

ROMEO & JULIET

Layla & Majnun



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Real. Provocative. Theatre.

Artistic Director Scott Palmer

ROMEO & JULIET (LAYLA & MAJNUN)

Based on *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*
by William Shakespeare

With adapted text from *Layla and Majnun* by Nizami Ganjavi

Adapted by Scott Palmer

With translation assistance from Melory Mirashrafi

Directed by Scott Palmer

July 20 - August 5, 2017

The Hillsboro Civic Center Plaza

CAST

Romeo/Majnun (a Bedouin youth) Nicholas Granato
The Sayyid (Romeo's father, a descendant of Muhammad) Lawrence Siulagi
Benvolia (cousin to Romeo, a Bedouin) Cassie Greer*
Nawfal/Mercutio (a Bedouin warrior) Colin Wood
Abram (a Bedouin youth, also a singer) Avesta Mirashrafi
Ibn Salam/Paris (a Bedouin trader) Eric St. Cyr**
Juliet/Layla (a Roman lady) Arianne Jacques*
Lady Capulet (Juliet's mother, emissary of Constantine) .. Mandana Khoshnevisan
Tybalt (cousin to Juliet, a Warrior of the Cross) Signe Larsen
A Storyteller Gary Ploski

CREW/PRODUCTION TEAM

Adaptor and Director Scott Palmer
Assistant Director Melory Mirashrafi
Stage Manager & Props Master Ephriam Harnsberger
Costume Design Melissa Heller
Scenic Design Jim Ricks-White & Scott Palmer
Lighting Design & Technical Direction Jim Ricks-White
Sound Design Scott Palmer
with assistance from Behnaz Mirashrafi
Assistant Stage Manager Melissa Hampton

*Member of the Bag&Baggage Resident Acting Company

**Bag&Baggage Associate Artist

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's tale of star-crossed lovers has been described as "timeless"...perhaps moreso than most people think!

There is ample evidence to suggest that one of the main literary sources for the Bard's story of feuding families comes from a 12th century Persian tale called *Layla and Majnun*. In Nizami's epic poem, two "star-crossed lovers" rebel against the edicts of their parents, embrace their forbidden love, and pay the ultimate price.

"Her parents' home had become her prison. Guarding the secret of her love, which must not be revealed, she waited, listening to the wind, as it lovingly caressed her tent, hoping it might bring a message from her beloved..."

– *Layla and Majnun*

Sound familiar?

In this world premiere adaptation, Bag&Baggage fuses the romantic, haunting poetry of Nizami's *Layla and Majnun* into Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, re-imagining the Bard's tragic lovers in 3rd century Persia during the time of Emperor Constantine.

A timely and powerful exploration of clashing cultures, unrepentant love, and unreasoning hate – and the deep ties that bind us all – performed outdoors at the Tom Hughes Civic Center Plaza in downtown Hillsboro.



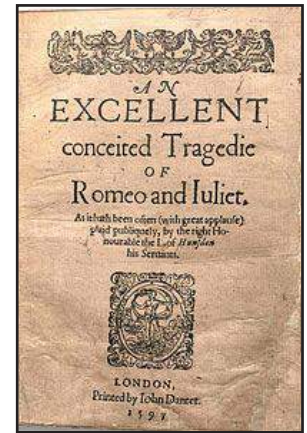
Nicholas Granato plays Romeo/Majnun in Bag&Baggage's Romeo&Juliet (Layla&Majnun)

ROMEO AND JULIET

The 11th of William Shakespeare's 37 plays, *Romeo and Juliet* is believed to have been written between 1591 and 1595, and was first published in a quarto version in 1597. *Romeo and Juliet* was among Shakespeare's most popular plays during his lifetime, and (together with *Hamlet*) remains one of his most frequently-performed. The title characters, Romeo and Juliet, are regarded as archetypal young lovers, and the play is one of Shakespeare's most widely-read and broadly-studied.

Shakespeare's use of poetic dramatic structure (especially effects such as switching between comedy and tragedy to heighten tension, his expansion of minor characters, and his use of sub-plots to embellish the story) has been praised as an early sign of his dramatic skill. The play ascribes different poetic forms to different characters, sometimes changing the form as the character develops. Romeo, for example, grows more adept at the sonnet over the course of the play.

Here are some interesting and lesser-known facts about *Romeo and Juliet*, courtesy of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare's Globe Theater, and British educator and text book author John D Clare:



- The first words of *Romeo and Juliet* are in the form of a sonnet¹. This prologue reveals the ending to the audience before the play has properly begun.
- 90% of the play is in verse, with only 10% in prose². It contains some of Shakespeare's most beautiful poetry, including the sonnet Romeo and Juliet share when they first meet.
- Juliet is the third largest female role in Shakespeare (after Cleopatra and Rosalind).
- Although a story of passionate first love, the play is also full of puns. Even in death, Mercutio manages to joke "ask for me tomorrow and you will find me a grave man".
- Juliet is only 13 at the time she meets and marries Romeo, but we never learn his exact age.
- Despite its famous "balcony scene", the word "balcony" does not actually appear in *Romeo and Juliet*
- Shakespeare wrote during the Renaissance period, a time when art and literature flourished. Renaissance writers tried to recreate the glories of the Greeks and Romans; in particular, they thought deeply about human nature, and things like love and honour – and this comes out in *Romeo and Juliet*. The play is set in Verona, in Renaissance Italy – which was considered the height of fashion in Elizabethan England.
- Astrology was an integral part of English society – every noble family in Italy had horoscopes drawn for their children upon birth, and most governments employed astrologers to advise them. Many people believed that the stars dictated the outcome of your life. The power of the stars in determining the Fate of the characters can be found many times in *Romeo and Juliet*.



a 1917 illustration of a classic Shakespearean duel

- Life in Elizabethan England was very violent, and feuds were happening all the time. Some Shakespeare scholars try to guess which particular feud Shakespeare was referencing with his play (one between the Danvers and Long families of England was well-known in Shakespeare's time) but Shakespeare probably simply took the feud from a similar story by Luigi da Porto, who called the rival families "Montecchi" and "Capuleti", which were actual feuding families of thirteenth century Verona.

¹ Shakespeare's sonnets are fourteen-line poems written in iambic pentameter, comprised of three quatrains and a couplet following the rhyme scheme: ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG. The couplet plays a pivotal role, usually arriving in the form of a conclusion, amplification, or even refutation of the previous three stanzas.

² Shakespeare sometimes writes in verse, sometimes in prose. Verse is distinguished from prose by the relative regularity of its rhythm, determined by the alternation of stressed and unstressed (accented or unaccented) syllables.

- Duels and street-fights were common too – calling someone a liar, or a coward ... or just taking his place in a queue, could lead to a fight. Mercutio’s sudden rage at the word “consortest” was typical of Shakespeare’s times.
- Theatre audiences in Shakespeare’s time were vulgar and rude, and they would have cheered Mercutio’s rude sexual innuendos.
- *Romeo and Juliet* was adapted by the 17th century Irish poet Nahum Tate, changing the story to give it a happy ending.
- In March 1662, Mary Saunderson became almost certainly the first woman to play Juliet on the professional stage. Until the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, women were not allowed to perform in public.
- *Romeo and Juliet* have occasionally been played by siblings, including sisters Charlotte and Susan Cushman in London in the 1840s.
- The musical *West Side Story* is probably the most famous adaptation, while Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 *Romeo + Juliet* brought Shakespeare’s play to the MTV generation.



the Cushman sisters as
Romeo and Juliet

Just as it has been adapted for centuries following Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* takes its story and subject matter from a long tradition of previous romances. The plot is based on an Italian tale translated into a 3,020-line poem as *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* by Arthur Brooke in 1562; it was retold in prose in *Palace of Pleasure* by William Painter in 1567. Shakespeare may also have known of the Italian version *Giulietta e Romeo*, written by Luigi da Porto in 1530, who was the one to originally set the tale of Romeo and Juliet in Verona, Italy.

At Bag&Baggage, we have noticed some uncanny ties between Shakespeare, these Renaissance writers, and a far older piece of epic literature from 12th century Persia...

LAYLA AND MAJNUN

Layla and Majnun have been characters for Sufi poets, as Krishna was for the poets of India. Majnun means absorption into a thought and Layla means the night of obscurity. The story is from beginning to end a teaching on the path of devotion, the experience of the soul in search of God.

— Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan, Sufi poet, 1882-1927



the opening of Layli va Majnun in
Nizami's Khamsah

Layla and Majnun is a 4,600-line long poem, first originating in narrative form in the 5th century, and known in Persian as early as the 9th century. And although it was somewhat popular in Persian literature, it was the poet Nizami Ganjavi who popularized it dramatically with his version written in 1188. Nizami collected both secular and mystical sources about the character Majnun, and portrayed a vivid picture of the famous lovers, drawing heavily on the influence of Udhrite love poetry, which is characterized by erotic abandon and attraction to the beloved, often by means of an unfulfillable longing. Subsequently, many other Persian poets imitated Nizami and wrote their own versions of the romance.

Layla and Majnun is the third of Nizami's five long narrative poems, known collectively as the *Khamsa* ("the Quintet"). No one knows the number of translations of Nizami's work in the many languages encompassed by Islamic religious culture, but at least forty Persian and thirteen Turkish versions are known, and one scholar states that there are actually over a hundred versions of *Layla and Majnun* in those two languages alone. The story of Layla and her Majnun is one of the most popular in the Islamic world, enduring in legends, tales, poems, songs, and epics from the Caucasus to Africa and from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.

The story of *Layla and Majnun* begins with the Sayyid, a man of wealth, power, and prestige, desiring a son and heir. He importunes Allah, who grants his request with a son, Qays. The beauty of Qays:

"grew to perfection. As a ray of light penetrates the water, so the jewel of love shone through the veil of his body."

At the age of ten, Qays goes to school and meets his kismet/fate, Layla:

"Does not 'Layl' mean 'night' in Arabic? And dark as the night was the color of her hair."

Layla's father, however, forbids any contact between the two. Separated from Layla, Majnun becomes obsessed with her, singing of his love for her in public. His heart breaks and he begins to slip into melancholy. Layla's tribe, to protect her (and their) honor, deny her right to see him, and he falls into madness:

"A madman he became — but at the same time a poet, the harp of his love and of his pain."

Qays takes on the moniker "Majnun" - literally translated in English as "madman". His obsession grows to the point that he sees and evaluates everything in terms of Layla. In time Majnun runs away into the wilderness, becoming unkempt, not knowing good from evil. His father takes him on pilgrimage to Mecca, to seek God's help in freeing him, but Majnun strikes the Kaaba (a building at the center of Islam's most sacred mosque, and the most sacred site in Islam). When Majnun realizes that he cannot completely regain his mind even when other people intercede for him, he grows disillusioned with society and roams naked in the desert among the beasts. Contemplating the image of Layla increases his love so that he cannot eat or sleep; his only activity is thinking of Layla and composing love songs for her. Many come to hear him, and some write down the poems he spontaneously speaks.



a miniature from the famous 1431 Persian manuscript of the *Khamsa*



a 19th century "Image of Majnun" in which Majnun is surrounded by text blocks containing 20 lines of Persian poetry from various sources, all referencing the story of Layla and Majnun

Meanwhile, Layla holds their love quietly so none will know. Refusing suitors, she writes answers to his poems and casts them to the wind. It happens often that strangers find these little papers, and guessing their hidden meaning, realize for whom they are intended. Some go to Majnun hoping to hear, as a reward, some of the poems which had become so popular.

Eventually, Layla is married to the noble Ibn Salam, but she guards her virginity by resisting her husband's advances. She arranges secret meetings with Majnun. When they meet, they have no physical contact; rather they recite poetry to each other from a distance. When Layla's husband dies, removing the legal obstacle to their union, Majnun is so focused on the ideal picture of Layla that he runs away to the desert. Layla dies out of grief and is buried in her bridal dress. Hearing this news, Majnun rushes to her grave where he dies. They are buried side by side and their graves become a site of pilgrimage. In the epilogue, someone dreams that they are united in Paradise, living as a king and queen.

J. T. Coker for The Theosophical Society muses:

Is their story a medieval soap opera of epic proportions? It is, if that's what your heart hears.

Is it a cautionary tale inculcating acceptance of earthly injustice and suffering in the Islamic faithful, who will be rewarded in the great by-and-by? It will surely serve, if that's your concern.

Is Majnun "Man" and Layla "Soul," suffering because denied union while bounded by flesh? Yes, if your concern, your love, leads you to hear it that way.

Is it an allegorical Sufi text, instructing seekers in practical means for awakening to the supernal reality of their true, spiritual nature? Only our hearts know for sure — Nizami bids us follow them.

The story of *Layla and Majnun* is an eternal and tragic one that lived through the ages, travelled through the world, entered many cultures and influenced a lot of them. Among the most famous works of literature inspired by *Layla and Majnun* are the German love story *Tristan und Isolde*; the French *Aucassin et Nicolette*; and finally Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.



Layla and Majnun from an 18th century Khamsah

Lord Byron called the story of *Layla and Majnun* the "*Romeo and Juliet* of the East." It is a tale that has been reinterpreted in countless artistic forms over time, including just a few listed here:

- Persian poet Hatefi's edition was printed c. 1500.
- The first English translation of *Layla and Majnun* was done by Sir William Jones (translating Hatefi's version), published in 1788.
- *Kais, or Love in the Deserts: An Opera in Four Acts* by William Reeve was performed in 1808 in London at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane.
- An abridged version of *Layla & Majnun* in verse was published in English by James Atkinson in 1836.
- The 1908 Azerbaijani opera *Leyli and Majnun* by Uzeyir Hajibeyli was the first Middle Eastern opera.
- The Tajik Soviet film-ballet *Layla and Majnun* was produced in 1960.
- Various films have taken the story of *Layla and Majnun* as their subject, beginning as early as the 1920s. In pre-independence India, the first Pashto-language film was an adaptation of this story.
- *Le Fou d'Elsa*, a collection of poems, was published by Frenchman Louis Aragon in 1963.
- The tale and the name "Layla" served as Eric Clapton's inspiration for the title of Derek and the Dominos' famous album *Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs* and its title track in 1971. The song "I Am Yours" is a direct quote from a passage in *Layla and Majnun*.
- In 2007, the story was enacted as both a framing story and as a dance-within-a-movie in the film *Aaja Nachle*.
- In the 2007 novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Afghan author Khaled Hosseini, Rasheed often refers to Laila and Tariq as "Layla and Majnun".
- *Majnoon Layla* by Syrian-American hip-hop artist and peace activist Omar Offendum was released in 2010.
- *Laila The Musical*, a British theatre production by Rifco Arts, Watford Palace Theatre, and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, toured England during 2016.
- The Mark Morris Dance Group and the Silk Road Ensemble, produced the dance theatre piece *Layla and Majnun* in 2016, utilizing parts of Hajibeyli's opera in a 45-minute chamber arrangement.



"Layla visits Majnun in the wilderness"
Indian watercolour held by
the Bodleian Library

OUR PRODUCTION

Bag&Baggage is taking the unprecedented step of blending these two iconic stories, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Nizami's *Layla and Majnun* in the world premiere adaptation *Romeo&Juliet (Layla&Majnun)*. To understand a little bit more about why we're doing this and what we hope to gain, read this article from Oregon Arts Watch's Brett Campbell, who spoke with Artistic Director and Adaptor Scott Palmer about the production...

'Romeo & Juliet (Layla & Manjun)': cross cultural combination

Brett Campbell, Oregon Arts Watch

Scott Palmer was stuck. The Bag & Baggage Productions artistic director had just auctioned off the choice of its annual summer Shakespeare production to a patron, and this year's choice was... *Romeo and Juliet*.

Palmer silently groaned. They'd staged the popular perennial ten years earlier and Palmer, an expert on the Bard of Avon's work, didn't want to revisit it so soon. Now he had no choice. How could he do it differently than before?

Palmer started researching the play's history, and learned that one of the most famous plays in Western literature was actually based on a 12th century epic poem by one of the most famous Muslim writers in history. He got a translation of *Layla and Manjun* by Persian poet Nizami (1141-1209), read it — and was instantly hooked. He knew he wanted to produce it.



a late 16th-century illustration of Layla and Majnun meeting for the last time before their deaths

But Palmer quickly realized that he couldn't do it alone. "It's the greatest epic piece of Muslim literature. I immediately realized I was in over my head," Palmer recalls. "I had no clue about 12th century Persian culture." He needed help.

And he found much of it in a surprising place — his theater's own home of Hillsboro. Both onstage and in creation, Palmer's brand new mashup of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Layla and Manjun*, represents a cultural combination — and cross cultural collaboration.

Most of Shakespeare's plays are adaptations based on earlier tales, and in retracing the classically educated playwright's steps back through several likely earlier sources, Palmer discovered that Nizami Ganjavi's poem — itself constructed, Shakespeare style, from earlier Persian and Arabic folk tales — had been recounted by various European authors.

"There's no smoking gun," Palmer explains, "but we do know he was reading Italian sources and those were heavily influenced by Persian masterpieces from the 11th and 12 centuries. There is just no question that *Layla and Manjun* had a powerful, although indirect, influence on *Romeo and Juliet*."

Nizami Ganjavi

Nizami's 4,000-verse poem about the tragic consequences of the feud between families also inspired famous tragic love stories like Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* and Eric Clapton's classic song "Layla." (Nizami's verse from the story provided lyrics for another song, "I Am Yours," on the same Derek & the Dominoes album.) The basic story may even stretch back even earlier, to ancient Greece and before.



Nizami Ganjavi

But Palmer soon decided staging the original *Layla and Majnun*, with its magical animals ("we didn't have a gazelle budget") and other supernatural effects, would be impractical. He decided to create a fusion of the two stories, scouring them for similarities. He found plenty.

"When you read the texts side by side, the parallels between the two tales are really astounding," Palmer explains, including metaphorical references to ravens, nightingales, light smoke and feathers of lead, Romeo/Majnun's role in the accidental death of his friend Tybalt/Newfal (*sic.*), and much more. He also found some big differences. "Layla is much more modern and feminist, much more headstrong and independent than Juliet," he says, threatening violence in rebuffing the advances of the husband her family has arranged for her. "I will die before I let you touch me," she says.

Challenging Assumptions

That was only one discovery that confounded Palmer's own preconceptions about Islamic culture and history, which plays a crucial role in the Sunni Muslim poet Nizami's work. "I have never had an experience of working on a show that did more to illuminate my own ignorance than in the past few months," he acknowledges. "A huge part of this process has been challenging my own assumptions and prejudices... that have prevented me from truly understanding how connected we all are."

He sought advice throughout the project from knowledgeable sources, including feedback from "every Muslim theater company in America" and scholars at Columbia University and at the University of Oregon. "No Aladdin!" cautioned UO prof Michael Najjar, professor of theatre arts at the University of Oregon who is a director, playwright, and scholar of Arab American drama and who had earlier written about the dangers of cultural appropriation in a recent play produced by Portland Center Stage. No flying carpets, belly dancers or genie lamps appear. But appropriate to the 12th century Persian style and setting, it's the high-status Roman woman, not the Muslims, who wear headscarves.



Michael Najjar

Palmer found more help even closer to home. He'd worked with Melory Mirashrafi, a Persian-American student at Linfield College and a graduate of Hillsboro High School, in an earlier B&B production. He hired her as assistant director to help with, among other things, translation, pronunciation, insight into Persian culture and the role of Islamic faith in the characters' lives.



Melory Mirashrafi

"Being a part of a production that celebrates the history and literature of Persia, that embraces intersectionality, the connection between the cultures of the east and west, and that shows our audiences Iranian faces that aren't painted by extremism or terrorism is absolutely crucial," she says. Her brother Avesta, a Hillsboro High junior, is also in the cast along with another actor of Persian descent, and her parents provided advice during rehearsals.

In one scene, for example, Palmer worried whether one character insulting another with the term "dog" would be too offensive in an Islamic setting. The Mirashrafis assured him that at a time and place when Christian crusaders were murdering "infidel" Muslims, such gross offense is precisely appropriate.

They also helped Palmer "bring together the poetic, lush, expressive blank verse of Nizami and the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare," he says. All together, "what we have is NOT *Romeo and Juliet*, and it is NOT *Layla and Majnun*, but rather an amalgamation of the two."



Arianne Jacques and Nicholas Granato

Palmer, who will direct Bag & Baggage's outdoor production, believes his new adaptation is the first such attempt to merge Shakespeare's play about the Montagues and Capulets with one of its main inspirations, and to frame the story as a conflict not just between feuding families but also between two religions.

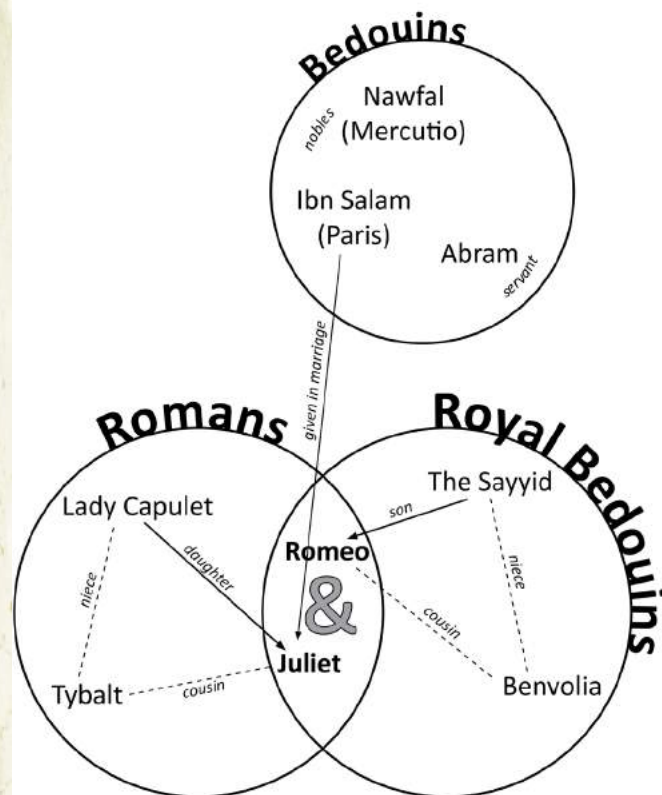
Collaborating Across Cultures

The process of conjoining the two stories also produced something equally valuable: a creative cross-cultural collaboration. Bag&Baggage had from the outset emphasized equity and diversity, but "I have discovered a large and welcoming Muslim community in Washington County that invited us to Ramadan dinners, sent people to watch rehearsals to give us feedback, offered to let us borrow prayer rugs and prayer beads, and displayed incredible openness and eagerness to bring this forward to our predominantly white middle class audience," Palmer says.

“We wanted to start first season in new home with a bang,” (*sic.*) Palmer says. “It is a convenient piece of great luck that *Layla and Majnun* is not only so beautiful and epic and perfectly suited to our Shakespeare production, but also that it gave us chance to do something that’s never been done in Washington County theater before: to focus on the connections between the Muslim and Christian worlds.” He quotes one of *Romeo and Juliet*’s signature lines: “A rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet.”

WHO’S WHO?

In this new mash-up of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Layla and Majnun*, we’re also combining characters and streamlining the cast list. In the show, you will find the Sayyid, a Bedouin lord who is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, ruling over the ancient tribe of the Banu ‘Amir. Among his household are his son Romeo (also called Majnun, the “mad man”), and Benvolia, his niece, who is also a warrior for the tribe. A family of Romans has recently come to Banu ‘Amir, sent by the Emperor Constantine looking to enhance trade relationships and carry their religion to the East. This household is headed by Lady Capulet, living in this new place with her daughter Juliet (also called Layla for her dark hair, as the night is called “layl”), and her niece Tybalt, a Warrior of the Cross. The Bedouin warrior Nawfal (also called Mercutio), the Bedouin trader Ibn Salam (also called Paris), and the Bedouin youth Abram are also part of the action, and the audience is guided through the play by a Storyteller.



THEMES

In this unique merging of these timeless stories, we find themes shared by *Romeo and Juliet* and *Layla and Majnun*, as well as new ideas that emerge from the combination of the two. Bag&Baggage's *Romeo&Juliet (Layla&Majnun)* brings a particular focus to the concepts below:

Cycles of Violence

"He who thirsts after death himself shall lose his life," says Benvolia, following Romeo's murder of Tybalt, and indeed we see violence begetting violence - death begetting death - all throughout the story. On a macro level, the Roman Emperor Constantine used violence and force in expanding the Holy Roman Empire, and faced several internal civil wars as he worked to command his power over the vast geography of his reign. The Capulets, as emissaries of Constantine, arrive among the Banu 'Amir coming out of this tradition of violence and force. The Bedouins, for their part, were a warring tribe, engaged in long-standing battles with surrounding tribes of the region. These two civilizations - Romans and Bedouins - have few ways of solving conflicts without turning to violence.

On a micro level, we know that the Sayyid has recently dealt with "three civil brawls" in the streets of Banu 'Amir. Street fighting, dueling, and immediately responding to the slightest provocation with violence is part of the lived daily reality of the characters moving through this play. Tybalt wants to respond to Romeo's presence at the party by killing him; Romeo is unable to contain his passion leading up to his banishment and violently launches himself at Lady Capulet; and Mercutio and Benvolia even play at violence in their friendly banter.

For *Romeo and Juliet (Majnun and Layla)*, we see how the violence done to them leads them to the violence of their deaths. Juliet/Layla returns Ibn Salam's physical threats with a physical threat of her own, and responds to the emotional violence she receives both from Benvolia and from Lady Capulet with suicide. Romeo/Majnun, for his part, answers Mercutio's death with the murder of Tybalt, and responds to Juliet's death by begging for his own. It is also worth noting that when Romeo attempts to stop the violence, entering the fight between Mercutio and Tybalt, he cannot, and only causes greater harm by his involvement. On all levels, this is a story of people entrenched in seemingly inescapable cycles of violence.

Love v. Hate

Perhaps the greatest example of the inherent love/hate dichotomy in this play is in Juliet's exchange with Lady Capulet after Romeo's banishment. In the scene, she simultaneously feigns hatred of Romeo, (claiming love for her cousin, Tybalt) while being overwhelmed by her love and concern for Romeo:



Arianne Jacques plays Juliet/Layla in Bag&Baggage's *Romeo&Juliet (Layla&Majnun)*

*O, how my heart abhors
To hear him named, and cannot come to him...
To wreak the love I bore my cousin
Upon his body that slaughter'd him!
Indeed, I never shall be satisfied
With Romeo, till I behold him... dead...*



Mandana Khoshnevisan and Lawrence Siulagi play Lady Capulet and the Sayyid in Bag&Baggage's *Romeo&Juliet (Layla&Majnun)*

While the most vivid, this is not the only tension between love and hate highlighted in the play. The general violence between the Romans and the Bedouins stands in counterpoint to the passionate love between Layla and Majnun; Ibn Salam's love for Layla is answered only with her hatred; bits of romance between Benvolia and Mercutio are overpowered by the hatred they both feel towards Tybalt; and Benviola's love for her cousin Romeo only results in her intense hatred of Juliet.



Arianne Jacques and Nicholas Granato as Juliet/Layla and Romeo/Majnun

Cultural Similarities Amid Cultural Differences

From the opening moments of *Romeo&Juliet (Layla&Majnun)* the cultural clash between Bedouins and Romans is clear. But despite their obvious cultural differences, these two groups have a striking number of similarities: religious dedication; close relationships with extended family; matriarchs/patriarchs who rule with an iron fist; a love of nature and repeated references to the natural world; a strong sense of propriety and duty; and strong, passionate spirits. At the end of the day, no matter how different we appear on the outside, there are certain realities we all share.

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS

Before you see the show:

1. How would you define the phrase “young love”? What sets “young love” apart from other types of love?
2. Discuss a time when you made one small decision that had much larger and far-reaching consequences. Were you aware of the consequences of your actions when you made your decision? Why or why not?
3. How does your identity influence the way you choose to live your life and the decisions that you make? Specifically consider family, religion, gender, sexuality, social class, and age in your response.

After you see the show:

4. The stories of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Layla and Majnun* are both considered “timeless”. Seeing this mashup of the two stories, what would you say are the things that have made them continue to have relevance for audiences? What does *Romeo&Juliet (Layla&Majnun)* have to say to a 21st century audience?
5. At what point in the story do things begin to go wrong? Whose fault is this? Discuss how the choices of the following characters affect the outcome of the play: Romeo, Juliet, the Sayyid, Benvolia, Lady Capulet, Tybalt.
6. Is it possible for cultures or groups of people to escape deeply ingrained cycles of violence? Why or why not? How might you go about trying to change the face of a violent culture?
7. In the prologue, the audience is told how the story will end: “a pair of star-crossed lovers take their life.”
 - a. Does knowing the ending change your reactions as you watch the play?
 - b. Write your own prologue for *Romeo&Juliet (Layla&Majnun)*. Consider the parts of the story you think are the most important, and what particular elements you think the audience needs to pay attention to.
8. Who is really responsible for Mercutio's death: Mercutio, who provoked the fight, Tybalt who stabbed him, or Romeo who got between them? How would you stage this as a director?
9. Were these two lovers really in love? Romeo only first caught sight of Juliet about an hour or two before they decided to get married; they had only spoken for at most ten minutes. Was their love as Juliet said, “too rash, too unadvised, too sudden”? Can love at first sight be true love?

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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Lawrence Siulagi as the Sayyid