

# Creation Myths: Inspiration, Collaboration, and the Genesis of *Romeo and Juliet*

Amy Rodgers, Mount Holyoke College

---

## Abstract

Recent inquiries into Shakespeare and dance have tended towards excavating the place and form of dancing in Shakespeare's plays or historicizing movement itself. My essay takes a different heuristic route by exploring what dance might bring to our understanding of how Shakespeare's plays were constructed. Using John Cranko's *Romeo and Juliet* as a test case, I explore how this work's collaborative creation might offer insight into the material means of plays' genesis and realization in Shakespeare's era. In doing so, I suggest an additional line of inquiry into the relationship between Shakespeare and dance, one that adds to work that expands our understanding of early modern drama's production.

---

What is Shakespeare without language? Scholars have explored Shakespeare without women (Callaghan 2000), without class (Hedrick and Reynolds 2000), and without English (Chaudhuri and Lim 2006), but for most Shakespeareans, Shakespeare *is* language. As one eminent scholar puts it: "Much of the time [Shakespeare] is talking about language itself, and we are never allowed to forget it" (McDonald 2001, 58). What, then, do we do with Shakespeare and dance? Of course, as my collaborators herein suggest, dance was an integral part of Shakespeare's dramatic works, artistic milieu, and social and cultural practices and remains a significant communicative form for contemporary theater and film directors, especially as a signifier of a particular historical period and/or sociopolitical context. Seen via these perspectives, dance participates in creating meaning in the plays and their afterlives on stage and screen not by replacing language, but as an additional communicative form that, along with music, supplements or fills out the plays' linguistic, aural, and visual composition.

What, then, about forms of danced "Shakespeare" that do not use language at all, such as the many full-length dance incarnations based on his plays? While the relationship between Shakespeare, his plays, and dance adaptations remains mostly *terra incognita*, there has been a recent surge of interest in Shakespeare-based dance narratives. Julie Sanders (2007) has explored

dance adaptations of Shakespeare as one of several significant performance epiphenomena that have proliferated from Shakespeare's dramatic works and that also include orchestral music, opera, musical theater, and film. Focusing on Cathy Marston's 2009 *Julia und Romeo* for Bern:Ballett, Lynsey McCulloch explores dance as a kind of translation. Tracing the fault lines between dramatic and dance renditions of Shakespeare, McCulloch "explores the process by which early modern text becomes movement and asks what distinguishes the linguistic context of the play from the kinetic concept of dance" (2013, 255). And, in her provocatively titled essay, "'There Are No Mother-In-Laws in Ballet': 'Doing' Shakespeare in Dance" (2005), Robin Wharton argues that the translation of Shakespeare's plays into dance creates a unique space for disrupting classical ballet's rigidly circumscribed conventions for representing gender, while still retaining the vocabulary and structure of classical dance.

Like these scholars, I am interested in questions of adaptation, translation, and disruption, but with a somewhat different end in mind. Rather than interrogate the relationship between Shakespeare's works and their dance incarnations by placing them in a historical narrative of adaptation practices or a theoretical one of signification, I consider the place of danced Shakespeare in what Joseph Roach calls "performance genealogies." Performance genealogies are structures that function as repositories for those cultural memories that exist and are passed down in forms other than linguistic ones. As Roach puts it, "Performance genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonic reserves, including patterned movements made and remembered by bodies" (1996, 26), citing ballet as a paradigmatic example of a legible kinesthetic history.

In this essay, I consider dance as an important part of a Shakespearean performance genealogy: as a living, breathing example of a certain kind of creative and collaborative process that, for the most part, has not survived in contemporary theater practice. In other words, dance can help us better understand not only the process by which Shakespeare created his plays, but also his creative milieu, one that was relentlessly collaborative, intertextual, and imitative (or, to use the modern parlance for this sort of iteration, plagiaristic).<sup>1</sup> Informed both by historicist studies that helped destabilize the "Great Man" master narrative and by performance studies and theater history scholarship that investigate the manifold ways in which early modern drama was generated by a creative network that included playwrights, actors, theater owners, costumers, printers, audiences, and readers, my inquiry suggests further points of contact between the fields of Shakespeare and dance scholarship. In particular, I argue that dance offers an alternative kind of archive for studying early modern performance practices, a field in which one of the primary obstacles is a dearth of

records. However, when considering what we do know about the early modern English theater, a number of striking similarities with the twentieth-century repertory ballet company emerge.

Much as professional drama and the profession of dramatist flourished in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, the mid-twentieth century ushered in a kind of renaissance for classical ballet and dance. From the rise of the most influential classical choreographers since Petipa (including George Balanchine, Anthony Tudor, Frederick Ashton, Agnes DeMille, Kenneth MacMillan, and John Cranko) to the proliferation of modern choreographers and companies (such as Martha Graham, José Limón, and later Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, and Alvin Ailey), dance companies and choreographers seemed to multiply exponentially. Moreover, while the traditional repertory theater model dwindled in the twentieth century (a trend that continues into the present day), ballet and modern companies built on both repertory and touring models proliferated in the 1960s, and most dance companies continue to employ them in the twenty-first century. This hybrid model resembles the one used by the majority of theater companies in Renaissance England, but is used by few theater companies now. And, whereas few of the twentieth century's major playwrights either directed or held a resident playwright position with a theater company, nearly all of the twentieth century's major choreographers either ran their own company or held the title of resident choreographer. This allowed them to develop a repertory built on not only their own talents, but also the talents of individual dancers with whom they worked repeatedly. Finally, the post-World War II era saw a dramatic change in the composition of ballet audiences, from a small, elite cohort to a much larger, more diverse audience: dance critic and historian Frank Jackson claims that during this period, ballet became "the art of the masses" (1953, 35).

Within this vital mid-century moment, I locate a particular creative nexus, one that assembles the energies of dancers, choreographers, designers, and composers and fosters a culture of cross-pollination among them. Focusing on the relationship between one of the major twentieth-century choreographers, John Cranko, and the Stuttgart Ballet's principal dancer, Marcia Haydée, I suggest that their collaboration on Cranko's *Romeo and Juliet* provides a fertile analogy for understanding the kind of collaboration early modern playmaking demanded. Analogous, yes, but not identical: I do not aver that the mid-century ballet company can (or should) be directly mapped onto the early modern English theatrical one. Instead, I hope that such an analogy will prove useful in opening new avenues of inquiry into Shakespeare's plays and the early modern theater and demonstrate the opportunity, even urgency, for greater cross-disciplinary conversation and collaboration between the fields of Shakespeare and dance studies.

### Symbiosis as Genesis: Creating Cranko's *Romeo and Juliet*

In a variant of the one-upmanship fueled by the masculine and writerly *agon* that spurred many of early modern England's most precocious wits to try their hand at writing for the stage, John Cranko's inspiration for choreographing *Romeo and Juliet* came about after seeing Leonid Lavrovsky's elaborate production in 1956 (Percival 1983, 122; Haydée 2013, 32:24).<sup>2</sup> Cranko's initial attempt at the ballet was for La Scala in 1958, with the twenty-one-year-old Carla Fracci in the role of Juliet. The production was not a success (Percival 1983, 123), but it did provide Cranko with a useful learning curve for his next attempt: a heavily revised version made by his company at Stuttgart four years later. Circumstances could not have been more different from La Scala. Stuttgart was a small, newly formed company, qualities reflected in its modest budget. Whereas Cranko could mount a production at La Scala that mimicked some of the Lavrovsky production's opulence and spectacle, the Stuttgart production would live or die by the strength and expressive capabilities of the choreography and dancers. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Cranko's 1962 production is the sparseness of its staging. Cranko collaborated with novice set designer Jürgen Rose to create a minimalist set consisting of movable structures that could be easily manipulated to form the armature for different kinds of spaces: street, ballroom, bedroom, and cloister (Percival 1983, 133-34).<sup>3</sup>

More formative than budgetary constraints, however, was the presence of Cranko's muse, Marcia Haydée, for whom he choreographed the revised Juliet. In 1962, twenty-five-year-old Haydée found herself at that ephemeral moment in a dancer's career where she is at the peak of her technical powers but just starting to reach her artistic abilities' full florescence. Equally significantly, she had worked with Cranko since 1957, when he had, despite the misgivings of the theater director, made Haydée the company's prima ballerina, because, as he stated, "She understands me" (Haydée 2013, 12:08). According to Haydée, the choreographic process was highly collaborative, to the point where Cranko's dancers were equal partners in crafting steps, style, and dramatic effect. Reminiscing about Cranko's choreographic process during *Romeo and Juliet*, Haydée stated: "John didn't know the steps he was going to do, but he was so clear about the situation, how to build that situation . . . And for me and Ray [Barra, Haydée's Romeo] whatever he said, we immediately did. And sometimes it was different than what he wanted, but he says: "Oh no, this is better; let's keep that" (2013, 17:03-24). Haydée's description is revealing for not only what she says, but how she says it. Her choice of language deftly testifies to the liminal, generative space of creation through the language she uses to describe both intention and process. Haydée states that while Cranko did not know the *steps* he wanted the dancers to perform, he was pellucid on "the situation," an ambiguous construct for those of us left outside of that moment.

Does it mean the narrative? The emotional tenor of the scene? Haydée's paradoxical concatenation of abstraction ("the situation") and transparency ("he was so clear") captures something about the nature of creative collaborations. A temporal and spatial dimension in which something inchoate is given form, rhythm, and dimension, the creative transfiguration from idea to language or movement becomes reified in Haydée's account of how Cranko's vision of *Romeo and Juliet* came to be: "Whatever he said, we immediately did."

When comparing Cranko's rendition to the Lavrovsky version that inspired him, we may see traces of this unique, almost instinctive, collaborative process through where and how Cranko features his lead ballerina. Known for her combination of seriousness, intelligence, and ability to create a sense of fantasy onstage, Haydée provided the cynosure for Cranko's production. In the Lavrovsky version, Juliet is present from the ballroom scene's opening, and Juliet (danced by Galina Ulanova at the premiere) seems perfectly at ease, sitting among the guests and gracefully inclining her long neck to listen to a courtier's whispered pleasantries.<sup>4</sup> When Paris hands her a bouquet, she accepts it with delight. Cranko, however, has Juliet enter in the middle of the Knights' dance: she scurries in and stands upstage, awkwardly, as if she is not sure she belongs there.<sup>5</sup> After getting her frock fluffed by the Nurse, she runs towards her parents, touches her mother lightly on the shoulder and then defers to her father's presence, bowing somewhat stiffly, in an unpracticed manner, to the floor. She is then introduced to Paris, at whom she glances — barely — then runs to her mother, as if seeking reassurance.

Whether she finds reassurance is uncertain, since her father takes her hand and places it in Paris's, who leads her to the side, and the Knights' dance continues. Unlike the Lavrovsky version, where Juliet is centrally placed in and always a part of the festivities, Cranko's Juliet irrupts onto the scene, an entrance that clearly marks her as singular and incandescent. Immediately following the Knights' dance, Juliet and Paris take center stage. In the Lavrovsky version, the courtship dance exhibits bold, traditional *pas de deux* elements. The steps showcase the ballerina's technique and the danseur's partnering skills (there are balances for Juliet and multiple overhead and press lifts for her partner). In addition, the couple tends to cover the entirety of the ballroom's space and move along multiple axes: vertical, horizontal, and diagonal in both directions (left to right and right to left). In Cranko's courtship dance, however, the guests hem the pair in, and they travel only on the diagonal, two choices that serve to emphasize Haydée's portrayal of Juliet as aware of her rapidly narrowing options as she stands on the precipice of adulthood. Haydée's Juliet seems almost as if she is in a trance, as if she cannot quite believe any of this is happening to her. None of the *pas de deux*'s steps appears to be technically challenging, although in many ways they are more so than

the virtuoso steps found in the Lavrovsky. Cranko's choreography demands a steadiness of pacing and show of effortless technique and partnering: a form of *sprezzatura* nearly impossible to achieve. However, it also allows for a greater emphasis on Haydée's dramatic rather than technical gifts. Indeed, according to Haydée, Cranko's primary inspiration for choreographing, particularly at the height of his career, was neither music nor libretto, but the dancers themselves. As Haydée puts it, "I don't think John could ever create something without really making it for the person" (Haydée 2013, 12:40).

We might simply chalk this quality up to idiosyncrasy, to a particular strand of Cranko's emotional and intellectual DNA. However, when one scrolls through the list of the major ballet choreographers of the twentieth century — Frederick Ashton, John Cranko, Kenneth MacMillan, and George Balanchine — one finds them yoked to another set of names — Margot Fonteyn, Marcia Haydée, Lynn Seymour, and Suzanne Farrell. Often these dancers are collected under the aegis of the *muse* — that rare, transcendent entity that moves beyond his or her function as the vehicle upon which the creator's vision is written to become the catalyst for it. However, I would argue that the muse is more than a source of inspiration; rather, he or she is collaborator and co-creator of the artistic product. This relationship between choreographer and dancer often resonates well beyond their own moment of creation. For example, Kenneth MacMillan's better-known version of *Romeo and Juliet*, choreographed only three years after the Stuttgart version, is heavily influenced by both Cranko and Haydée.<sup>6</sup> British dance critic Luke Jennings has noted that MacMillan's ballet "borrows so liberally and unambiguously from Cranko's version that at times the eyes widen in disbelief" (2008). Tellingly, much of the "borrowing" comes from those scenes that serve to introduce us to Juliet's character: "At the moment in act 1 when Juliet discovers she's got breasts, a whisper of recognition ran through the audience on Wednesday's opening night. Gesture for gesture, note for note, the scene is almost identical" (Jennings 2008). But MacMillan was not the only one influenced by Cranko and Haydée. In 1964, Seymour had gone to Stuttgart to dance Juliet as a guest artist, and Haydée had coached her in the role. These tessellations of influence suggest that art forms requiring more than a single compositor do not simply come into being ex-nihilo from the mind of the genius, but from a complex, interdependent creative network, one that continues to affect and shape future artists and performances even if the exact imprints of the various collaborators become effaced over time.

### Dance as Shakespearean Archive

What, then, might dance tell us about Shakespeare? Certainly, it can provide us with additional insight into the culture in which he lived and worked. It can help us better understand

the rhythm and pacing of his plays, and the myriad avenues through which they are communicated. Dance offers access into under-theorized adaptive spaces that can allow for greater insight into how Shakespeare has been interpreted and reimagined over four centuries. However, as I have been suggesting, dance can also offer us a living template for understanding not just Shakespeare's plays or culture, but also the process by and conditions under which his works were — dare I say — choreographed. Performance scholars often take literary scholars to task for not considering "embodied Shakespeare" — that is, for failing to consider the ways in which an actor's body, gesture, and voice are as significant sites of meaning as the text. Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan cautions that play texts can be be "a surprisingly misleading guide to what people are actually doing onstage and/or experiencing as a viewer" (1988, 40). I would add that play texts can be surprisingly misleading about the conditions of their own generation. Rather than imagining the version of Shakespeare immortalized in John Madden's 1998 *Shakespeare in Love* — the solitary playwright struggling alone with his thoughts — we might revise the scene to include the writer, the actor, the designer, and the impresario working together, trying out lines, imagining blocking possibilities, feeling their way around speech cadences and line rhythms. It might look rather more like Haydée's version of creation: "I always questioned Cranko about what he really wanted, and I told him if I agreed or not. There's always a dialogue with the choreographer, otherwise there's no way one can create a ballet" (Haydée 2001). Embodiment (in this case via dance and its creative processes) may supplement more than our understanding of how Shakespeare's plays come to mean; it may also illuminate the very process through which they came into existence both on stage and page.

### Notes

1. See, for example, Jonathan Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays: A Socio-Linguistic Study* (1994); Gary Taylor, "Shakespeare and Others: The Authorship of *Henry the Sixth, Part One*" (1995); Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Early Modern Drama* (1997); and John Jowett, "Varieties of Collaboration in Shakespeare's Problem Plays and Late Plays" (2005).
2. Lavrovsky's production premiered in St. Petersburg in 1940.
3. It is worth noting that these staging practices echo both what we believe to be the original staging practices for the early modern theater and the minimalist approach that marked some of the most significant theater productions of the mid-twentieth century, such as Peter Brook's 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. For a description of early modern staging practices, see E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* Vol.

- 3 (1923); Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa, *Staging in Shakespeare's Theatres* (2000); and Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (2009).
4. For an online version of the Lavrovsky version starring Alina Somova and Andrian Fadeyev in 2010 at the Mariinsky Theater, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAIaPjdXXDk> [accessed 25 April 2017].
  5. For an online version of the Cranko version starring Haydée and Richard Cragun, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wknSiNIikII> [accessed 25 April 2017].
  6. An anecdote cited in Parry's biography of MacMillan suggests that Cranko did not believe, in this case, that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery: "Cranko had been watching a performance of MacMillan's ballet when a fellow spectator said to him, 'I wish I'd seen yours.' 'You just have,' replied Cranko" (2009, 284).



## References

- Callaghan, Dympna. 2000. *Shakespeare Without Women: Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage*. London: Routledge.
- Chambers, E. K. 1923. *The Elizabethan Stage*. 4 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Chaudhuri, Sukanta, and Chee Seng Lim, eds. 2006. *Shakespeare Without English: The Reception of Shakespeare in Non-Anglophone Countries*. Delhi: Pearson Longman.
- Finnegan, Ruth. 1988. *Literacy and Orality, or Studies in the Technologies of Communication*. New York: Blackwell.
- Gurr, Andrew, and Mariko Ichikawa. 2000. *Staging in Shakespeare's Theatres*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haydé, Marcia. 2013. Interview by Katerina Novikova. St. Petersburg. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGVRAtDIC5M/> [accessed 25 April 2017].
- Haydé, Marcia. 2001. Interview by Kevin Ng. *ballet.co magazine*, April. Available online at: [http://www.danze.co.uk/magazines/yr\\_01/apr01/interview\\_marcia\\_haydee.htm](http://www.danze.co.uk/magazines/yr_01/apr01/interview_marcia_haydee.htm) [accessed 25 April 2017].
- Hedrick, Don, and Bryan Reynolds, eds. 2000. *Shakespeare Without Class: Misappropriations of Cultural Capital*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Hope, Jonathan. 1994. *The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays: A Socio-Linguistic Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, Frank. 1953. *They Make Tomorrow's Ballet: A Study of the Work of Jack Carter, Michael Charnley, John Cranko*. London: Meridien.
- Jennings, Luke. 2008. "Cranko's Legacy of Greatness." *The Guardian*, 30 March. Available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/mar/30/dance/> [accessed 25 April 2017].
- Jowett, John. 2005. "Varieties of Collaboration in Shakespeare's Problem Plays and Late Plays." In *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume IV: The Poems, Problem Comedies, Late Plays*. Edited by Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard. Malden: Blackwell. 106-28.
- Julia und Romeo*. 2009. Choreography by Cathy Marston. Music by Sergei Prokofiev. Stadttheater, Bern, 9 October 2009.
- Masten, Jeffrey. 1997. *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Early Modern Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McCulloch, Lynsey. 2013. "'Here's That Shall Make You Dance': Movement and Meaning in Bern:Ballet's *Julia und Romeo*." In *Reinventing the Renaissance: Shakespeare and His*

- Contemporaries in Adaptation and Performance*. Edited by Sarah Annes Brown, Robert I. Lublin, and Lynsey McCulloch. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. 255-68.
- McDonald, Russ. 2001. *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*. Second edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Parry, Jann. 2009. *Different Drummer: The Life of Kenneth MacMillan*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Percival, John. 1983. *Theatre in My Blood: A Biography of John Cranko*. London: Herbert Press, Ltd.
- Roach, Joseph. 1996. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sanders, Julie Ann. 2007. *Shakespeare and Music: Afterlives and Borrowings*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Stern, Tiffany. 2009. *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Gary. 1995. "Shakespeare and Others: The Authorship of *Henry the Sixth, Part One*." *Medieval and Renaissance Drama* 7: 145-205.
- Wharton, Robin. 2005. "'There Are No Mothers-In-Law in Ballet': 'Doing' Shakespeare in Dance." *Shakespeare Bulletin* 23.3: 7-22.