

Walter Schlinger's Romeo and Juliet

By Sean Gordon



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CHARACTER

Walter: Ex-Undergrad. Nervous. He is very aware he's on stage but momentarily finds casual conversation with his audience. He's conflicted between his desire to appear smart without being a know-it-all. Both of which stem from his somewhat juvenile (but understandable) desire to be liked. The only reason he is effective in front of an audience is his complete commitment to sincerity.

SETTING

A Brooklyn basement for poets, musicians, and others of that nature. There are more people in the audience than Walter was expecting. Most of them are people he knows but there are a few faces he didn't expect to see.

NOTE ON TEXT

Bolded text indicates speech that has been prepared in some way.

PROLOGUE

The stage is barren except for two small flats with papier-mache book pages. It's very reminiscent of something that might have been posted on Tumblr ten years ago. There are projectors in use, and a plastic water bottle sits on a stool; the label is semi-torn off. Walter walks on stage, his foot snags on something; he catches himself without too much embarrassment, but the damage is already done. He holds a stack of bright notecards. Should the audience catch a glimpse of the cards, they are handwritten and covered edge-to-edge in notes. He is giving off an uncomfortable energy; maybe he clears his throat. He takes center stage wearing a button-down shirt, tie, digital watch, and slacks with a brown belt. He's well dressed but doesn't look particularly good.

WALTER

A recitation and analysis of themes in Romeo and Juliet through a contemporary lens; adapted from "Romeo and Juliet and the Artist: an essay on the ideas and images of the Star-Crossed lovers."

By me

Performed by me

(He goes to speak into the microphone.)

Thank you all for coming.

(His voice is too loud for him.)

(Off-mic)

Can you guys hear me? Do we need this? Okay.

(He steps away and moves the microphone to the side.)

Before we get too far into it, I wanted to say thank you to those who contributed to the gofundme which helped finance this live reading.

There's a lot so I don't want to take time and name everyone. But if you gave money, thank you. Thanks.

Uh, also **thanks to my roommate Mikey and his girlfriend Mia for putting together this amazing set.**

(It is not amazing. Probably done in a weekend.)

For anyone who isn't familiar with my work, I'm Walter Schingler and this is, in large part, the thesis I wrote in order to graduate Durdan University— go Frogs— but I just wanted to preface this by saying I am not a dramatic writer, and I am by no means a performer. Sorry in advance. This is simply a workshop-of-a-literary-experiment. Sort of like a

recitation, like I said, that's better. *(He makes a note in his cards.)* As most of you know, my senior thesis was on the themes and depictions in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet"; But if you didn't have the pleasure of reading it, I used the archetypal "young artist" as a rhetorical device in order to track the reader's journey through my essay across three key themes:

Youth

Love

And Fate

(He turns to look behind him and checks if the projections are synced up. They are. Great.)

I thought the paper was pretty good. Effective! Not that, like, it was some -- anything crazy. The paper was good... It was recognized by the department... and my advisor said I could maybe even publish it.-- After some edits, obviously! I mean, some of the language was inaccessible. It was. So that's what I'm doing-- trying to do. Trying to ground it a bit more.

(Reading from the cards.)

One of the major issues with the original essay was that in my attempt to parallel the motifs of Shakespeare's play with the social narrative of the "Young Artist" I was distancing *myself* from the reader, I referred to the artist as some other entity, some amorphous "they", and it— I guess it just didn't work. So this time around I will be trying to slip in some more "personal anecdotes" to see if that will remedy my issue with language...

(references the cards.)

What else...

Oh and while this is a workshop with the purpose of gauging audience response, please don't boo.

Part one: Youth

PART I- YOUTH

(The word YOUTH is projected.)

I first met Romeo and Juliet (respectively) Freshman year of high school. We read the play in ninth grade and, as with most soon to be Literature Majors, I had a special relationship with my English teacher. Okay, yeah see, when I say it like that I feel like I undercut it a bit. Me and Mrs. P— My teacher was a woman named Lisa Perring— we were close. At least I think we were.

She was the proverbial “cool adult”. She expected a lot from you without being overbearing. Laid back but focused. She was a really good teacher and she really liked Romeo and Juliet.

Now, because Mrs. P. took us seriously as people, we weren’t provided a modern translation of the play. That’s something other teachers at our school did. I didn’t appreciate that because it made me feel like high schoolers couldn’t be trusted to figure it out for ourselves. That, and those plain text versions suck all the beauty out of the language. And most importantly, perhaps selfishly, what I enjoyed the most about reading the traditional text was that I seemed to understand it better than some of my classmates. I felt like that raised my esteem in front of Mrs. P. And as kids we tend to define ourselves by the adults in our lives. Yeah, it made me feel special at a time when I didn’t feel particularly special. It was nice having someone.

(He stutters for a short second and powers on.)

Through my process, I found myself having to define what “youth” means. First, I think it means a lot of things: it means a certain level of naivety, unintentional self-centeredness, and idealism. It also means not having a disposable income, very little responsibilities but also little autonomy, and hearing about your friend’s first pseudo sexual experience on the back of the school bus on your way to Six Flags Great Escape. But in totality, I determined that “Youth” is almost entirely defined by one’s relationship to those who “lack youth,” a.k.a. Adults.

And then we have to look at who our first adults are.

^I never really liked Capulet, Juliet’s father. Like as a character. I thought he came off as oddly two-dimensional for Shakespeare. Overly antagonistic. In Act Three, when he unloads on Juliet and casts her out, he reads to me as the archetypal father. Overbearing and angry. And that paternal force didn’t resonate with me. My dad’s a retirement planner for public school teachers. Total sweet guy. The angriest he gets is at college football and then he’ll apologize to me and my mom for yelling at the TV. Capulet just wasn’t someone I saw in my everyday life so I never connected to the character.

Until one time, I was talking to my dad. I was 17 and about to commit Durdan. (This tiny liberal arts college in New Hampshire.) We were in the car, he was coming to pick me up during his lunch break to take

me to my regional youth choir concert— yes, I was a choir kid, I sang tenor, let's not talk about it. **Anyway, my dad was telling me about all the different jobs he's worked and was complaining about his new hours.** And I guess he also told me what he majored in because I told him— **this was my first time telling him I *wanted* to be a writer.** And he was trying to be supportive, I realize that now. **But when I told him he said, "Okay. I thought you already were a writer." And I was—** I knew he wanted me to go to school and study chemistry, it was the one science class I did well in, **but I was just so ready for any kind of resistance, anything other than unwavering support was... I kinda came down on him.**

Totally flipped out, you know.

I ranted about how I wanted to be a *professional* writer. —

I went through all the cliches, because they didn't feel cliché at that moment. "You couldn't understand" "I'm an adult capable of making my own decisions." "I hate chemistry" Geez... and I didn't hate chemistry. Chemistry was fine... **I don't know why I did that. But after I was done I looked at him, and we were at a red light, he had the softest stare. His eyes were so soft and he had this nearly imperceptible smile and he just said. "If that's what you *want*, then that's great." And I thought—** for the love of god I don't know why, but **I thought of this one line from Romeo and Juliet. It was Capulet's:**

(The quote is projected behind him. It is annotated with stressed and unstressed syllables.)

**"Day, night, hour, tide, time, work, play,
Alone, in company, still my care hath been
To have her match'd: and having now provided
A gentleman of noble parentage,
To answer 'I'll not wed.'"**

It made me think about how he was going to drop me off and then leave work again to pick me up and then he would go back to work until six.

And I understood Juliet's father a bit more. He loved her. And sometimes dads show their love by— I don't know. Dads can be weird. Sweet and scary. Selfless and selfish. **^And in my essay I expand further on how, as children, we see our parents as infallible entities. All the while neglecting their humanity. And this divide in mutual understanding plays a large part in the outcome of the play. If Juliet wasn't intimidated to tell her parents about Romeo, if Montague felt comfortable confronting his son's melancholic mood, "Romeo and Juliet" might have ended with a wedding rather than with a funeral.**

In my first draft I understood this divide intellectually but I didn't fully internalize it. In terms of my relationship with my parents and, like, how I should reframe how I perceive them. **And that came up when I called my mom recently**— or my mom called me. You know, I should probably call my mom more. But anyway. **Lately...** She has been getting kinda weird about her age. She's just really conscious of it, I mean. **I asked her if she wished she were younger or something. And she said, "No"... She said she wouldn't dare go back to being a twenty something. And that was bizarrely really comforting. To know that it isn't just me. When I--** 'Cause part of me is, like, totally skeptical of being a twenty something... It's just, like, your twenties are supposed to be this mythic part of your life that you look back on. But, I don't know, parts of it— a lot of it— seems to... suck? Sorry. **My point is that I appreciated my mother's candor. And then I couldn't help but wonder if Lady Capulet could have shared similar insights with her child. Lady C tries to explain the importance of marrying Paris, but it falls short of having its intended effect on Juliet. Maybe because Juliet forgets she, her mother, was also married young.**

"One of the mixed blessings of being twenty and twenty-one and even twenty-three is the conviction that nothing like this, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, has ever happened to anyone before."

That's a quote from a journalist named Joan Didion. She's a *fantastic* writer. A real wordsmith. I had to read her a bunch Junior year. If you haven't, I highly suggest checking her out; you won't regret it. I'm not joking, if you take one thing away from this, it's read Joan. Anyway,

(He flips to the next card. Something's wrong.)

Oh, crap. I think... uh, I think I'm missing cards. Shoot. That's embarrassing.

(To someone in the audience.)

Mikey you don't happen to have— No? Nope. Yeah, dumb question. K. Cool. Uh, if I remember correctly, next I talk about how... **liberal arts college is wasted on the young.** What I mean is, it's over before you appreciate it. The sentiment is, **"where else can you publish a collection of broad and nonspecific autobiographical poems? Or have an entire gallery dedicated to your black and white photographs of rural gas stations?" And it's all free?** You have resources you will never see again in your life. An arsenal of student run publications, a fitness center, dark rooms; the state-of-the-art 3D printer that your tour guide made sure to point out to you when you visited. When you're deep in the fox hole of your Junior year you can't picture what life is going to be like after the era of 4:00 pm seminars and dining hall credits.

Most importantly, for 4 years, you are surrounded by hundreds of other people just as delusional as you. Freaks ready to bare their souls in

whatever mixed medium they've decided to get a degree in. Everyone is pursuing passion, unencumbered. And it's amazing. It's amazing talking to someone who really gives a shit about sedimentary rocks. You're living at the center of a commune with insane people ready to get their hands dirty and rediscover something that Aristotle already knew about 300 years before Christ. It's a place to *try*, and all the sharp corners and hard edges are padded. You arrive, 18 years old, and you're practically a blank canvas. David is trapped in his marble, waiting to be released, and college is where you bring the hammer down on your first chisel. And it's important that you do, you have to. It's important that you work on creating yourself, creating your David. Because once graduation comes and goes and you're through the tunnel, what's on the other side is different from what you expect.

It's a wide, infinite, green field.

And yeah, it feels great. You can head in any direction.

But, you know, it's surprisingly easy to get lost in a field. Cause it feels like you are—

It feels like I'm supposed to be pushing somewhere. And I want to. You know, toward something. But there's no obvious direction when you're standing in a field. At least Sisyphus had a hill. It was pretty obvious where the boulder was supposed to go.

I feel like adults— or just people older than me, I guess— have been telling me that my twenties were going to be all these things. It's like, I've spent two decades in anticipation for whatever it is. For this image I've pieced together from sitcoms and movies. And I'm like, "When is that going to start?" Because it hasn't happened yet and I'm almost twenty-three. And then I'll be twenty-four and that's, like, your mid-twenties. My frontal cortex is about to be done cooking and I'm worried I won't be ready for it.

Like, I need to have things in order so I'm prepared for this new level of understanding— that way I can take full advantage of my freshly minted cortex and it can start cortexting to its fullest extent. You know?

I just felt like I would have a better understanding of what was, like, going on around me. Cause all I've noticed about my "twenties" is that I'm—I— I get, like... angry? A lot. I don't know if there's a particular reason or if I'm just an "angry person" now. But I get frustrated and I get pissed at, like, the smallest things. And what's mildly concerning is that it builds until it's real--like furry. It's the kind of anger I feel like only a young person can have. And that makes me wonder if it will ever go away. I wonder if my dad, that sweet guy, ever felt this way. It really, uh-- it really *stresses* me out.