

Reading for Information

Great Movies: *Romeo and Juliet*

Critical Review by Roger Ebert

What's the Connection?

You've just discovered why filmmakers love Shakespeare: plays like *Romeo and Juliet* present directors with terrific material to work with. You've also explored the choices one director, Franco Zeffirelli, made to transform Shakespeare's classic drama into a big-screen blockbuster. How do critics think Zeffirelli's movie measures up? Read to find out one movie reviewer's opinion.

Standards Focus: Analyze a Critical Review

A **critical review** is an essay in which the writer gives his or her opinions about a movie, a play, a book, a TV show, or another work. A critical review typically includes these elements:

- the name of the work and its creator
- a description of the work, often including some background information and summary of the plot
- a clearly stated central idea, the reviewer's opinion of the work
- reasons that support the opinion
- examples or details that illustrate the reasons

A critical review may include other elements as well, but the heart of a review is the writer's opinion and the reasons and examples he or she uses to back it up. Opinions that are **substantiated**, or supported, in a critical review are more persuasive than those that are simply stated without appropriate support.

As you read this critical review, use a chart like the one shown to record Roger Ebert's opinion and the main reasons he gives to support it. Keep track of the examples and details from the movie that Ebert uses to illustrate each reason.



Use with *Romeo and Juliet*, page 1036.

COMMON CORE

RI 2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development.

RI 3 Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas, including the connections drawn between them. **RI 8** Delineate and evaluate the argument and claims in a text. **L 4a** Use context as a clue to the meaning of a phrase.

Ebert's Opinion:

Reason	Examples or Details
Reason 1:	
Reason 2:	

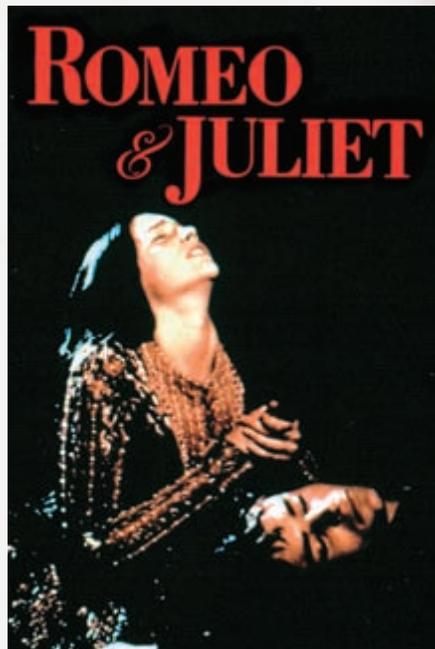
GREAT MOVIES

Romeo and Juliet

BY ROGER EBERT

“Romeo and Juliet” is always said to be the first romantic tragedy ever written, but it isn’t really a tragedy at all. It’s a tragic misunderstanding, scarcely fitting the ancient requirement of tragedy that the mighty fall through their own flaws. Romeo and Juliet have no flaws, and aren’t old enough to be blamed if they did. They die because of the pigheaded quarrel of their families, the Montagues and the Capulets. By writing the play, Shakespeare began the shaping of modern drama, in which the fates of ordinary people are as crucial as those of the great. The great tragedies of his time, including his own, involved kings, emperors, generals. Here, near the dawn of his career, perhaps remembering a sweet early romance before his forced marriage to Anne Hathaway, he writes about teenagers in love. **A**

“Romeo and Juliet” has been filmed many times in many ways; Norma Shearer and Leslie Howard starred in the beloved 1936 Hollywood version, and modern transformations include Robert Wise’s “West Side Story” (1961), which applies the plot to Manhattan gang warfare; Abel Ferrara’s “China Girl” (1987), about a forbidden romance between a girl of Chinatown and a boy of Little Italy; and Baz Luhrmann’s “William Shakespeare’s Romeo & Juliet” (1996), with California punk gangs on Verona Beach. But the favorite film version is likely to re-



Zeffirelli cast two young, unknown actors instead of more experienced stars in his 1968 film. **B**

main, for many years, Franco Zeffirelli’s 1968 production. **B**

His crucial decision, in a film where almost everything went well, was to cast actors who were about the right age to play the characters (as Howard and Shearer were obviously not). As the play opens, Juliet “hath not seen the change of 14 years,” and Romeo is little older. This is first love for Juliet, and Romeo’s crush on the unseen Rosalind is forgotten the moment he sees **C**

A CRITICAL REVIEW

In lines 1–21, Ebert introduces the play, mentioning a key element of the plot as well as the context in which Shakespeare wrote the play. In your own words, summarize the information in this paragraph.

B CRITICAL REVIEW

In lines 22–38, Ebert provides information about other film versions of the play. What opinion about Zeffirelli’s film does Ebert state in lines 35–38?

C CRITICAL REVIEW

What was Zeffirelli’s “crucial decision”? Paraphrase the first reason Ebert gives to support his opinion of the movie.

COMMON CORE L 4a

Language Coach

Roots and Affixes A word's **root** is the base part of the word and generally the origin of the word and its related forms. The root of *flourish* is the Latin verb *florere*, "to flower." Reread lines 60–69. What are "rhetorical flourishes," and what does it mean to "prune" them? How can you tell?



Olivia Hussey as Juliet proclaims her love in the balcony scene.

Juliet at the masked ball: "I ne'er saw
50 true beauty until this night." After a well-publicized international search, Zeffirelli cast Olivia Hussey, a 16-year-old from Argentina, and Leonard

Whiting, a British 17-year-old. They didn't merely look their parts, they embodied them in the freshness of

Hussey and Whiting were so good because they didn't know any better.

their personalities, and although neither was a trained actor, they were fully equal to Shakespeare's dialogue for
60 them; Anthony Holden's new book *William Shakespeare: The Man Behind the Genius* contrasts "the beautiful simplicity with which the lovers speak at their moments of uncomplicated happiness," with "the ornate rhetorical

flourishes which fuel so much else in the play"—flourishes that Zeffirelli severely pruned, trimming about half the play. He was roundly criticized for his
70 edits, but much that needs describing on the stage can simply be shown on-screen, as when Benvolio is shown witnessing Juliet's funeral and thus does not need to evoke it in a description to the exiled Romeo. Shakespeare, who took such wholesale liberties with his own sources, might have understood.

What is left is what people love the play for—the purity of the young lovers' passion, the earthiness of Juliet's nurse,
80 the well-intentioned plans of Friar Laurence, the hot-blooded feud between the young men of the families, the cruel irony of the double deaths. And there is time, too, for many of the great speeches, including Mercutio's poetic evocation of Mab, the queen of dreams.

Hussey and Whiting were so good because they didn't know any better.
90 Another year or two of experience, perhaps, and they would have been too intimidated to play the roles. It was my good fortune to visit the film

set, in a small hill town an hour or so outside Rome, on the night when the balcony scene was filmed. I remember Hussey and Whiting upstairs in the old hillside villa, waiting for their call, unaffected, uncomplicated. And when the balcony scene was shot, I remember the heedless energy that Hussey threw into it, take after take, hurling herself almost off the balcony for hungry kisses. (Whiting, balanced in a tree, needed to watch his footing.) **D**

Between shots, in the overgrown garden, Zeffirelli strolled with the composer Nino Rota, who had written the music for most of Fellini's films and now simply hummed the film's central theme, as the director nodded. Pasqualino De Santis, who was to win an Oscar for his cinematography, directed his crew quietly, urgently, trying to be ready for the freshness of the actors instead of making them wait for technical quibbles. At dawn, drinking strong coffee as cars pulled around to take his actors back to Rome, Zeffirelli said what was obvious: That the whole

movie depended on the balcony and the crypt scenes, and he felt now that his casting decision had proven itself, and that the film would succeed.

It did, beyond any precedent for a film based on Shakespeare, even though Shakespeare is the most filmed writer in history. The movie opened in the tumultuous year of 1968, a time of political upheaval around the world, and somehow the story of the star-crossed lovers caught the mood of rebellious young people who had wearied of their elders' wars. "This of all works of literature eternizes the ardor of young love and youth's aggressive spirit," wrote Anthony Burgess. **E**

Zeffirelli, born in Florence in 1923, came early to the English language through prewar experiences hinted at in the loosely autobiographical "Tea with Mussolini" (1999). His crucial early artistic influence was Laurence Olivier's "Henry V" (1945), which inspired him to go into the theater; he has had parallel careers directing plays, films and operas. Before the great

D CRITICAL REVIEW

Reread lines 88–105. Why does Ebert think Hussey and Whiting were so successful at bringing the star-crossed lovers to life? How does Ebert substantiate his opinion?

E CRITICAL REVIEW

Why does Ebert think audiences—particularly young people—were so taken with the movie when it premiered in 1968?



Leonard Whiting as Romeo gazes adoringly at his Juliet.

F CRITICAL REVIEW

Reread lines 168–186.

What aspect of the film does Ebert praise in this paragraph? Explain why he found this element essential to the movie's success.

success of “Romeo and Juliet,” he first
visited Shakespeare for the shaky but
150 high-spirited “Taming of the Shrew”
(1967), with Burton and Taylor. Later
he directed Placido Domingo in “Otel-
lo” (1986), Verdi’s opera, and directed
Mel Gibson in “Hamlet” (1990).

**Something
fundamental has
changed in films
about and for
young people.**

“Romeo and Juliet” remains the
magical high point of his career. To see
it again is to luxuriate. It is intriguing
that Zeffirelli in 1968 focused on love,
while Baz Luhrmann’s popular version
160 of 1996 focused on violence; some-
thing fundamental has changed in
films about and for young people, and
recent audiences seem shy of sex and
love but eager for conflict and action. I
wonder if a modern Friday night audi-
ence would snicker at the heart-baring
sincerity of the lovers. . . .

The costumes by Danilo Donati
won another Oscar for the film (it was
170 also nominated for best picture and
director), and they are crucial to its
success; they are the avenue for color
and richness to enter the frame, which
is otherwise filled with gray and ochre
stones and the colors of nature. The
nurse (Pat Heywood) seems enveloped
in a dry goods’ sale of heavy fabrics,
and Mercutio (John McEnery) comes
flying a handkerchief that he uses as a

180 banner, disguise and shroud. Hussey’s
dresses, with low bodices and simple
patterns, set off her creamy skin and
long hair; Whiting is able to inhabit
his breeches, blouse and codpiece with
the conviction that it is everyday
clothing, not a costume. **F**

The costumes and everything else in
the film—the photography, the music,
above all Shakespeare’s language—is so
190 voluptuous, so sensuous. The stagecraft
of the twinned death scenes is of course
all contrivance; the friar’s potion works
with timing that is precisely wrong, and
yet we forgive the manipulation because
Shakespeare has been able to provide us
with what is theoretically impossible,
the experience of two young lovers each
grieving the other’s death. When the
play was first staged in London, Holden
200 writes, Shakespeare had the satisfaction
“of seeing the groundlings moved to
emotions far beyond anything before
known in the theater.” Why? Because of
craft and art, yes, but also because Ro-
meo and Juliet were not distant and au-
gust figures, not Caesars, Othellos or
Macbeths, but a couple of kids in love,
as everyone in the theater had known,
and everyone in the theater had been.



**Whiting and Hussey in Donati’s
sumptuous costumes**

Comprehension

- 1. Recall** What is Ebert's opinion of Franco Zeffirelli's film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*?
- 2. Paraphrase** Reread lines 198–209. According to Ebert, why have audiences been so moved by the story of *Romeo and Juliet* ever since it was first staged?

Text Analysis

- 3. Analyze a Critical Review** Look at the chart you filled in as you read. What are the main reasons that Ebert gives to substantiate his opinion of the film? Describe at least two examples or details that Ebert uses to illustrate each reason.
- 4. Analyze Author's Purpose** How would Ebert's review have been different if his main purpose were to summarize the movie rather than to critique it? Explain.
- 5. Evaluate an Opinion** Do you agree with Ebert that "Romeo and Juliet have no flaws" and that they die only "because of the pigheaded quarrel of their families"? Explain your answer.

COMMON CORE

RI 3 Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas, including the connections drawn between them. **RI 8** Delineate and evaluate the argument and claims in a text. **W 9b (RI 8)** Draw evidence from informational texts to delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims of a text.

Read for Information: Compare and Contrast

WRITING PROMPT

What did you think about the casting of Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting in Zeffirelli's film version of *Romeo and Juliet*, and how would you rate their performances in the balcony scene? How are your opinions similar to and different from Ebert's?

To answer this prompt, you will have to **compare and contrast**, or explain similarities and differences. To explore the similarities and differences between your views and those expressed by Ebert, follow these steps:

1. Consider your reactions to the movie's two main characters and their acting in the balcony scene. Sum up your opinion, and identify details from the scene that support it.
2. Review Ebert's main points and the evidence he gives to back them up. In your response, you can either examine Ebert's points in order and agree or disagree with each, or you can examine the points you agree with first and then move on to those that you disagree with.

