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East End Thoughts: All for Love

Posted on 06 March 2009 - [Print This Article](#)

By Richard Gambino

“Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!” a love-struck Romeo exclaims when he first sees Juliet at a dance. And several things are making this winter burn brighter on

the East End. One, a man named Harry Carlson is continuing his wonderful Shakespeare Saturday mornings, as he has done for some years. We watch, from recordings this long-time Shakespeare scholar and teacher has collected over a life-time and put on DVDs, different productions, scene compared to same scene, of Shakespeare's plays, and briefly discuss them. In recent weeks, we've watched some productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, with an emphasis on the deservingly celebrated, very moving 1968 production directed by Franco Zeffirelli. As a bonus, we watched an astonishingly poignant dance version of the play, choreographed to Prokofiev's music by Kenneth MacMillan, and performed at the Teatro alla Scala in Italy.

All this is presented via the technologically up-to-date, digitally-projected large-screen system, and superb sound system at the Amagansett Public Library. More, this unique and priceless on-going gift is *free of charge*. It's all for the love of the best plays ever written — one need only show up from 10:30 to 12:30 every other Saturday morning. (For information about dates, call the Amagansett Library at 267-3810.)

Now, regarding the kind of instant great attraction Romeo feels for Juliet, which she in turn feels for him, a recently published book tells of a study which tested men and women. (*Do Gentlemen Really Prefer Blondes?* By Jena Pincott. Personally, I wouldn't get any closer to this question than I would to a cobra.) Individuals (heterosexuals) were shown pictures of the faces of people of the opposite sex. Unknown to the subjects, large numbers of people had previously studied these same pictures and judged half of the faces as "hot," and the other half as "not." (It seems we've come a long way since Shakespeare's eloquence.) The faces were flashed before the subjects for only thirteen milliseconds (13/1000 of a second). Some complained that they could not really see the faces so quickly run before them. Yet despite that, the subjects scored the faces as being either attractive or not attractive the same as had the people who had rated them before — these previous individuals having studied the faces for a much longer time. The author concludes, with a reductionism typical of our time, that parts of the human brain — the nucleus accumbens, orbitofrontal cortex and the amygdala — tell us *instantly* whom we are attracted to, and whom not.

But looks are not enough. Women, at least, are more cautious about blindly going with their initial attraction. This is explained by the fact that in a given year, a man can father a lot of babies by a lot of women, but a woman may carry only one pregnancy to term, so she is a lot more selective in her sex life. When I read this, I could not help but thinking, "Before the pill." These kinds of explanations were labeled as "just so" explanations, i.e., a bit too neat, by none less than one of the greatest evolutionary biologists of our time, the late Stephen Jay Gould. Another example: There is a brain expert on TV, an M.D., who tells us that the best aphrodisiac a man can use is to put some baby powder behind his ears. He claims the powder's scent turns a woman's thoughts towards (freshly-diapered) babies, and Just so. But I tried it on my wife, and she just asked if I had a skin rash.

There's more. As anyone can guess, some pick-up lines used by men work better than others. It is said that this shows that women are indeed thinking beyond a short sexual pleasure. (With some men, women complain, all too short.) "Hey babe, I'm like Fred Flintstone — I can make your bed rock!" This is not a line likely to get a man far. Compare it to Romeo's first words to Juliet, at the dance. Taking her hand, he says, "If I profane with my unworhiest hand/ This holy shrine, the gentle fine [punishment] is this/ My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand/ To smooth that rough touch with a tender

kiss.” (I expect that after men read this article, this Saturday night many a man in Sag Harbor’s bars will be seen and heard trying Romeo’s approach on a woman.)

Whatever we may think of the idea that women’s judgment is more selective than that of men in *affaires d’amour* – in my opinion, after having watched both for a long time, the judgment of both genders is ... shall we say, less than sterling — Juliet is a bit more cautious about trusting her attraction than all-speed-ahead Romeo. So she later says to him, “Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say ‘Aye;’/ And I will take thy word. Yet if thou swear’st,/ Thou mayst prove false. At lovers’ perjuries,/ They say Jove laughs.” But not much later, she says to him one of the most famous declarations of love ever written, “My bounty is as boundless as the sea,/ My love as deep; the more I give to thee, /The more I have, for both are infinite.” Imagine hearing this from someone with whom you are in love. And this from a young woman who, we are told early in the play, is still two weeks short of her fourteenth birthday. A kid.

So I went to a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Bay Street Theatre on January 29 with much on my mind. Speaking of Juliet being a kid — and also of Romeo, whom most Shakespeare fanatics, like me, guess is about sixteen years old – the performance at Bay Street was by ... well, kids. The kids in the Hayground School were the performers, costume designers and set designers — *all* the kids in the school, from pre-K through eighth grade. They had had a four week in-depth immersion in the play with a group from Massachusetts called Shakespeare & Company. My first impressions were, one, the theatre was filled by the audience, and two, I smiled when I saw a set built to look like a wall in Verona had graffitied on it, “Tyblalt is a cankerblossom.” It perfectly fits that character’s poisonous personality, filled with hatred and malice. The kids were true to the play, some saying some very difficult lines with precision, and most with feeling. In their acting, they presented the play’s tragic essence earnestly. Indeed, at the afternoon performance, one of the girls playing Juliet, a *six-year old*, on cue drank a narcotic causing her to collapse into a comatose, death-like state. She did this so convincingly that it brought forth a quite audible gasp from the audience.

Bravo to all those who, all for love, are teaching our winter to burn bright!

RICHARD GAMBINO *believes that never has a tale of woe brought more joy to the East End than this of Juliet and her Romeo.*

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