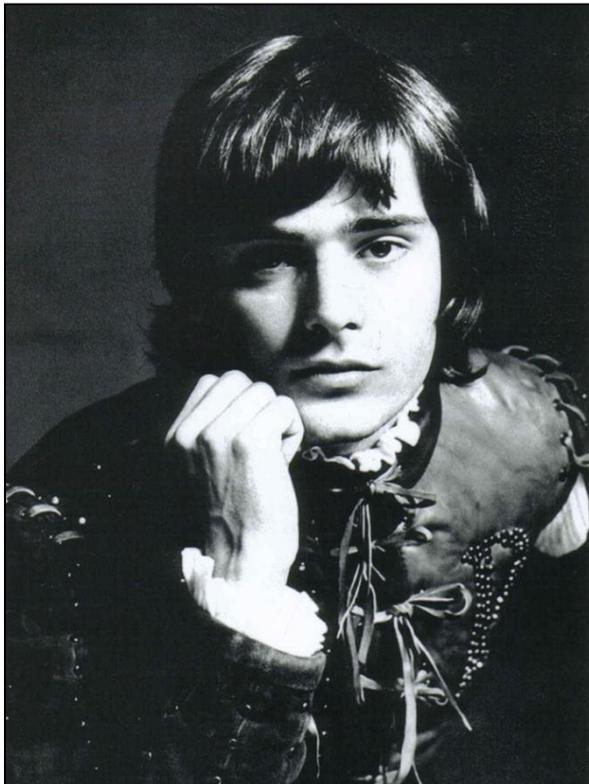


Review #28 : *Romeo and Juliet* (1968)

Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting

The love story written by Shakespeare has been filmed many times in many ways : over-the-hill Norma Shearer (who was 36 at the time) and **Leslie Howard** (already 42 !) 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 finally **Baz Luhrmann's** *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) with California punk gangs on Verona Beach. But the favourite film version is likely to remain **Franco Zeffirelli's** 1968 most beloved production.



REVIEW

Zeffirelli's crucial decision 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 and Romeo's crush on the unseen Rosalind is forgotten the moment he sees Juliet at the masked ball.

After an international search, Zeffirelli cast 16-year-old **Olivia Hussey** from Argentina and **Leonard Whiting**, a British 17-year-old. They didn't merely look their parts, they embodied them in the **freshness of their personalities** and although neither was a trained actor, they were fully equal to Shakespeare's dialogue for them. Hussey and Whiting were so good because they didn't know any better. Another year or two of experience, and they would have been affected or too intimidated to play the roles. To take only one example : the balcony scene, one is struck by the **heedless energy** that Olivia Hussey threw into it, take after take, hurling herself almost off the balcony for hungry kisses. Leonard Whiting, balanced in a tree, certainly needed to watch his footing. The scene exhilarates this naive and hopeless intensity only those in love for the very first time can comprehend...

'This of all works of literature eternizes the ardour of young love and youth's aggressive spirit.' (Anthony Burgess)



Zeffirelli first visited Shakespeare for the high-spirited *Taming of the Shrew* (1967) with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. Later he would direct **Mel Gibson** in *Hamlet* (1991). *Romeo and Juliet* remains the **magical high point** of his career. It is intriguing that Zeffirelli's version of 1968 focused on love, while Baz Luhrmann's popular version of 1996 focused on violence. Something fundamental has changed in films about and for young people...

Zeffirelli got some criticism from purists by daring to show Romeo and Juliet awakening in her bed – no doubt after experiencing physical love. In the play the same dialogue plays in the Capulets' orchard, but after all, were they not wed by Friar Laurence and is it not right they should consummate their love before Romeo is banished into exile? In my opinion, the director should just have spared the audience with Leonard Whiting's bare bottom, on which the camera languishes for a couple of unnecessary minutes...



The costumes by Danilo Donati won another Oscar for the film – already nominated for best picture and director – and they are crucial to its success. They are the avenue for **colour and richness** to enter the frame – which is otherwise filled with **gray and ochre stones** and the **colours of nature**. The nurse seems enveloped in heavy fabrics while Mercutio (**John McEnery**) comes flying a handkerchief that he uses as a banner, disguise and shroud. Olivia Hussey's dresses, with low bodices and simple patterns, set off her creamy skin and dark long hair. Leonard Whiting is able to inhabit his breeches, blouse and codpiece with the conviction that it is everyday clothing, not a costume. The photography – everything is red and brown and yellow, dusty and sunlit –, the stunning music by **Nino Rota** and above all the language – all those outpourings of the soul at moments of great emotion – also contribute to the **sensuousness** of the filming.

With this in mind, I believe Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* is the most exciting film of Shakespeare ever made. Not because it is greater drama than Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*, because it is not. Nor is it greater cinema than Orson Welles' *Falstaff*. But it is greater Shakespeare than either because it has the passion, the sweat, the violence, the poetry, the love and the tragedy in the most immediate terms I can imagine. It is a deeply moving piece of entertainment, and that is possibly what Shakespeare would have preferred +++

The 2013 British version starring **Hailee Steinfeld as Juliet** and Douglas Booth as Romeo is also worth mentioning.



This version – especially made to help students of this new generation connect with literature – is beautiful as well. **Filmed in the actual city of Verona in Italy**, you feel transported by the orange-hued sunrises, the castled landscape, and the constant flavours in renaissance artwork layered on each backdrop. **It's visually perfect.** Certainly Julian Fellowes, *Downton Abbey* writer, takes his literary liberties as screenwriter, allowing for a medieval tournament and fewer characters. He does, however, speed up the action and include scenes and characters rarely enjoyed in film versions...



He is also somehow able to keep it clean without losing the romantic heart of the play. I believe Shakespeare himself would have approved of Fellowes's translation.



Hailee Steinfeld, plays a lovely and sweetened Juliet with youth and believability. Definitely worth watching +++