



## Love in the Ruins: *Les Amants de Vérone* and “Authentic” Shakespeare Adaptation

Douglas M. LANIER

1 *Les Amants de Vérone* [*The Lovers of Verona*] is one of several landmark European adaptations of Shakespeare for the cinema that have been largely forgotten by Shakespeare film scholars, dutifully acknowledged in lists of Shakespeare on film and then rarely discussed at any length. This neglect is rather surprising. The film was a modest box-office success upon its release in France in 1949, enough to prompt international release two years later.<sup>1</sup> Its success made its principal actors, Anouk Aimée and Serge Reggiani, stars of French film, a status they would maintain throughout the fifties, and it gave its scenarist and director André Cayatte considerable clout in the French film industry for a decade afterward, though he was never again to equal *Les Amants*’s favor with the public. The dialogue was written by Jacques Prévert, at the time of *Les Amants*’s release a well-established and well-regarded film-writer who, with director Marcel Carné, created many of the key films in the “poetic realist” vein of the late 1930s and early ’40s. The critical neglect of *Les Amants* can be traced in part to the fact that the film has long not been widely available (only in 2013 did it appear on a DVD from Pathé Classique, and then only in a non-subtitled version available only in France), but also to an unwillingness until recently of English-speaking critics to address non-English adaptations of Shakespeare and of French critics to address Shakespeare adaptation in Francophone film. Contributing too, no doubt, is the fact that Cayatte was one of several directors singled out for opprobrium by François Truffaut for making “social cinema” (didactic issues-oriented pictures) and screen adaptations of literary works, rather than the stylistically fresh, improvisatory, and culturally iconoclastic cinema of the *nouvelle vague*.

2 However, *Les Amants*’s critical neglect may spring primarily from the very long shadow that Prévert’s most famous film, *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945, dir., Marcel Carné), regularly dubbed the best French film ever made, has cast over its immediate

---

<sup>1</sup> The film was much more warmly received in Europe and England than in the United States. In the States, both Crowther and Kael were put off by the film’s combination of lush romanticism for the scenes between Angelo and Georgia, the gothic qualities of the scenes in the Maglia Palace, and the vignettes of filmmaking. Largely lost on them, and apparently on many American audiences of the day, was the film’s purposeful engagement with the crisis of post-war European culture, perhaps precisely because American attitudes toward Europe were part of the problem.

successor in the Prévert cinematic canon. *Les Enfants* uses a metatheatrical framework to examine the question of what constitutes artistic authenticity, and likewise *Les Amants* addresses many of the same issues through a metacinematic frame, for it is a film about a film production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Like *Les Enfants*, which uses *Othello* as a touchstone for what constitutes authentic art and genuine love (see Lanier), *Les Amants* uses *Romeo and Juliet* in much the same manner, suggesting that Shakespeare's play captures intense romantic passions that both reflect and activate such passions in the present day. Both films insist, as do many "poetic realist" films, that authentic desire must be for a beautiful yet ultimately unattainable object, a desire that by its nature must end in exquisitely heartbreaking tragedy.

3 The two films part company, however, on two issues. First, *Les Enfants* is set during what Prévert and Carné present as the apogee of French cultural achievement, its transition out of arid neoclassicism into the glories of late eighteenth-century Romanticism and republicanism, epitomized by Shakespeare and pantomime. The subject was appropriate for the moment of the film's production, since it was penned and photographed in the final years of French occupation when the public needed to be reminded of the cultural heritage for which they were fighting. By contrast, *Les Amants* addresses the years immediately after World War II, in which Europe's artistic legacy had been placed in some doubt and its cultural foundations profoundly shaken, in part by the ascendancy of American popular culture. Second, *Les Enfants* celebrates the theater — the craft of stage acting, the presence of the audience and the theater's appeal to popular taste, the interplay of artifice and emotional authenticity — as the quintessence of the poetic realist sensibility. It suggests with Baptiste's mime performances the fundamental congruence between pantomimic theater and the purest expression of cinematic form, the silent film. In *Les Enfants*, the baring of the device, our backstage access to the mechanics of theatrical performance, works only to intensify our respect for stage performers and the medium of stage performance. By contrast, *Les Amants* is far more equivocal in its meta-artistic treatment of its principal medium, film. To be sure, the mechanics of filmmaking are lovingly detailed, but Prévert seems much less convinced that Shakespeare's play and the movies are compatible with one another or that film as a medium can be a worthy vehicle for European cultural heritage. Popular taste and commercialism, so closely associated with cinema as a mass medium, emerge as powerfully destructive, vulgarizing forces, threatening to complete the ruin of European culture that world war had started. How a work like *Romeo and Juliet*, treated here as a landmark of European artistic expression and enduring emotional truth, might survive in the cinematic environment of post-war Europe is the subject of this remarkably self-conscious film. Ironically, even as Prévert and Cayatte reflect upon the problem of cultural heritage, they create a film adaptation that updates and thus at some level preserves Shakespeare's play. I will be arguing that the film constitutes itself as a Derridean supplement, in the words of the film a *doublure* ["doubling," "extra"], that is paradoxically "restoring" *Romeo and Juliet* to its "original" cultural authenticity.

4 *Les Amants* chronicles a cross-class romance between Angelo, a working-class glassblower from Murano, and Georgia, daughter and only child of the Maglia family, a once prominent, now fallen aristocratic Venetian family. The two meet on the set in

Venice of a film production of *Romeo and Juliet*, where they are serving as doubles for Bettina Verdi and Beneditti, the principal actors playing Juliet and Romeo, and they consummate their relationship when the cast and crew briefly move to Verona to shoot on location. At first, Angelo is presented to us as something of a womanizer, targeting women tourists as they visit the glassblowing factory. As the film begins, he is working his seductive wiles on Bettina Verdi (whom he does not recognize at first as a movie star), the film's equivalent for Rosalind. We also learn that Angelo has had a previous affair with Clio, a working-class flower girl, who continues pitifully to carry a torch for him, and he takes a part as a movie extra so that he can get access to Bettina. However, once Angelo encounters Georgia dressed as Juliet on the balcony of the film set, he falls for her completely. Their encounter occurs when Angelo volunteers to stand in for Beneditti, the "proper" Romeo, who is too afraid to climb the rope ladder to Juliet's balcony during a lighting check.

5 This developing romance is blocked by Georgia's suffocating family. Her father, Ettore Maglia, was once a powerful magistrate with fascist ties; indeed, in his office he sits beneath an oversize portrait of himself in full legal regalia. He has become an alcoholic who never leaves his house, spending his time railing against the commoners who despise him and dreaming of his glory days. Georgia's mother, Lucia, is a compulsive chatterbox whose extravagant dress and speech seek to preserve her illusion of gracious high status; her relationship with Ettore has gone cold, and so her one comfort is playing the same cheerful tune over and over at the piano. Ettore is carrying on a long affair with the household's blowsy maid Laetitia, who affectionately calls Ettore "my big rat"<sup>2</sup> and abets his drinking. Laetitia's son, Amédeo — perhaps an unacknowledged bastard son of Ettore — is a child-man who has been psychologically damaged during his wartime service. He is subject to wild mood swings, sometimes placidly listening to Lucia's music or a mechanical lark music box that sits atop the piano, at other times agitatedly pretending to shoot his family or random tourists with a machine-gun he keeps in his armoire. His signature expression — "pourriture!" ["rot!"] — typifies the state of the once grand Maglia household and, by implication, the post-war state of old Europe's class hierarchy.

6 The Maglia villa provides a powerful visual metaphor for the family's slide into decay, for it is filled with authentic (and expensive) antiquities displayed in empty rooms with peeling walls (fig. 1). As the film begins, the Maglias are making ends meet by renting out their treasures to the film crew for *Romeo and Juliet*, this despite the fact that Ettore (predictably) disapproves of the movies as vulgar and immoral. The film's producer, Mr. Sandrini, is particularly interested in procuring an authentic Renaissance bed to serve as "Juliet's bed"; the bed he ends up choosing turns out to be Georgia's. The deal between Sandrini and Ettore is brokered by Raffaele, a slick wheeler-dealer in an ice-cream suit who, we soon learn, is affianced to Georgia (he corresponds to Shakespeare's Paris). Raffaele is of the amoral new generation who survive by profiting

---

<sup>2</sup> All citations of dialogue are taken from the DVD edition of *Les Amants de Vérone* released by Pathé Classique in 2013, and have been checked against Prévert's 1949 novelization of the film (which uses the dialogue from the film); all translations into English are my own.

from the post-war cultural “rot” in Venice. Besides supervising rentals and sales of the Maglia family antiques, he makes his living as a tour guide, taking a cut on souvenir sales, only one or two steps up from the poor urchins who pester tourists with cheap trinkets. Though Raffaele becomes homicidally jealous of Angelo when he discovers his romance with Georgia, his interest in Georgia seems in the end primarily financial: by marrying her, he gets full access to the Maglia family fortune. Ironically, in Raffaele’s own tour-guide patter at the Murano glassblowing factory, he reveals that Angelo may be the more appropriate match for the aristocratic Georgia, for traditionally glassblowers, he notes, “were lords of Venice and, as such, enjoyed many privileges,” and Angelo himself proudly traces his lineage to a long-lived family of glassblowers, even though he adds with equal pride that he is an orphan.



Fig. 1. The Maglia villa

- 7 As this summary suggests, *Les Amants* addresses powerful forces of cultural degradation at work in the world of Venice, forces against which Angelo and Georgia struggle. Two songs in the film register those forces at work. The first is sung by Clio the poor flower-girl when Angelo asks her whom the father of her baby might be. Gesturing toward the sea, she replies with the popular tune of the day “Two earrings”: “Yesterday a small girl and today a whore / For two earrings / For a pittance / To feed my family / All for nothing / I sold my sunshine / To the Americans.” Clio’s fate, an unwed mother left pregnant by an American GI and now evicted by her family and slipping into poverty, becomes a metaphor for the prostituting of post-war European culture, impoverished by war, humiliated by occupation, forced by circumstance to surrender to vulgar, acquisitive American values. The fact that so many characters know this tune — Angelo joins in

with Clio as she sings it, and Georgia's grandfather, Laetitia, and the workmen on the film set all offer their own renditions — suggests how generalized the experience it describes has become. It also demonstrates just how seductive American-style pop culture is, since this catchy little song is an example of the very principles it laments. The other song is the familiar children's song, "Alouette" ("The Lark"), first heard from Ricardo, the actor who plays Brother Lawrence, as the cast and crew of *Romeo and Juliet* take a bus ride to Verona for location shooting. Along the way, Ricardo tells bawdy jokes and flirts with Laetitia, eventually coaxing his companions into a rousing chorus of "Alouette" as they pass the pock-marked city walls. It is heard again after the day's filming in Verona, when the cast comes back to the hotel after an evening of drinking led by Ricardo. The song's violent (and, in context, sexual) lyrics — they detail the plucking of the lark — epitomizes the kind of vulgar, popular entertainment that threatens to displace the film's other "lark" passage, the morning aubade from *Romeo and Juliet* in Act 3, scene 5, a passage referenced after Angelo and Georgia's first night together, spoken by the voiceover chorus over a lush musical accompaniment. In essence the sentiment of these two passages is similar — both express hostility to the lark — but Prévert heightens the association of "Alouette" with mindless popular culture, crude sexuality, and intoxication by placing it in such close proximity to the innocent romanticism of Angelo and Georgia's authentic love, punctuated by their association with Shakespeare's words and their separation from the crowd.

- 8 At the heart of the film (and the film-within-the-film) are multiple instances of doubling and re-production that involve an ironic interplay between the authentic and the fake. Ettore Maglia devotes considerable energy to maintaining the family's appearance of social rank and its role as keepers of Italy's cultural heritage, but in reality Ettore depends upon the very film industry he despises for his income. The family treasures have become their own ironic doubles, movie props that trade on their aura of historical authenticity (and of course at another level that is exactly what they "really" are). Ironically, when Georgia's "Juliet bed" is brought to the set, the workmen handle it without any respect, as if it were just another manufactured fake, and the director declares that it probably will not see much screen time (fig. 2). These treasures used as film props are yet another manifestation of the touristic ideology that, it becomes clear, has come to drive the Venetian economy, converting its cultural heritage into a mass-market commodity and making Venice into its own commercial *doublure*. This ideology extends also to the making of the film of *Romeo and Juliet* and to the kind of love relationship Shakespeare's tale celebrates. The film set in Venice is a meticulous recreation of an Italian Renaissance villa, given a veneer of authenticity by various historically "real" objects that dot the *mise en scène*. However, the set is also strongly reminiscent of the otherworldly garden and impossibly high balcony tower of George Cukor's 1936 film of *Romeo and Juliet*, as if the villa were an "authentic" double of a Hollywood fake double. Although in the filming scenes Cayatte does, as one reviewer suggests, offer a valentine to the craft of moviemaking, each detail he shows us seems calculated to open an ironic gap between the Shakespearean tale he is telling and the illusory means he uses to tell it. Beneditti, the actor who plays Romeo, is a preening coward, and his assigned double is too superstitious to climb the rope ladder to Juliet's



balcony; Angelo becomes Beneditti's double's double by volunteering to make the climb. Bettina, the actor playing Juliet, is a diva who is exploiting the producer Sandrini's sexual interest in her; she is delighted when she briefly sees Angelo in costume as Romeo, for she hopes to take him as a young lover. Friar Lawrence, played by Riccardo, complains that getting an authentic tonsure will ruin his chances for the plum role of pimp or seducer in his next film. As Angelo proceeds up the ladder to Juliet's balcony, we hear the film crew laconically repeat instructions to one another and we watch the soundman drop the needle on a record to produce the film's lush romantic soundtrack. Even Shakespeare's text becomes reductively reproduced in the process. Romeo's assertion that "Juliet is the sun" is redoubled in the form of a spotlight that blinds Angelo, momentarily stopping him in his ascent up the ladder. Despite all the attention to period authenticity and "realism," the process of reproducing *Romeo and Juliet* on film, at least as Cayatte portrays it, de-romanticizes the play and risks turning into parody the very passions the film-within-the-film purports to lionize. Filming emerges, in short, as yet another instance of the touristic ideology, perhaps even its master exemplar, by which the historically and romantically authentic is turned into a commercial fake.



Fig. 2. Georgia's bed, on set

- 9 And yet doubling also becomes the mechanism in the film by which the effects of this ideology can be mitigated and redeemed, the means by which the story of *Romeo and Juliet* can be returned to itself and preserved, albeit with a difference. This is the paradox that Prévert and Cayatte are most interested in exploring. As *doublures* ["extras," "doubles"], Angelo and Georgia are innocent of filmmaking — Angelo goes to the film

set not to be in a movie but to seduce Bettina, and Georgia goes merely for a bit of excitement, to escape her stifling family. When Angelo climbs onto the balcony, he is expecting to see Bettina, his potential conquest, but instead he encounters Georgia doubling Bettina. Their meeting is an exquisitely cinematic moment, but not as we might expect. As Angelo scrambles over the railing, Georgia covers her eyes to protect from the arclight, and Angelo does not recognize that she is Bettina's double. But as the lights dim and Georgia lowers her hands, Angelo takes notice and is mesmerized by her modesty and innocent smile. This sequence begins with a seemingly inelegant lighting set-up, with the face of the ostensible female star swallowed in unflattering shadow (fig. 3). But this violation of cinematic convention is the point: Angelo as Romeo's double first encounters Georgia as Juliet's double outside the falsely idealizing apparatus of film, and paradoxically this allows him to fall genuinely in love with her at first sight. What follows is a more conventional cinematic montage in which Angelo and Georgia trade wordless glances in increasingly tight close-ups that reveal their developing passion for one another (fig. 4). Indeed, they remain frozen in each other's gaze, lovers visually isolated from the film crew and the rest of their world, and they continue to hold their poses even after the arclights are cut and the projected moon goes out, until the director intrudes to break the spell. This sequence redeems what had heretofore seemed a rather degraded, patently inauthentic staging of the balcony scene by doubling that scene, treating it as a drama between *doublures* that is catalyzed by Shakespeare's balcony scenario. The effect is palpable, particularly on Angelo the womanizer: when afterward he passes Bettina on the catwalk up to the balcony, he is so overcome with passion that he does not register her presence at all.



Fig. 3. Georgia as Juliet, in dark



Fig. 4. Angelo and Georgia falling in love

- 10 It is not, however, that Angelo and Georgia’s encounter simply erases the problem that cinematization poses for *Romeo and Juliet*, for immediately we return to the film’s earlier ironic mode. Bettina, annoyed and hurt, and Beneditti, ever the self-absorbed pretty boy, a couple utterly without chemistry, occupy the balcony in the same positions as did Georgia and Angelo moments earlier, except that tellingly now the shot is reversed. Biacchini the director gives the two actors deeply ironic instructions — “remember, a lot of emotion, but with great simplicity” — and as they begin to act, the audio engineer again drops the needle on the soundtrack record. But the camera cuts away from them to Angelo and Georgia, who are holding hands and maintaining their gazes in the Renaissance garden below. Now Bettina and Beneditti seem the inauthentic *doublures* of Angelo and Georgia, who are not acting and are out of view of the production’s camera, at the margins of the film-within-the-film (fig. 5). The lighting behind Angelo and Georgia and the soundtrack are clearly intended for the balcony scene being filmed above, and yet both elements seem more appropriate for Angelo and Georgia as they move slowly toward their first kiss. The accidental shifts in lighting that plunge them into shadow and then into silhouette only work to suggest the couple’s mythic stature and foreshadow the tragedy to come. It is precisely the juxtaposition of Angelo and Georgia’s developing romance against the “authentic” cinematic version of *Romeo and Juliet* that establishes the couple’s status as the genuine incarnations of Shakespeare’s lovers, even though they are merely *doublures*. Within the narrative of *Les Amants*, their romance escapes cinematization, but within the film of *Les Amants* itself,



Cayatte's camera does record their story, and lovingly so. And paradoxically in that doubling, cinema recovers its capacity faithfully to transmit the heritage Shakespeare represents, by staging the rejection of its own apparatus.



Fig. 5. Georgia and Angelo at the margins

- 11 When the film production moves to Verona, this juxtaposition of the authentic and the cinematically fake emerges with even greater ironic force, drawing upon Verona's reputation as the site of the "authentic" location of Shakespeare's play. At the supposedly "actual" monastery of Friar Lawrence, for example, we see Angelo and Georgia as Romeo and Juliet being married by Ricardo as Friar Lawrence, after which the couple contentedly walks down the cloister. Only when Cayatte's camera turns do we realize the couple is being filmed, as if they were now the principals of the film-within-the-film. (A cutaway reveals Bettina lounging in the monastery garden with Sandrini, gossiping about Angelo and Georgia.) But the closeups of Angelo and Georgia exchanging silent glances suggest that they regard themselves as genuine newlyweds, not merely actors. Even the balcony scene is doubled when Angelo and Georgia visit Verona. Blocked by Georgia's chaperone Laetitia from consummating their "marriage" (Laetitia is hypocritically carrying on with Ricardo), Angelo climbs across the hotel balcony so that he can join Georgia in her room. Later, after their night together, Angelo and Georgia share a morning kiss on the balcony, a kiss which Raffaele accidentally sees, setting in motion the tragic final events of the film (fig. 6).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> These balcony scenes themselves replay two key scenes from *Les Enfants*. In the first, Frédéric Lemaître, an actor, initiates a tryst with Garance, the object of his affections, on a hotel balcony much like that of Verona's Hotel Cavour; in the second, Baptiste and Garance share a long delayed kiss on a



Fig. 6. Balcony kiss and Raffaele's arrival

**12** The warden of the Verona monastery plays a key role in highlighting the ironic

---

balcony while observed by Garance's paramour the Count Montray, who is jealous and humiliated by the sight.

relationship between tourist or cinematic appearances and historical or emotional realities. It is no accident that he first enters the film by barging in on Angelo and Georgia's filming at the monastery. When the director objects that they are working, he answers that he is working too, and he goes on to note that they are not the first to film at the monastery, making, in effect, the entire-film-within-the-film a double of an earlier *Romeo and Juliet* film. In a later sequence that underlines the ironic relationship between the authentic and the fake, the warden catches Angelo and Georgia in costume kissing in the chapel. At first he thinks that they are being filmed, and he opines, "Perfect! Successful! I bow, it's great art, you've got everything: the flame, the heat. . . ." But turning the corner, he discovers there is no camera and, realizing that they are kissing in earnest, he exclaims, "Congratulations anyway, that's even better, and it changes my opinion a little! Lovers! True love!" Afterward the warden invites the couple to view Juliet's tomb, a site, he says, few tourists see. The tomb itself is rather decrepit, situated in a dark crypt lit by a single shaft of light, quite unlike the Juliet tomb we saw earlier in the Venetian film studio, a beautiful new tomb on a well-lit plinth (fig. 7). As the warden observes, the real tomb is something of a disappointment, and the story it symbolizes — a tale of "scandal and indiscretions" — has nothing to do with the reality of Verona which, as far as he is concerned, is "the gayest city in all of Italy." Even the tomb's supposedly miraculous survival of bombing during the war, apparently a tourist come-on, is a sham, for, he observes, the tomb was preserved simply because it is housed in a crypt, not because of God's protection. He counters, now "if there had been no war at all, that would have been a miracle, a true one." The warden serves also as caretaker of letters sent to Juliet; he keeps them in a small casket that resembles a tiny version of Juliet's tomb. Surprisingly the warden has nothing but disdain for "those who write letters for others to read," those unable to appreciate that Juliet is fictional. The task he is engaged in when he interrupts the film is to burn the letters and scatter their ashes on the Adige River. The irony comes when Angelo is being drowned in the Adige by two thugs hired by Raffaele, men who look unmistakably like Laurel and Hardy, as if Angelo were being killed by representatives of American film culture. As they hold Angelo's head underwater, a black cloud of ashes interrupts their work and chases them away, the ashes which the warden is scattering on the river. That is, the detritus of the cult of Shakespeare's Juliet, a cult that the warden dismisses as fake and misguided, works to save Angelo's life, that is, the life of the modern and very real man who is now living out the life of Romeo.



Fig. 7. The on-set tomb and the tomb of Verona

- 13** After Raffaele sees Georgia kissing Angelo on the hotel balcony, the film turns its attention back to Raffaele and Ettore's alliance as a block to the lovers' romance. Revealed in this sequence is the latent brutality and the full corruption of their commitment to "tradition" and social status. Though Georgia is victimized (Raffaele



threatens to kill himself and her in order to frighten Georgia, and then he tries to rape her), the bulk of the family's fury falls on Angelo, a representative of working-class pride, sincere passion, and genuine commitment to artisanship who gives the lie to Raffaele's and Ettore's exploitation of Italian cultural tradition for their own aggrandizement. The film's climax involves Laetitia luring Angelo to the Maglia villa on the pretext of his meeting Georgia there. Once there, Angelo finds himself placed on trial before a mock tribunal of Georgia's mother, father, and grandfather, a fake and almost comical staging of Ettore's long-lost authority as magistrate (fig. 8). Ettore intends, he tells Angelo, to fake a scenario in which Angelo is killed during a botched armed burglary of the Maglia home, a burglary which Ettore claims targeted works of art he learned about from Georgia. This scenario only underlines how his collection of cultural treasures, so closely linked to his family's social status, has lost any real connection for the Maglias to moral authority or genuine emotional attachment. Now it is merely a matter of a faded patriarch vulgarly protecting his property rights over his art and daughter — his waning legacy — from a lower-class interloper, a symbol for Ettore of the ungrateful masses whom he so despises, who reject him as a fascistic elitist and on whom he by Raffaele's proxy now financially depends. Before he can carry out his frame-up, however, Angelo escapes (he literally brings the curtain down on his accusers), pursued by Amédéo with his machinegun. As Raffaele passes Angelo, two silhouettes in the dark, Amédéo accidentally shoots Raffaele dead by mistake while wounding Angelo (a recasting of the fight between Tybalt, Mercutio and Romeo). A victim of the principle of ironic doubling, Raffaele becomes in death an example of the "rot" Amédéo madly seeks to purge throughout the film. He dies with Georgia's name on his lips, lying in the broken shards of a glass chandelier, the very glass on which his tourist business was based.



Fig. 8. The Maglia family tribunal

- 14 This sequence of events sets up the film's final scene, a recasting of the final scene of *Romeo and Juliet* played out in the Venetian film studio. There the balcony scene is being reshot because of a problem with the footage (originally scheduled to be shot was the burial scene). There too Georgia dressed as Juliet waits for Angelo, having been released from being on camera because Bettina, out of respect for Georgia's true love, agrees to serve as her double's *doublure*. As the balcony scene is filmed in an adjacent studio and we hear the strains of the swelling soundtrack and repeated directorial instructions through the walls, Angelo arrives on the unlit burial scene set, mortally wounded. In a revised version of the death scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, he dies in Georgia's arms, consoling her that at least they were happy in Verona. Angelo's statement reiterates the film's operative contrast between the world of Verona, a world where authentic cultural tradition remains despite the ruinous effects of war, a site where a landmark like *Romeo and Juliet* can be relived and thus preserved in the present, and the world of Venice, a world where cultural tradition has become a matter of touristic trade and cinematic simulacrum, a world which actively destroys genuine culture and love paradoxically in the name of preserving tradition. It is the malevolent, ultimately self-destructive effects of the Venetian world, that, so Angelo suggests, makes their fleeting genuine love, counterposed against the spreading "rot," all the more precious and valuable. Once Angelo dies, Georgia finds herself unbearably alone on the darkened set and soon after, like Juliet, commits suicide at the foot of the Juliet tomb. In effect, Georgia and Angelo's deaths redeem, albeit ironically and only partially, the filming going on in the adjacent studio. Here, again at the margins of the "official" film

production, is the real *Romeo and Juliet*, not the stagey, clichéd balcony scene in the film studio but the real deaths of the *doublures* at the foot of the fake tomb, captured by Cayatte's camera. As if to underscore the tragically ironic gap between the romantic reality of Angelo and Georgia as Romeo and Juliet, and the callous simulacral world of Venice that pursues a vacantly "authentic" film adaptation, a props handler wanders through the dark studio, takes its one remaining light and exits without realizing that the true Romeo and Juliet lie dead on the other side of the tomb (fig. 9). The tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* in the world of Venice and of film is that the real tale goes unrecognized, replaced by an "authentic" *doublure*.



Fig. 9. Angelo and Georgia's death with workman

- 15 Georgia's means for killing herself is, significantly enough, a shard of glass. Glass serves throughout the film as a central symbol of cultural tradition, its beauty, its roots in artisanal skill, its malleability, its susceptibility of being appropriated by the tourist industry, its ultimate fragility. Indeed, the first image we see is of a spinning swirl of molten glass being shaped into a lens-like plate at the Murano glassblowing factory as Raffaele gives his monotone tourist speech about cultural tradition. Georgia's use of shattered glass to commit suicide reminds us yet again of the equivocal way in which Prévert conceptualizes the crisis of post-war European culture, a tradition which at once remains beautiful and vital and yet is in danger of self-extinction if it cannot escape the creeping "rot" of commercialism and simulacra, the twin evils of a touristic mentality and cinematic mediation. *Les Amants de Vérone* rather cleverly uses film against itself to address the issue of adapting Shakespeare to film format. Prévert and Cayatte use the *Romeo and Juliet* film-with-the-film as a means for purging their own film of any

contribution to the ideology of mass mediation they are criticizing. If Bianchini's camera within the film captures only a falsely "authentic" *Romeo and Juliet*, Cayatte's camera captures the far more potent and yet far less literally faithful "*Romeo and Juliet*" lived out by Angelo and Georgia. It is only in the context of the former that the latter lends itself a sense of ironic authenticity. Produced in the shadow of Europe's post-war political and cultural reconfigurations, *Les Amants de Vérone* is a sophisticated engagement with the question of what constitutes an authentic screen adaptation of Shakespeare. But the questions it raises are really only part of a much larger set of issues that its director and screenwriter are interested in pursuing: the nature of European culture's survival in a world increasingly dominated by a touristic, commercial mentality and the mass media, especially the cinema. As a metacinematic treatment of *Romeo and Juliet* that recognizes the ideological costs of a mediatized Shakespeare, and mediatized culture in general, *Les Amants de Vérone* raises questions well before its own time, questions that remain vital today for any consideration of Shakespearean adaptation. For those reasons, and others besides, it merits our critical reconsideration.

Douglas M. Lanier  
New Hampshire University (USA)

### Filmography

*Les Amants de Vérone*. Dir. André Cayatte. 1949. With Pierre Brasseur, Serge Reggiani, and Anouk Aimée. Black and white. Released on VHS in the Mémoire du Cinéma Français series, 1990.

*Les Amants de Vérone*. Dir. André Cayatte. 1949. With Pierre Brasseur, Serge Reggiani, and Anouk Aimée. Black and white. Released on DVD in the Pathé Classique series, 2013.

### Bibliography

BAKER, Will. *Jacques Prévert*. NY: Twayne, 1967.

BARRIÈRE, Jean. "Report from France." *The New York Times* 26 September 1948, X5.

BERGENS, Andrée. *Jacques Prévert*. Paris: Éditions universitaires, 1969.

BISHOP, Michael. *Jacques Prévert: From Film and Theater to Poetry, Art and Song*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2002.

BLAKEWAY, Claire. *Jacques Prévert: Popular French Theatre and Cinema*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990.



CROWTHER, Bosley. "The Screen in Review: 'The Lovers of Verona,' Modern Paraphrase of *Romeo and Juliet*, at Cinema 48." *The New York Times* 12 March 1951, 20.

GANIM, Russell. "Prévert Reads Shakespeare: Lacenaire as Iago in *Les Enfants du Paradis*." *Comparative Literature Studies* 38.1 (2001): 46-67.

JEANCOLAS, Jean-Pierre. "Beneath the Despair, the Show Goes On: Marcel Carné's *Les Enfants du paradis* (1943-5)." In *French Film: Texts and Contexts*. Eds. Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau. London: Routledge, 2000, 78-88.

KAEL, Pauline. *5001 Nights at the Movies*. NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983.

LAJUS, Sybille. "*Les Amants de Vérone*: Du théâtre à la théâtralité." In *Jacques Prévert, qui êtes aux cieux*. Ed. Carole Aurouet. Condé-sur-Noireau, France: Corlet, 2001, 120-25.

LANIER, Douglas. "L'homme blanc et l'homme noir: *Les Enfants du paradis* and *Othello*." In *Shakespeare in Performance*. Eds. Eric Brown and Estelle Rivier. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.

LEJEUNE, C. A. "New French Faces Around London Studios." *The New York Times* 24 July 1949, X3.

"The Lovers of Verona." *The Sun-Herald [Sydney, NSW]*, 31 October 1954, 52.

NAU, Peter. "Prévert, cinéaste." *Filmkritik* 27 (1983): 347-93.

PRÉVERT, Jacques, and André Cayatte. *Les Amants de Vérone*. Les Classiques du Cinéma Français. Paris: La Nouvelle Édition, 1949.

QUÉVAL, Jean. *Jacques Prévert*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1955.

R. L. C., "Lovers Tale Portrayed in Native Italy," *Washington Post*, 20 October 1951, B5.

RUSTENHOLZ, Alain. *Prévert, inventaire*. Paris: Seuil, 1990.

© IRCL-UMR 5186 – CNRS – Université Montpellier 3

---

## How to Cite

LANIER, Douglas M. "Love in the Ruins: *Les Amants de Vérone* and "Authentic"

Shakespeare Adaptation.” In *Shakespeare on Screen in Francophonia* (2010-). Shakespeare 450 Conference proceedings of seminar n°15 on “Shakespeare in French Film / France in Shakespearean Film.” Paris: 21-27 April 2014. Ed. Melissa Croteau. General eds. Patricia Dorval & Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin. University Montpellier III (France), Institut sur la Renaissance, l’Âge Classique et les Lumières (I.R.C.L.): 2016. URL: [http://www.shakscreen.org/analysis/othello\\_role-playing\\_came/](http://www.shakscreen.org/analysis/othello_role-playing_came/).