

## ***Romeo and Juliet* Balcony Scene Critique**

**Video: Frank Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet* with Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting**

---

Although the “balcony scene”— Act 2, Scene 2— of the 1968 version of *Romeo and Juliet* was performed almost word-for-word from the original play, the performance conveyed much more than the plain text did. Unlike our read-alouds in class, the producers of the movie considered many aspects that would add to the effect of the dramatic story: many aspects to improve the appearance and tone of the actors so that the plot would be more interesting. Many aspects of the film, especially the music, the scenery, and the acting of the protagonists, led to the successful rendering of the well-known scene from the famous play.

The music in the movie was well-matched to the mood of the characters. Near the beginning of the scene, when Romeo first approaches and notices Juliet up on the balcony— as he said when Juliet entered, “But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the East, and Juliet is the sun” (2. 2. 2-3)— gentle, slow, and quiet flute music played a romantic tune in the background. Visually, we can tell how much Romeo is attracted to Juliet, but the music creates a mood of romance that the audience is inclined to absorb— this way, Romeo’s sense of love towards Juliet can be transmitted to the viewers of the film, making the film more convincing. During most of the scene, as Romeo and Juliet converse, there is no music playing, as their feelings are not somewhat ambiguous as they go back and forth about their love and loyalty. When they decide that they would get married, their excitement was carried out to the reader by their expressions and tone, but also by the new music that appeared— still a flute and violin song, but this time upbeat and happy. This happened when Juliet told Romeo, “If that thy

bent of love be honorable, Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow” (2. 2. 150-151). The addition of music into the scene played a crucial role in allowing the audience to feel like Romeo and Juliet, effectively pulling them into the story and making them more involved.

Another powerful and purposeful aspect of the movie was the scenery and appearance of the scenery and overall appearance of the video. A few of the details were from the book, but a few small details were altered to produce a more exact effect. According to the book, the balcony scene occurred at night, and Romeo had scaled a high wall to see beautiful Juliet on the balcony— however, without the full moon shining on their faces, the ivy covering the stone walls of the castle, and the old-fashioned clothing of the lovers, there is no way to imagine in full the romance and symbolism from the plot. There would be no way to visualize the backyard of an old castle at night, rustic and majestic at the same time. The full moon, which is often associated with love and uncertainty, and a castle, a somewhat mysterious place, were both important features that the movie helped the reader understand much better. It was also much easier to see that the Juliet on the balcony was like a trophy on a tall pedestal— a precious item, hard to get, that would sound an alarm when taken. The balcony separated them, and was another important piece of symbolism. Lastly, the costumes, which were colorful and made to the style of centuries ago, were matching and helped add to the reality of the scene— there was no mention of them in the book. Overall, the visual aspects that Zeffirelli changed had a huge impact on the story.

A play wouldn't be a play without skilled actors and meaningful dialogue, and Hussey and Whiting fulfilled their roles as dramatic, interesting characters in the film. First of all, they spoke directly from the book, clearly and with the correct punctuation and emphasis on words,

which alone adds meaning to a text and makes it easier to understand. What they really emphasized, however, were the tones and speed of their speech. At times, they spoke slowly, uncertain, of vows and identity; while at other times, they spoke excitedly and hopefully of marriage. One of the most notable was Juliet's well-known line: "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?" (2. 2. 36). It was pronounced slowly and sadly; Juliet was staring off into the distance, sighing. Another instance was when Romeo had shown himself to Juliet. In the book, the only indicator that he had spoken out to Juliet was that there was no "[aside]" next to his dialogue; however, in the movie, he shouted out his line to her (as opposed to whispering to himself earlier). Following his exclamation, Juliet's line was, "What man art thou that, thus bescreened in night, So stumblest upon my counsel?" (2. 2. 56-57). Her line did not indicate fear or surprise, but seemed rather calm; in the movie, however, Hussey appeared very frightened, convincing our class much better than the book that she was startled by Romeo's intrusion. The acting was very convincing, and it greatly improved the effectiveness of the scene.

Zeffirelli deliberately had many details of the film perfected in order to preserve the splendor and feeling within the balcony scene. Between the music in the background, the scenery and the acting, the movie had a much larger effect than the book. Zeffirelli's producing, along with Hussey and Whiting's acting, performed the play in the most effective manner to the audience.