

Mercutio Loves Romeo?

Director Baz Luhrmann jazzes up a classic.



MY IDEA WAS TO TRY and do *Romeo and Juliet* in the way Shakespeare himself might have done if he was making a film," says director Baz Luhrmann about his first Hollywood movie, which features Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes as the famous star-crossed lovers. And as Luhrmann wrote in the film's production notes, "Shakespeare was a rambunctious, sexy, violent, entertaining storyteller."

"We took the Elizabethan world and we converted it into contemporary images," says Luhrmann.

Luhrmann's movie, titled *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (20th Century Fox), follows the Australian filmmaker's hugely popular first feature, *Strictly Ballroom*, with a similar splash of energy and color. Just as Luhrmann updated the setting for his Australian Opera production of Puccini's *La Bohème* (telecast on PBS) to the late 1950s, the director has transferred Shakespeare's tragic tale of thwarted love from 16th century Verona, Italy, to a fictional contemporary world he calls Verona Beach. Working with his Sydney-based creative team—they have worked together over the past 10 years on theater, opera, and a signature issue of Australian *Vogue*—Luhrmann traveled from Verona to Miami on a quest for the movie's visual look.

"We mixed a European city with a modern Western one, and then we took the Elizabethan world and its social realities and we converted that into contemporary images," says Luhrmann. "It's really a collage of 20th-century images to help release the language of the play." The rival Montague and Capulet gangs in the movie travel in fast cars and carry guns instead of daggers, but they speak Shakespeare's original language (albeit with some cuts in the text). "Truly great stories really communicate to every kind of person," Luhrmann explains. "They were popular entertainment first, so it's like claiming these works back for the audience for which they were written."



Does the great heterosexual love story have a gay subtext? In Luhrmann's movie Mercutio (left) makes his appearance at the Capulet ball decked out in silver sequins and a white wig, à la Dennis Rodman. "Mercutio is a badass in this really macho society," explains Mercutio actor Harold Perrineau. "His drag to the party is like a 'fuck you' to the world."

Still, Luhrmann recognizes that Mercutio is often presented as having the hots for Romeo, jealous of his best buddy's infatuation with Juliet. Of course, as out British actor Sir Ian McKellen cautions, the language and labels of modern gay politics were not available to Shakespeare or his audience 400 years ago. But,

McKellen adds, "because of our interest in tracing our history, it's perfectly fair to discover with some relief that Shakespeare is interested in homosexuality, even though he doesn't give it a name."

The 33-year-old *Romeo* director (who says, "I see all sexual possibilities in my life") adds, "When you're dealing with a group of young men and they're at that stage of finding out about themselves, it's too simple to say that they are having a relationship or they're not. But I think there's no question of there being a love between them." —GERARD RAYMOND

Gerard Raymond also contributes to Harper's Bazaar and The Village Voice.

MERRICK MORTON (2)