

UC SANTA BARBARA

# THE *Current*

August 29, 2022

Tom Jacobs

## Romeo and Juliet, Our Contemporaries

A polarized society is engulfed in tribalism and an increasingly irrational hatred of one's fellow citizens. This animosity spirals into widespread violence and bloodshed.

That's a frightening forecast for our future. It's also a spot-on description of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Verona, as Shakespeare portrays it in *Romeo and Juliet*.

"*Romeo and Juliet* is hopefully not a harbinger of things to come, but it is a warning," said Irwin Appel, director of the Naked Shakes production of the classic tragedy, which the UC Santa Barbara Department of Theater and Dance will stage beginning Thursday, Sept. 1, in the UCSB Studio Theatre. The first five shows will be free of admission, though [tickets](#) can be reserved.

"As we all know, we are living in a very divided country, and there's no sign of it getting better," he noted. "For me, that makes *Romeo and Juliet* a play for this place and time."

When most people think of this ever-popular Shakespeare play, they generally focus on the title characters, who have become architects of doomed young love. But Appel, chair of the department and director of the Naked Shakes program, likes to approach the Bard's plays by first focusing on their social settings — the communities in which they take place.

"I like to ask, 'What is the society like before the play begins? What about it allows the action of this particular play to emerge?'" he said. "A Richard III could only emerge from a society that was primed for it."

In the case of R&J, the setting — the city-state of Verona — is in deep turmoil.

"Early in the play, the prince says 'three civil brawls' between the Capulets and Montagues 'have thrice disturbed our streets.' So there have been three recent city-wide brawls. That's the state of this community when the play begins."

So violence is a constant threat, which raises the stakes enormously when a young man from the Montague clan locks eyes at a party with a young girl from the Capulet family, and they instantly form an unbreakable bond. A provocation in normal times, this pairing becomes a real threat to civil order.

"So many characters who are tired of fighting, but it only takes one person to light the match again," said Ahlora Smith, the third-year BFA acting student who plays Juliet. "To me, that's how this show is most comparable to modern-day society. We see that a lot in real life."

A different sort of production could run with this idea, set the play in modern-day America, making Romeo a member of a MAGA household and Juliet a Black Lives Matter protestor. But that's not the style of Naked Shakes. Since 2006, it has kicked off each academic year with a stripped-down production that emphasizes the actors and the text. Audiences are free to make their own connections between the play and their own lives, or the world around them.

"We're going for something that feels contemporary, but also timeless," said Appel, who noted the play has been cut so that it clocks in at just over two hours including intermission. "The clothing is contemporary, but it's also evocative of an earlier time as well."

"The show is reliant on us — the actors," added Smith. "Our voice comes out in this production, and I love that. It's such a collaborative production. Our set is the theater itself, and one long table. There was a time where there was a consideration of bringing in another table, and we all shot that down."

"We turn the table. We roll it. We climb on it," Nicholas Enea, a third-year BFA acting student who plays Romeo, said of that single large scenic element. "We sometimes

turn it on its side, and use the metal bar legs. That I love.”

“The whole point of Naked Shakes is it’s about actor-generated theatricality,” added Appel. “I’m always looking for actors who are adept at precision of language *and* very physically expressive.

“We have an interesting mix of students in this production. We have some of our most advanced BFA acting students, and non-acting majors who have never been in a play before. We all get together, study the play, and get on the same page — pun intended.”

So how do you coax the actors into playing fully fleshed-out characters rather than all-too-familiar archetypes?

“By finding the nuance, and the juice, in each line, each image, each thought,” he said. “By challenging the actors to not only understand what they are saying, but to understand these are the only words they could possibly use at that moment, in that situation. I want them to act from the heart, rather than putting on a ‘Shakespearean voice’ or act like they might think they’re supposed to in a Shakespeare play.

“I ask the actors, ‘Have you ever been in love? Have you ever been in love with someone your parents hated? Do you believe in love at first sight? Would you give up everything for love?’” Appel continued. “This gets them thinking about their own lives, and the ways they can relate to the text. You can’t play an icon.”

Another attempt at making the material relatable will be the soundtrack, which Appel is assembling from student suggestions.

“I think we need the driving edge of rock music — heavy on the electric guitar,” he said. “Much of it will be recognizable to young people in the audience. It’s a way of helping them to recognize ‘This world is my world.’”

This is the second time Naked Shakes has produced this play — the first was in 2010 — but Appel reports he keeps finding hidden nuances in Shakespeare’s masterful text.

“I continue to be surprised by *Romeo and Juliet*,” he said. “Yes, they’re the most famous lovers in history. But there’s so much in it that people don’t realize is there — so much depth of character and imagery. So many complexities.

“It’s a play about young people, about love, about what keeps us apart and what draws us together.”

----

*Naked Shakes’ Romeo and Juliet will be performed at 7 p.m. Sept. 1, 2, 6 and 7, and at 1 p.m. Sept. 3, in the UCSB Studio Theatre. Admission is free; [tickets](#) can be reserved. Additional performances (where admission will be charged) will take place Sept. 23 through Oct. 1.*

---

## **About UC Santa Barbara**

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.