

**National
Theatre**

Romeo & Julie

Learning Guide

Index

About This Guide.....	2
Background Information	3
Teaching Information.....	4
Production Notes.....	5
Key Design Elements.....	5
Performance Style.....	9
Key Moments.....	10
Plot Synopsis with Timecodes	11
Find Out More.....	20

About

This learning guide supports the National Theatre's production of **Romeo & Julie** directed by **Gary Owen**, which opened on **14 February 2023** at the **National Theatre**.

Our packs are designed to support viewing the recording on the **National Theatre Collection**. This pack provides links to the UK school curriculum and other productions in the Collection. It also has a plot synopsis with timecodes to allow you to jump to specific sections of the play.

Here you'll find all the information you need to enable you to study the production and write about it in detail. This includes notes about all the key elements from performance style to design. You'll also find pointers for further research.

Background Information

Recording Date – 8 March, 2023

Location – Dorfman Theatre, National Theatre

Age Recommendation – 12+

Cast:

BarbCatrin Aaron

Col Paul Brennen

Kath..... Anita Reynolds

Romeo..... Callum Scott Howells

Julie Rosie Sheehy

Creative Team:

Writer..... Gary Owen

Director Rachel O’Riordan

Set and Costume Designer..... Hayley Grindle

Lighting Designer Jack Knowles

Sound Designer..... Gregory Clarke

Dialect Coach..... Patricia Logue

Intimacy Coordinator Imogen Knight

Teaching Information

This production is particularly suitable for:

- Anyone with an interest in new writing and contemporary plays
- Anyone with an interest in new work inspired by the plays of Shakespeare.
- Anyone with an interest in theatre that explores contemporary themes including class, poverty, education, parenting, and aspiration.

In particular you might like to explore:

- This production alongside a production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (which you can also watch on the NT Collection)
- The setting of the play in contemporary Cardiff
- The design of the production and how it supports the narrative.



Production Notes

The following notes have been compiled to help guide you through the significant design and performance aspects as you watch the production, or to remind you of them after you have watched it. You may also want to make your own notes and form your own opinions on the effectiveness of these aspects as you explore the production.

Key Design Elements: Set

- The set is very sparse, and relies on five plastic chairs upstage, and a white table which are moved to different areas of the stage throughout the performance. There are a couple of grey chairs. Romeo's existence is one of struggle and therefore the stripped back set suggests the ongoing struggle affording everyday basics that he experiences every day.
- The cyclorama has a dark brick-like appearance.
- There are three different levels to the stage, the lower one being the biggest space (downstage). The upstage level is where actors sit when they are not acting in a scene but observing instead.
- There are different shaped lighting tubes above the stage, shaped in asymmetrical patterns. These light up in different formations during the performance and are a suggestion of the influence of fate in Romeo and Julie's lives (i.e. the 'star cross'd lovers' of *Romeo and Juliet* which inspires the play)
- A buggy and a Moses basket also form part of the set.

Production Notes

Key Design Elements: Costume

- The costumes worn by all of the characters suggest that they do not have a great deal of money, and therefore all clothing is practical.
- Barb wears blue jeans, a blue strappy top, a burgundy cardigan and nude-coloured ballet pumps. In Act 2 she wears a brown striped top and a woolen waistcoat with jeans. Later she has a purple cardigan. Barb's colour palette is quite muted, particularly in comparison with Romeo's. Romeo and Barb have less money than Julie and her family (although they two struggle financially), and so Barb's clothes have a worn, faded appearance as if she has not bought any new clothes for quite some time.
- Romeo's first costume is a light blue t-shirt with a darker one underneath, grey tracksuit bottoms and black trainers. He also wears a grey and blue jacket with stripes down the sleeves later in the play. In the second act Romeo has changed to a navy gilet with a white Adidas t-shirt underneath.
- Julie wears an orange-red hoodie under a black gilet, with black jeans, and white trainers. She carries a blue bag. Under Julie's hoodie we later see a stripey vest top. Later she wears a pale biker jacket. In the second act her top is a purple and black leopard print jumper with $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves. She also wears a fluffy white zip up fleece.
- Kath wears black trousers with a lilac polo shirt and a blue gilet. Her blue lanyard suggests that she is in work uniform. In act 2, Kath has black wide legged trousers and a peach-coloured top.
- Col's costume consists of blue jeans and a white and blue rugby shirt. In act 2 he has a plaid shirt on with his jeans. He wears brown lace up shoes. When Col challenges Romeo in the park, Col wears a wax jacket, to suggest the external location.
- The casual clothes worn by Romeo and Julie – hoodies, trainers, skinny jeans, tracksuit bottoms etc – contrast with the more mature style of their parents' clothing.

Production Notes

Key Design Elements: Lighting

- Much of the lighting design is harsh white lighting. It emphasises the harshness of the characters' existence. The same lighting is focused downstage in the café scene between Romeo and Julie.
- The lit shapes above the performance space provide interest during some of the transitions, for example with short chase sequences from one side of the shapes to the other. These lights also chase when Romeo and Juliet kiss for the first time.
- In various scenes, a dim white light comes from the sides of the stage and randomly spaced shaped LED lights light the action.



Production Notes

Key Design Elements: Sound

- Pop music at some points in the play such as *Liberty Bell* by Fontaines DC.
- The recorded sound effect of a baby's cries is used at several points in the play.
- Electric/synthesized music composed for the production underscores some of the transitions.



Production Notes

Performance Style

- The intensity of the dialogue forms the foundation of this play. Whilst it is a non-naturalistic play, the dialogue itself is naturalistic and you will see an intensity in the acting which includes tears being shed during a scene between Romeo and Julie.
- Transitions are non-naturalistic with actors moving furniture in choreographed / coordinated scene changes.
- The characters have Welsh accents to indicate the setting of Splott – a district in the Welsh city of Cardiff.



Production Notes

Key Moments

- The flirtation between Romeo and Julie begins from 00.28.40 – 00.33.14 and their chemistry is mirrored in the lighting above the stage as the various shapes light up.
- Romeo challenges Julie about Cardiff University 01.33.40 to 01.42.20
- Kath and Julie have a conversation about being a mother, and working as a carer. The scene ends at 01.48.33
- The moment where Julie is about to leave for Cambridge University demonstrates the use of pace and creation of pathos. This scene starts at 01.53.00 and finishes at 01.58.36.



Plot Synopsis with Timecodes

Act 1

Act 1, Scene 1: 00:00

A pram is spotlighted on the stage. Liberty Bell by the Fontaines D.C. plays. All characters go about their busy daily lives.

Barb's flat. Barb is Romeo's mother, and Romeo (Romy) is the father of the baby (Niamh) in the pram. The baby's nappy needs changing, and Romy is overwhelmed with his fatherly responsibilities. Barb dishes out tough love about the hardships of parenting, financially, physically, socially. She refuses to be the one that brings up this baby. Romy is exhausted, he is only a kid himself. Barb tells Romy how proud she is of him, and they agree that it is best that the baby is given to social services for adoption. Barb says that she will make all the arrangements. Romy goes to say goodbye to the baby, and he falls in love with her all over again. He cannot give her away, much to Barb's desperate frustration.

Act 1, Scene 2: 00:11:30

Romy is asleep in the local café hub. Julie approaches and jabs him to wake him up. She pushes his bag off the table and joins him as she has work to do. She assumes he's homeless, sleeping in public spaces. He tells her that his mum, Barb, is an alcoholic, so he escapes the flat to sleep sometimes. She has recently moved onto a nearby road, and is studying physics at a nearby Welsh-language school. She has aspirations of studying at Cambridge university to work with Stephen Hawking on the Theory of Everything. Romy has never heard anyone say anything like that around here. It doesn't happen. The pair begin to flirt. Romy introduces Julie to his baby daughter, Niamh. He tells her that he raises her alone, as her mum isn't interested, so he can't attend school.

Julie tells him that as part of her university application process, they need to have completed a community outreach challenge, and to do this, she could help Romy looking after his daughter. He reluctantly agrees, and she types her number into his phone.

Act 1, Scene 3: 00:21:45

Barb's flat. Romy has tidied before Julie arrives. She asks him to fill out an evaluation form of his experience with her.

JULIE: Well great, cos I get better marks if you say I was rubbish to start but I kept at it and really tried not to be? Shows resilience. Apparently, that's number one attribute young people need to face the future. Not ambition or having big dreams - just being able to take a kicking.

Romy tests Julie's knowledge of how to look after a baby and teaches her how to take care of his daughter. It is not as easy as she thought. There is a physical tension between them. She asks about Niamh's mum, and he tells her the story of their relationship, the decision to keep the baby, and then how Romy became her sole carer.

Julie tells him of how her mum died while she was a baby, and how she doesn't really remember her, and was brought up by her dad and now her step-mum. The pair settle in to watch a TV programme on Julie's phone. Romy keeps a distance, but Julie insists he sits closer to her. She notices that his hands are badly cracked due to needing to wash his hands so many times after changing Niamh's nappies. She fetches coconut oil from her bag and rubs it into his hands. The pair share a moment. They almost kiss, until the promise that they won't fall in love with each other. They kiss. They are interrupted from a phone call from Romy's mum. She is drunk and is in a state, and Romy needs to go and rescue her. Julie offers to look after the baby while he leaves, he is still distrustful, but he has no choice. They kiss and he leaves.

Act 1, Scene 4: 00:35:05

Julie's Dad, Col, and her step-mum, Kath, are attempting to break into Julie's laptop, with no luck. Julie enters, and senses a tension. Her Dad admits that he saw a notification on the screen, and Julie rushes to open it, with her parents watching. She has received a conditional offer from Cambridge University, but she needs the grades to get in. She will be the first in the family to have ever gone to university, and her Dad is so proud of her, and offers to work overtime to pay for additional tutoring. He leaves. Kath however, knows something is different. With a small bit of probing, Julie reveals to her that she has been helping Romy with childcare, for her "community challenge" work.

The pair fight about Julie lying, and Kath is sceptical. Kath wants Julie to focus on her studies and get into Cambridge, for her Dad has ill health from working in the steel-mill. Kath makes Julie promise her that she will not do anything that distracts her from her A-levels.

Act 1, Scene 5: 00:42:30

Barb's flat. Romeo and Julie are in the passionate early stages of a new relationship. Enter Barb, the pair meet awkwardly for the first time. Romy is out, walking Niamh in her pram. Julie wanted to talk to Barb alone. She asks and even offers to pay for Barb to look after Niamh so that Romy can come to celebrate with her and her friends. Barb initially resists, but agrees to allow Romy to have one night off, accepting the payment. As Julie leaves, Barb tells her to be kind to Romy, "when you've had enough of him."

Act 1, Scene 6: 00:47:50

Back at Barb's flat. Romy has been waiting for Barb so he can go and celebrate with Julie. Barb arrives back at home, drunk. Romy is angry and Barb gets immediately defensive. Romy tells her to fuck off, and admits that he knows that Julie has paid her to babysit. Barb gets up and leaves, "let's see how you get on without me, shall we?"

Romy's phone rings, he answers to Julie, who has booked them a room in a local hotel, and talks of the fun night ahead they are going to have. Romy tells her he will be there. Romy contemplates and even tries leaving baby Niamh alone. He can't do it.

Act 1, Scene 7: 00:53:20

Julie arrives at Barb's flat, dressed in her going-out clothes. She voices her frustrations with the situation, and Romy is expecting her to break up with him. But she likes him. They talk about how she lies to her parents about him, how impressed she is of how he looks after Niamh, and how he makes her feel safe. Romy tells Julie that he loves her, and they embrace.

Interval. 00:56:35

Act 2, Scene 8: 00:57:00

Splott beach. Julie and Romy are looking through binoculars as the International Space Station goes past in the sky. Julie shows Romy the stars.

Julie reveals that she is pregnant. Julie considers having an abortion, and Romy offers to support her. Julie holds baby Niamh and reflects on how, in 10 years time, they would be celebrating this news. She reveals that studying at Cardiff is her back-up option if she doesn't get the grades she wants.

ROMY: And it would be as good? Studying here, it would be as good as going to Cambridge?

JULIE: It's all the same physics. Okay.

Romy tries to persuade Julie to study in Cardiff, so she can stay with him, have the baby and live their lives together as a family. He asks her a difficult question: "do you want to?"

Act 2, Scene 9: 1:06:45

Kath and Col's house. Julie has explained to them her new plans. Kath and Col are furious. Kath questions if Julie realises the difficulties that she will face as the mother of a new-born child. Julie suggests that she will defer her place at Cardiff for a year. Col says that if Julie wants a family, then she can have that elsewhere. As her parents, they have done everything to shield her from life so that she could achieve her dreams, but it has made her soft. Col throws her out of the house, supported by Kath.

Act 2, Scene 10: 01:12:45

Barb's flat. Julie explains what has happened to Barb and Romy. Barb offers to allow Julie to stay there, even if it will be a little cramped.

Julie goes out to buy fish & chips to celebrate, leaving Barb and Romy to chat. Barb reveals that though she does like her, she is allowing Julie to stay as she thinks that Niamh will have a better life with Julie as her step-mum, than with just her and Romy.

BARB: She's staying, love. She's staying as long as we can keep her.

Act 2, Scene 11: 01:15:00

Barb's flat. Kath has come to visit, and has brought a few things for Julie, who is not pleased to see her. Barb listens in on the conversation, gives Kath a glass of red wine, and makes light fun of the situation.

In a moment without Barb, Kath asks Julie to reconsider the abortion, Julie insists that she has made the right decision. Barb re-enters and Kath gives her money for Julie's keep. Kath leaves and Barb teases Julie about the physical changes she is going to experience during pregnancy, and gives Julie a small glass of wine.

Barb asks if Kath had asked Julie to come home. Romy comes back to the flat with Niamh, and he tells Julie that she can't let Barb distract her from her work. Niamh is

teething, and crying. Julie is frustrated that she cannot concentrate on her work with the constant crying, and leaves.

Act 2, Scene 12: 01:23:50

Kath and Col's place. Julie has come by to visit. Kath is out on her shift. She tells Col how she and Romy are going to move to a new flat, will pay the rent by working and take it in turns for childcare. She's not as soft as he thought she was, when he threw her out of the house.

She asks Col if she can work at her house, just for one night, while Niamh is teething. Col suggests that she still wants to go to Cambridge, but Julie talks of how her interview at Cambridge revealed the difference in class and privilege between her and the others applying. She still wants to get the grades, to prove to herself that she is as good as them, even though she will go to Cardiff instead. Col insists that she is better than the others applying to Oxford, because she didn't have half the same help that those others did.

But Col refuses to let her study there. "You've made your choice love. Now live it."

Act 2, Scene 13: 01:28:50

Barb's flat, in the dark. Romy is asleep on the sofa. Julie reads to Niamh from her Quantum Physics book. Romy listens to her read to Niamh. He asks her if she got everything done that she needed to. They are both too tired to do anything or have an interesting conversation. She falls asleep in his arms.

Act 2, Scene 14: 01:33:10

The playground.

Romy reveals to Julie that he went to the University and got talking to a lecturer who told him that Cardiff is not as good as Cambridge, as it has less money. She said it doesn't matter about the teaching, it's what she teaches herself that matters. She also

tells him that it was obvious that Cambridge was better than Cardiff, and refuses his claims that she had lied to her.

Romy feels like he has ruined Julie's chances of achieving her dreams. Julie reassures him and tells him to listen to her. She doesn't want to leave, and she knows what is best for her, because that is what she wants. Romy isn't convinced.

He asks her if she wants to have a baby with him now, or is it that she can't give up the baby that they made together. She pleads with him that if he weren't there, then she would still keep the baby, but go to Cambridge. With this, he tells her to go. He wants her to have the baby, but go off to Cambridge, without him. Her heart breaks.

Act 2, Scene 15: 01:42:10

Kath and Col's place. Julie has come to see Kath.

Kath tells her that an abortion is the right thing to do. No regrets.

KATH: You'll feel sad sometimes, you will. You'll never feel you've made the wrong choice, deciding to have a life for yourself.

Julie asks her why it is so different for Kath, who raised Julie as her adopted daughter, than it is for her. Kath explains how her work as a care-worker expects her to give more for herself every day to her clients, while the man who owns the business gets richer every day. The best she can manage is to help Julie escape that cycle, the cycle that everyone in that area is stuck in.

Julie admits how scared she is to have an abortion, and apologises. Kath reassures her.

KATH: It's awful, isn't it. Actually being in charge of your life. You know the only thing that's worse? Not being.

Act 2, Scene 16: 01:48:20

Col approaches Romy with Niamh in the park, swearing at him and threatening to fight him. He tells Romy that Julie is having the abortion that afternoon, and he needs to stay away from her. Romy knows he's made a mistake, and wishes that he could unbreak Julie's heart, and keep the baby. Col tells Romy that she's better off without him, to which he agrees, and breaks down in tears. Col gives him a reassuring hand on the shoulder, and leaves.

Act 2, Scene 17: 01:51:00

Kath and Col's. Kath, Col and Julie are ready for the drive to Cambridge. Julie is nervous, and she still thinks about if her and Romy had met in 10 years time. Kath tells her that she is going to be doing something amazing, but Romy will still be the same kid, pushing a pram around Splott. "Nice enough, but nothing more."

Julie asks them if she can see Romy, for one last time. She goes.

Act 2, Scene 18: 01:52:50

Barb's flat.

Julie proposes the idea that she and Romy have a long-distance relationship. Romy refuses, as he says it's not just him she will be leaving behind for large chunks of time, but Niamh too, who won't understand why her Mum isn't there.

Julie steps forward to hold Niamh for a final time, and she realises if she picks her up, she'll never be able to put her back down.

She asks Romy what she should do.

ROMY: You go. And be brilliant, for all of us.

Suggestions for Further Activity

- Discussion: ‘A modern love story inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*’. Debate the following statement: “this play is as tragic as Shakespeare’s original”.
- Rachel O’Riordan and Gary Owen also worked together as director-writer on *Iphigenia in Splott* at the National Theatre. Research that play, and note the similarities in theme and location compared with *Romeo and Julie* and the repeated motif of adapting and exploding an ancient text for a contemporary audience. You can watch a recording of *Iphigenia in Splott* in the NT Archive.
- There are several excellent duologues in this production in which you can explore your physical and vocal expression. As well as trying to sustain a Cardiff accent, you can also select a section in which Romeo and Julie experience a range of emotions within a short space of time. As young people, they move swiftly through a roller coaster of emotions in what Rachel O’Riordan describes as “that all-encompassing teenage love slash lust” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmipdvDf6PY&t=9s>). As well as the duologues between Romeo and Julie, there are excellent opportunities to explore how to create father-daughter, mother-son relationships. Kath’s monologue about being a carer is an excellent opportunity for actors to develop their monologue skills.
- Read this review from *The Guardian* by Arifa Akbar. To what extent do you agree that this is a ‘rom com’?
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/feb/13/babygrows-such-sweet-sorrow-romeo-juliet-romcom-nt#:~:text=“We%20say%20it%20is%20inspired,a%20dilemma%20at%20the%20core.”>
- A review in the *Guardian* suggested that a refreshing element of *Romeo and Julie* was the absence of “a middle-class ‘linchpin’ character, as is the case with Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* and, before that, dramas such as *Educating Rita* and *The Corn Is Green*. Working-class lives are centred here, and this play’s achievement is in making their world visible, and entirely believable.”

Find out More

Watch

Romeo and Julie: In Conversation with Gary Owen and Rachel O’Riordan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmipdvDf6PY&t=106s>

Learning Hub

You can find more resources for schools and teachers on the National Theatre’s Learning Hub. Search by key stage, subject, theatrical style or practitioner and discover an ever-growing library of short films, learning guides and digital exhibitions.

Find out more: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/learn-explore/schools/teacher-resources/>

National Theatre Archive

More materials relating to the production including the costume bible, poster, prompt scripts, programme, stage management reports and more are held at the National Theatre Archive, which is free to visit.

Find out more: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/archive>

We hope that you have enjoyed watching and studying **Romeo and Julie**. Don't forget that there are many more fantastic productions to explore as part of the NT Collection. We hope that watching this recorded production has made you feel inspired to see and make live theatre. [Why not find out what’s happening at your local theatre and how you can get involved?](#)

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Thank you