between Tybalt and Mercutio? What effects does this have?	
Music and sound		

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

ACTIVITY SHEET 5

The masked ball

The ballroom is a key location as it is the setting in which Romeo and Juliet fall in love. Look at this scene as it appears in the text (Act I, Scene V). Consider how the director, Baz Luhrmann, has chosen this scene to provide a wealth of visual information beyond the words of the play text.

Cinematography

What can you remember about the way in which Act I, Scene V (the scene where Romeo and Juliet first meet) was presented in the film versions you have studied so far? In what ways might you expect the 1996 film version to portray character and action similarly or differently from the ones you have already watched?

During viewing:

Look closely at the scene where Romeo and Juliet meet at the masked ball.

- Make a list of the different shot types you see, and how frequently they occur. Which types of shots seem to be used most often? What reasons could you suggest for this choice?
- How is the interaction between Juliet and Paris presented in the sequence, and what effects does this have?
- Why do you think the director has Romeo and Juliet see each other through the aquarium? What effects does this choice of prop have on the 'mood' of the sequence?
- How does the interaction between Romeo and Juliet contrast with what is going on around them? Think about how Romeo and Juliet's different viewpoints are shown here.

Set, costume and make-up

The hair, make-up team and costume design teams created guests at the ball to fit in with the lavish and decadent surroundings. The team deliberately dressed the principal players in costumes that reflected exaggerated versions of their personalities.

- In what different ways does the director suggest the connection between Romeo and Juliet, beyond the dialogue they have with each other? Consider aspects of mise en scène including costume, body language and facial expression.
- Describe how the Capulet parents are dressed for the ball.
- How do these directorial choices emphasise or extend aspects of these characters' personalities? How important is this characterisation for the dramatic structure of the film?
- How are Paris and Tybalt dressed? Why do you think these choices have been made?

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

ACTIVITY SHEET 6

The Death of Mercutio

Refer to your notes on the film versions of this scene from 1936, 1954 and 1968. These film versions of the play have certain aspects in common, but the directors have chosen to interpret the scene in a variety of ways. Before you view the Luhrmann interpretation of this scene, make some predictions about what this director might bring to the mix in terms of mise en scène (location and props, costume, facial expression, lighting), camerawork (shot choice and camera movement) and editing (the pace and choices of perspective).

During viewing

This scene emphasises and intensifies ideas about the characters and the atmosphere. As you watch this scene, use the boxes on the following page to guide your note taking. Record your ideas in as much detail as possible as you will be using this information later.

When you have watched the scene, share your findings around the class adding any details you have missed and discussing any points of interest.

Now use your shared knowledge of this scene to answer the following questions:

- Choose a particular moment in this scene where body language is significant and explain how the actors have used it to bring meaning to the dialogue.
- Costume choices throughout the film help audience identify the characters quickly. Choose one character in this scene and analyse how choices about their costume, hair and make-up in this scene in particular impact on the audience's understanding of their character.
- How does the lighting affect our understanding of the situation and the characters' behaviour in this scene? What references are there to this in the text for this scene?
- How did the director's choices contribute to the overall meaning of this particular scene?

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

ACTIVITY SHEET 6 cont.

Location and set:

Lighting:

Act III, Scene I: The Death of Mercutio
Aspects of mise en scène

Props:

**Body language
and facial expression:**

Costume and make-up:

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

ACTIVITY SHEET 7

Juliet and her parents

Look at Shakespeare's written text (Act III, Scene V) from where Lady Capulet introduces the subject of marriage to Juliet. View this scene in the film [DVD Chapter menu: Capulet's Mansion] and compare the two texts.

• What has the filmmaker cut from the text?
• What aspects has he emphasised and how has he used the camera to do this?

Remind yourself of the key points in 'Watching the whole film: Context Sheet 2' to help you answer the questions below.

Look closely at the scene between Juliet and her father, Fulgencio Capulet, when she opposes his plan for her to marry Paris. [DVD Chapter menu: Juliet learns her options]

• How does the camera intensify this emotional scene?
• Does the camera linger on one person or go backwards and forwards between the two?
• What position does the camera take to make Juliet's father appear violent and threatening?
• What effect do the close-ups have on us, the audience?
• Do we share anyone's point of view at any point in this scene? If so, how does the camera achieve this effect?

WATCHING THE WHOLE FILM

ACTIVITY SHEET 8

Consolidating viewpoints

Now that you've seen extracts from a number of classic film versions as well as a whole film interpretation, you should have plenty of ideas about the effects that directors' choices can have on the way audiences respond to these versions of the play text.

Working in groups, you are going to produce a five-minute presentation that answers one of the following questions:

EITHER
What do you think are the main similarities and differences between the 1996 film version of 'Romeo and Juliet' and the older film versions you have studied? What reasons can you suggest to explain the points you have noticed?

OR
How has Baz Luhrmann created a world relevant to modern cinema audiences and yet true to Shakespeare's original text?

Your presentation needs to make specific reference to two of the following scenes in the play, using extracts from the text and cross-referencing these with examples from the films:

The prologue (Act I, Prologue)
The masked ball (Act I, Scene V)
The balcony scene (Act II, Scene II)
The death of Mercutio (Act III, Scene I)

In your presentation you should consider aspects of mise en scène alongside language choices. You may also wish to consider the impact of social, cultural and historical changes on the different productions.

Some suggestions to help you in your presentation:
- Use short (20-30 seconds) sequences from the DVD to refer to specific moments
- Pause the DVD to analyse a still image in detail
- Use stills from the image folder to focus your comparison (you could use the image analysis sheet on the Romeo and Juliet CD-ROM to guide you)