

ABSTRACT

EVERETT, MARY ELIZABETH. “Spectacular, Spectacular”: The Mythology of Theatre and Cinema within Baz Luhrmann’s Red Curtain Trilogy. (Under the direction of Marsha Orgeron.)

“Spectacular, Spectacular” looks at Baz Luhrmann’s Red Curtain Trilogy—*Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), and *Moulin Rouge* (2001)—in the context of the mythologies of the theatre and cinema that Luhrmann builds. Evoking themes, images, and concepts found within these two mediums, Luhrmann goes to great lengths to signify both the cinematic and the theatrical within these films through references to popular culture, and these references incrementally mesh the worlds of theatre and cinema throughout the trilogy. In *Strictly Ballroom*, Luhrmann explores the concepts of performance, spectacle, and realism while at the same time replicating a popular cinematic form of the time, the non-diegetic musical. Moving further away from the popular genre that *Strictly Ballroom* mirrored, Luhrmann next made *Romeo + Juliet*, a film that speaks to many of the same conventions of theatre and film while also adding features of diegetic song and self-referentiality to heighten this connection. *Moulin Rouge*, Luhrmann’s final film, is an overt musical homage, complete with internal and external references to both theatre and film with an overwhelming sense of awareness of popular culture. Although many critics, including Luhrmann himself, have praised him for his innovative style, this thesis argues that Luhrmann’s trilogy does not create a new film form. Rather, “Spectacular, Spectacular” will demonstrate that his self-proclaimed genre, Red Curtain Cinema, is a modernized echo of an earlier idea—using popular culture and referentiality to pay tribute to a fading genre—found in one of the most popular movie musicals of all time, *Singin’ in the Rain*.

**“SPECTACULAR, SPECTACULAR”: THE MYTHOLOGY OF THEATRE AND
CINEMA WITHIN BAZ LUHRMANN’S RED CURTAIN TRILOGY**

by

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INTRODUCTION

Bertolt Brecht, in a discussion on film and theatre, notes that “One need not ban film in order to preserve theatre as theatre; you only have to employ it theatrically,” introducing the idea that “the cinema too can learn from the theatre and use theatrical elements” (11). Producer, director, and screenwriter Baz Luhrmann explores this idea of combining film and theatre through his Red Curtain Trilogy: *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996), and *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). Luhrmann combines theatricality with cinematic techniques to enhance his filmic worlds, transforming ballroom dancing into a stagy, extravagant spectacle; converting Shakespeare from a traditional theatrical play into a MTV-style, pop-culture tragedy; and creating a movie musical homage complete with all of the conventions of the movie musical in an attempt to recycle the genre back into popularity.

Behind this red curtain he has created for the cinema, Luhrmann establishes a set of rules to define the cooperation between cinema and theatre that works to facilitate such films. His DVD documentary on Red Curtain Cinema, *Behind the Red Curtain*, explains that in order to create this new type of cinema—what he terms a “theatricalized cinematic form”—three guidelines must be followed. First, each film must be grounded in a mythic story or a combination of stories. Viewing these familiar tales, audiences are drawn into the story and they are aware of how the story ends. The ugly duckling/David and Goliath myth mixture, for example, provides a sound basis for *Strictly Ballroom*, allowing audiences to already have a connection with the characters and their plights. Marsha Kinder, exploring this underlying myth, comments that it “lets us know what will happen so that, as with any myth, we can concentrate not on what happens next, but on the unique inflection with which the familiar

moves are performed” (57). Secondly, Luhrmann requires a “heightened creative world” as a setting for his films. This world must be fantastic and new, yet also familiar at the same time. Luhrmann uses the heightened world of Montmartre, France at the turn of the 20th century to set *Moulin Rouge*, a recreated world that is strange and intriguing. Yet this world is also familiar at the time of the film’s release as only a few years before people celebrated the end of the 20th century, welcoming the 21st century much like the characters of the film welcome the 20th. Lastly, Red Curtain film employs a self-referential device—a device that reminds the audience that they are watching a film. For instance, in *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet*, Luhrmann uses the iambic pentameter typical of Renaissance drama as the self-referential device. Audiences, hearing the archaic speech of the 17th century, recognize that the modern spectacle on screen does not match the language, both written and spoken, and these two mismatches jar the audience, preventing them from undergoing temporary suspension of disbelief. Without suspending disbelief, audiences are constantly reminded that the actions on screen are part of a film and do not represent a window into the real world.

While the information Luhrmann provides in *Behind the Red Curtain* is pertinent to a discussion of Luhrmann’s films, it also attempts to close that discussion. As the director of this documentary, Luhrmann offers a critical framework through which to understand his own works. With this documentary, it is obvious that Luhrmann hopes to begin and end the discussion of his own works. He does not succeed. Film critics who have responded to his films have expressed opinions ranging from total enthusiasm for Luhrmann’s art to angry rampages about it. Much of this criticism is focused on the final two films of the trilogy, *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* and *Moulin Rouge!*. However, a few critics responded with general remarks on Luhrmann’s first film, *Strictly Ballroom*. Kathleen

Lundeen, observing that the film is self-reflexive, notes that the film “ignites zeal in movie goers, but in so doing, it epitomizes all cinematic experience” (99). She concludes by equating the film with the “dream of the fanatic” that Keats spoke of in his poem, “Fall of Hyperion” (100). One other critic of the film takes a different approach, looking at the film through the lenses of tourism and ethnic diversity. Wenche Ommundsen observes that “like the soulless Dance Federation rules of *Strictly Ballroom*, Australian culture must look to the folk art of the ‘ethnic’ (and thus ‘authentic’) immigrant communities to somehow redeem it from the modern world” (45). Through this lens, Ommundsen concludes that even though the ending of *Strictly Ballroom* proposes a “cheerful optimism, the film can be regarded as part of the problem” of the idealized Australian culture (48).

Many critics found it hard to accept Luhrmann’s newly defined Shakespeare. Jim Welsh notes that the film is “deceptively titled, because it is really Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo & Juliet*,” and he goes on to negatively judge the film because “the setting is so visually bizarre that its ‘fidelity’ is questionable” (152). Leah Guenther points out that the film “angered critics because it delighted audiences” (17). Lucy Hamilton, in her defense of the film, also comments on the overall negative response surrounding it, observing that “conservative opinion spluttered in outrage at Luhrmann’s film” (118). Elsie Walker begins her defense similarly, making it clear that she is not like most critics who tend to “dismiss the production as ‘MTV Shakespeare’: the kind of mindless visual candy we associate with rock videos” (132). Other critics like Erik Bauer appreciate Luhrmann’s different take on Shakespeare. Bauer describes the film as “opening up the story for a new generation” and notes that Luhrmann uses “a number of innovative narrative and visual strategies” (32). Francisco Menendez praises the film for its originality, stating that it “succeeds by daring to update, yet

retain Shakespeare's language as well as his plot" (41). Courtney Lehmann, too, supports Luhrmann's creation, noting that "separated by four hundred years, Shakespeare's play and Luhrmann's film demand that we give up the ghost of the creative process to embrace the spirit of adaptation" (221).

Criticism of *Moulin Rouge!* is similarly divided. Jonathan Dawson, in his article entitled, "The Fourth Wall Returns: *Moulin Rouge* and the Imminent Death of Cinema," concludes that the film does disservice to its subject matter because it ignores "the realist power and naturalist tendencies of cinema," and it ultimately makes the Bohemian ideals so prominent throughout the film "seem a rather careless act of hubris" (3). Kathryn Bennett observes that while the film is a "study in postmodernity," it supports a male-dominated world and "upholds the patriarchal execution of the female muse, which allows the male artist to create art via her death" (111). *Moulin Rouge!*, like *Romeo + Juliet*, has received positive criticism as well. Marsha Kinder declares, "I see [*Moulin Rouge!*] as a brilliant celebratory pastiche of the movie musical that highlights defining characteristics of the genre" (52). Graham Fuller calls the film the "artiest film ever predicated as a summer blockbuster" (14). Kent Jones, in his lauding article on *Moulin Rouge*, goes as far as saying, "Baz Luhrmann is our Santa Claus, and here's his greatest gift" (25).

While many of these critics have addressed the basic issues of plot, character, cinematography, and setting, the discussion of Luhrmann's mythic worlds is left uncharted. True, Luhrmann himself points out that he uses an underlying myth to ground his films in the human experience, but he also litters his films with references to other myths—myths that refer to elements of the theatre and cinema which audience members can either recognize or ignore. These referents, taken mostly from popular culture, appear throughout the trilogy,

and they suggest that Luhrmann is not only commenting on the importance of a combination of theatre and cinema but also the importance of popular culture to society. Popular culture, to Luhrmann, is the glue that holds these two mediums together. Fuller, in his tiny tribute to the film, notes that the film “suggests that when multiple cinematic mini myths...are montaged together in a new arena, their meanings change and they come to comprise an irreducible supermyth that’s a fount for future myth” (14). What Fuller briefly touches on is Barthes’ theory of myth. Roland Barthes, in his discussion of myth, observes that myth consists of a signifier, a signified, and a sign. These relationships, he notes, help decode myths, identifying the components (signifiers) and what they stand for (signified), while ultimately meshing the two together to find their mythic meaning (sign). Barthes perceives everything as myth:

Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things. A tree is a tree. Yes, of course. But a tree as expressed by Minou Drouet is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter. (109)

He also explains that myth is not limited to oral speech, but it can take the shape of “not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, [and] publicity” (110). Finally, he notes that it is ultimately the perception of the reader/viewer/onlooker that determines a myth’s function and purpose. This relationship, however, leaves interpretation as an ambiguous task, defined only by each individual’s perception of myth and its meaning.

Myth is therefore an individualized concept—each person bringing their own experiences to an image, writing, or film will interpret it differently based on their own experiences.

Luhrmann, in his Red Curtain Trilogy, creates films that revolve around these individualized myths. Littering his filmic texts with both cinematic and theatrical references, Luhrmann attempts to fuse them into one medium, calling attention to these references as myth by repeating them and progressively intensifying them as the trilogy progresses. This thesis will identify, isolate, and unpack many of the mythic elements found throughout this trilogy and illustrate Luhrmann's use of theatrical and cinematic references to create what he calls a "theatricalized cinematic form." As Luhrmann introduces these mythic elements, he grounds his audiences in popular culture, referencing popular genres, similar plot lines, and familiar songs to reinforce his themes. Using these various mythic references and references to popular culture, Luhrmann creates films that are focused on an audience's previous experiences and not just the film alone.

The Theatrical

In order to pinpoint Baz Luhrmann's use of the theatrical in his trilogy, it is first necessary to define theatricality. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, Thomas Carlyle first used this word in his 1837 writings entitled, *The French Revolution*. Theatricality in this sense, as defined by the *OED*, is "the quality or character of being theatrical." However, many critics have had trouble pinning down such a circular definition. Elizabeth Burns, examining the connection between sociology and theatre in her book on theatricality, notes that "the theatrical tradition is not merely the transmission of a code of rules to which players, playwrights—and audiences—should conform, but a store of possible

modes of representing social action which accumulates over the generations” (4). Using this idea, Burns pairs sociology with theatre to create a definition of theatricality that encompasses all social interaction. Theatre then, according to Burns, takes place everywhere. On the other hand, Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis write in their introduction to a collection of essays on theatricality that the term can refer to a range of different qualities. After exploring possible meanings or uses for the term from mimesis to performativity, they note that “it is simply not possible to stipulate a single, regulative meaning for the concept” (38).

Theatricality, as used in this thesis, will cover all of these suggested definitions—mimesis or imitating the theatre, performativity, and social signifiers or familiar theatrical images. Each chapter will explore the theatrical connection in all three of Luhrmann’s films as seen through these lenses of theatricality. Luhrmann uses elements of music to evoke the theatrical as well as the cinematic, creating in all three of his films a strong connection to music. Emphasizing performance in all three films, he also draws attention to the performative aspects of theatre, reapplying it to film. Finally, as a social symbol to his audiences, Luhrmann uses the color red to accentuate each film’s connection with the theatre. Using all three of these signifiers and signs, Luhrmann attempts to litter his cinematic works with theatrical references.

From the beginning of theatre history, music has played an important role. Beginning with the first performance in Greek theatre, music was used as an important feature in the art. Edwin Wilson, in his discussion of the relationship between theatre and music, describes the history of music in theatre:

In ancient Greek tragedy, choral sections were performed to the accompaniment of music and dance. Opera, which began in Italy around 1600, was originated by men who thought that they were imitating Greek drama. Shakespeare, who wrote at about the same time opera began, included songs as an important part of his comedies. The nineteenth-century term *melodrama* came from “song dramas” in which music accompanied the action onstage. In other forms of nineteenth-century theatrical entertainment, such as vaudeville and burlesque, singing and dancing played a key role. (203)

Aristotle, in his six elements of theatre, includes music as an “embellishment” that outweighs spectacle (13). Although music ranks fifth out of his six elements, he notes that it is present and important to the performance. Noting Aristotle’s mention of music, Robert Cohen adds that “the power of music directly present in the theatre is well known, and its effectiveness in moving an audience to ever-deeper feeling is one of its functions that few playwrights or directors wish to ignore” (42).

Today, music is used in both the theatrical and cinematic arts. Richard Schechner, in his discussion of performance theory, notes that music is an element that allows an audience to suspend disbelief and the performer to recreate himself/herself into a different person (191). J.L. Styan goes even further with his discussion of music and theatre, suggesting that dialogue within plays is musical. Styan notes that “it is in the more subtle differences of speech that the individuality of people is to be found, in the vocal qualities of tone and resonance, rhythm and tempo, harmony and discord, much as in music” (13). The cinema, created to pair moving images with music, uses music similarly. Moving from silent films that used live musicians to play accompaniment for the film to help convey the characters’

actions and feelings to films like *Jaws* and *Psycho* where music is a crucial element in the furthering of the plot, music is always employed for dramatic effect. Music is still an ever present feature of dramatic performance, and it can be used as a signifier of the art.

Luhrmann prominently uses music in all three of his films. Through all of these films, Luhrmann connects music with theatrical performance by referencing the mythic connection between theatre and music and progressively building on that connection throughout the trilogy. In *Strictly Ballroom*, Luhrmann links performance with music through dancing. The two main characters dance to music that speaks to their unique relationship, and their dancing becomes a spectator sport by the end of the film. *Romeo + Juliet* continues this emphasis on music, building on the connection between music and performance by adding several live musical performances in the film. *Moulin Rouge!* completes Luhrmann's vision of a fused theatrical and cinematic artform, using music as performance throughout the film and allying the film with theatre through the movie musical genre to celebrate that form.

Performance, however, is also referenced by Luhrmann as its own signifier of the theatrical. Richard Schechner, in his introduction to his own collection of essays on performance theory, notes that "performance is an inclusive term" (xvii). He goes on to describe the components that make up performance, emphasizing the diverse representations of the term:

Theater is only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life—greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on—

through to play, sports, theater, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude. (xvii)

While theatre is only one small branch of performance in this definition, it is one of the first venues to be considered performance. In his essay “What is Performance Studies Anyway?,” Schechner also notes that theatre was one of the “traditional” performance arts along with music and dance (361). Now the term is used for varieties of studies in anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

Theatrical performance alone is defined as the actor’s embodiment of a character for the sake of entertainment. Robert Cohen notes that there are two different types of theatrical performance: direct performance and indirect performance. In direct performance or presentational performance, “performers directly and continuously acknowledge the presence of the audience” (23). In indirect performance or representational performance, however, the audience “watches interactions that are staged as if no audience were present at all” (23). Representational performance is what theatre generally tries to accomplish, creating a performance with an imaginary fourth wall.

Referencing the theatre throughout his films, Luhrmann uses a combination of these types of performance. Performance for Luhrmann can be found in any situation, echoing the ideas of Schechner. Emphasizing performance through increasing and decreasing film speed and frequently encouraging overacting, Luhrmann decreases the realism of the performance. This decrease in realism calls attention to the performance, clearly separating moments of performance from the rest of the plot. From ballroom dancing, to Shakespearean language, to theatrical performances within the film, Luhrmann repeatedly calls on performative aspects of everyday life within his films.

Luhrmann not only uses music and performance to make this connection but he also chooses the color red to dominate his filmic palate within each of his works, a color that he uses to reference the theatre. Margaret Walch and Augustine Hope, in their studies of color and cultural symbolism, define the color red as “visually the most prominent color with a complex symbolic history ranging from being the color of Cardinals’ robes (for the blood of Christ) to a traditional color for the devil (for the flames of hell)” (xii). Red has many suggested meanings and interpretations, from Thomas Dickson’s list of representations for the color—“fire, love, sin, and...strong emotions” (59)—to J. Michael Gillette’s list of the color’s emotional indicators—“happy, affectionate, loving, exiting, striking, active, intense, defiant, powerful, masterful, strong, aggressive, [and] hostile” (92).

One of the first colors to be used in art, red has been identified as part of a triad of early color representation. The colors in this triad, red, black and white, are, as John Hutchings reports, thought to be “one of the earliest symbols used by man” (200). Whereas white and black seem to represent good and evil respectively, early symbolic uses of red are ambiguous. Hutchings describes this relationship, saying, “Red things have power to act for both good and ill” (200). This ambiguity continues in the color’s use today. In his 1840 *Theory of Colors*, Johann Von Goethe speaks of this same relationship, noting red as a color of opposing meanings and high importance:

It conveys an impression of gravity and dignity, and at the same time of grace and attractiveness. The first in its dark deep state, the latter in its light attenuated tint; and thus the dignity of age and the amiableness of youth may adorn itself with degrees of the same hue. History relates many instances of the jealousy of sovereigns with regard to the quality of red. Surrounding

accompaniments of this color have always a grave and magnificent effect.

(314-315)

Noting this wide spectrum of interpretation for the color, Goethe makes special note of what he terms the “surrounding” effect of using it, meaning that both grandeur and solemnity always follow the color (315).

This “surrounding” effect appears to be just what Luhrmann has in mind within each of his films. Combining to form what he calls his “**Red** Curtain Trilogy,” *Strictly Ballroom*, *Romeo + Juliet*, and *Moulin Rouge* use the color red to denote performance and theatricality. Luhrmann deliberately calls on his emphasis of red in his conception of the trilogy. Literally speaking, both *Strictly Ballroom* and *Moulin Rouge* begin and end with the rising and falling of a red curtain, placing the filmic audience in the position of the theatrical spectator. However, all of these films also employ a more pervasive use of the color in costumes, mise-en-scène, and tinting to represent and signify theatricality, especially during scenes in which Luhrmann emphasizes performance.

Using the color red, Luhrmann calls to attention moments that are rooted in performance—singing, dancing, or acting. Luhrmann uses this signifier, along with musicality and performance, to evoke the theatricality that is emphasized in each of the films. Using these three signifiers together, Luhrmann creates a world that continually represents the theatrical. The parallel nature of these three filmic worlds suggests that Luhrmann yearns to find a place for the theatrical elements in everyday life. However, by constantly making these references using the same signifiers, Luhrmann also points out the artificiality of the theatrical, encouraging his audiences to notice the theatrical within his works. In doing this, Luhrmann explores the beauty of the theatrical and also recognizes its artificiality in the same

breath, but he does not stop there. Luhrmann references yet another signifying system in his films—the cinema.

The Cinematic

The cinema—a term once short for the first film viewing space, the cinematograph—has come a long way from its beginnings. Now even referring to a group of films that are “especially considered as an art form,” the cinema has become a broad reaching term that has been defined many times over (*OED*). John Storey, in his book on cultural studies, notes that people have approached this definition of the cinema from many different angles:

It has been studied in terms of its potential as ‘art’, its history told as moments in a ‘great tradition’, the most significant films, stars and directors; it has been analysed in terms of the changing technology of film production; it has been condemned as a culture industry; and it has been discussed as a key site for the production of individual subjectivities and national identities. (54)

The cinematic, then is also quite a diverse descriptor. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines cinematic as “of or pertaining to the cinematograph; suitable for cinematography; suggestive of the technique, dialogue, etc., of the cinema.” For the purpose of this paper, however, the cinematic will refer to the latter portion of this definition, limited to the filmic elements that are reminiscent of the cinema.

Luhrmann uses cinematic references such as genres, themes, and self-referential devices throughout his films to signify the deep rooted history of film and the importance of that history. Luhrmann especially uses the movie musical genre to ground his films in cinematic convention. From *Strictly Ballroom*, which displays all of the conventions of the

movie musical without characters actually singing, to *Moulin Rouge*, where all of the genre's conventions are in place, Luhrmann increasingly emphasizes the genre reference. This increasing emphasis reverses film history, phasing the musical in much like it was phased out. Also a popular convention of film and theatre alike, the love story is the subject of each of Luhrmann's films. Using this love theme as a basis for comparison, Luhrmann also incorporates familiar cinematic love scenes into his own films, both referencing the original scene and recreating it into a different context. Lastly, Luhrmann uses cinematic self-referential devices throughout his trilogy. Using references to both television and the cinema within his films, Luhrmann creates self-aware films that compel audiences to acknowledge themselves as audiences. Using these references to the cinematic, Luhrmann grounds his already theatricalized filmic worlds in film history.

The movie musical, mainly owing its roots to the theatre, is one of America's great contributions to film. With plots centered on singing and dancing, movie musicals were especially popular from the 1930s to the 1950s. Many of these movies focused on theatre and performance, tracing a show from its casting through rehearsals and ending with the actual performance of the show as a grand finale. Jane Feuer, in her preface to the first edition of her book on movie musicals, notes that "although many of the films persisted as 'classics' to be taught in film courses or as 'nostalgia films' to fill the endless broadcast hours on TNT and American Movie Classics cable channels," movie musicals "peaked in the 1950s and then died rapidly with the end of the studio era" (xi).¹

¹ In this preface, Feuer cites the emergence of new music as a possible cause for this decline in popularity for the genre. She notes that "since the mid-1950s rock and pop have been the dominant forms of popular music and these forms appeared more suited to audio and concert presentational formats than to the movie musical with its double requirement of numbers *and* narrative" (xi).

Feuer notes many of the conventions of the genre: popular songs, dream stages, and spectacle. Many of the movie musicals of the Hollywood studio era used songs already in circulation. Using melodies ranging from traditional classical pieces to jazz songs, these musicals transformed the popular and sometimes unknown tune into a new form. Dream stages, too, were very popular within these films. During these scenes, characters perceive themselves in a different world that is usually accompanied by dance and song. Examples of these worlds can be found in *The Wizard of Oz* or *Oklahoma!*. Spectacle was also important, as many movie musicals of the time employed two directors: one for the narrative parts of the film and the other for the musical numbers. For example, directors like Busby Berkeley created lavish, unconventional visuals choreographed along with the musical numbers. These conventions create a genre far different from the non-musical films of the era, and the unique nature of the movie musical prompted many productions through the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

Although Feuer cites the death of the movie musical in the 1950s, her second edition to her book acknowledges a return to the genre in a different form. Reprinted with the addition of a chapter entitled “A Postscript for the Nineties,” Feuer includes contemporary movies such as *Flashdance*, *Dirty Dancing*, and *Footloose* in a discussion of the movie musical. According to Feuer, these films, while they do not possess all of the characteristics of the classic movie musical, do demonstrate many of their innate characteristics. Absent from all of these films is the diegetic singing of songs on screen, yet Feuer argues that the music is linked in as many ways as possible to what is going on onscreen. For example, at the end of *Dirty Dancing*, Baby (Jennifer Grey) and Johnny (Patrick Swayze) dance to “I Had the Time of My Life,” a song that encapsulates their summer together. Feuer concludes

that dance numbers within these films function much like musical numbers in a movie musical, and they “may be structured around a non-diegetic popular song to which the characters dance or throughout which narrative segments of an episodic structure are rhythmically cut” (132).

Baz Luhrmann adds to the evolving post-classical era of the genre, using the movie musical genre progressively throughout his works from the contemporary to the classical. Reversing the trend of classical musical turned modern day non-diegetic musical, Luhrmann progressively adds elements of the classical musical to his films. Music and dance both play significant roles in each of his films, and although most of the music in Luhrmann’s first two films is not recorded especially for the film, it is chosen for its relation to the action of the film. Lyrics and tempos help guide the action of the film, making it seem a large part of the film itself. By the end of his trilogy, Luhrmann has transformed the popular non-diegetic musical into a modern version of the classic musical, enacting a reversal of American film history.

Another characteristic element of Luhrmann’s films, romance has been a part of both cinematic and theatrical productions since their inception. Many audiences are drawn in by the charm and mystique of on-screen or on-stage love because of its importance to the human journey—romance is a part of life. Many of these films and plays discuss the importance of love, addressing issues between men and women and problems in finding the right mate. Many of the films that demonstrate these qualities fall in the genre of romantic comedy. Romantic comedy, as its name suggests, deals with romance and love in a humorous fashion. Defining romantic comedy, Mark Rubenfield states that it is a “movie that essentially focuses on the romance and comedy with its romantic elements outweighing its comedic elements”

(70). Other theorists such as Peter Evans and Celestino Deleyto believe that there is no set definition because the genre is constantly changing, noting that the genre is “rethought from text to text in order to incorporate social attitudes to love that will continue to make sense in our culture” (9). Cherry Potter, in her epilogue to her book *I Love You But...: Romance, Comedy and the Movies*, furthers this definition, asserting that “romantic comedies can be far more complex than may at first appear the case” (294).

Baz Luhrmann’s films are no exception. Each film, focused on romantic love, adds to this flexible, indefinite description of the romantic comedy. Like romantic comedies, each film portrays both the hard and humorous side of romance. All three of the films also adapt or reveal the “social attitudes to love” as Evans and Deleyto discuss. Although they do not always follow the “happily ever after” pattern set forth by previous romantic comedies, these films are invested in the romantic in the importance of romance to cinema, especially the movie musical genre. *Strictly Ballroom* follows the model of the romantic comedy more closely, yet Luhrmann’s final two films possess enough qualities of the genre to be classified within the genre. Luhrmann’s adaptation of *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* enhances scenes of romance and comedy throughout, yet ends with tragedy. Potter, in a discussion of Shakespeare in her introduction, recognizes that even Shakespeare treads the fine line between comedy and tragedy: “Shakespeare was particularly adept at balancing on the precarious tightrope between the light and dark side of relationships, often causing us both to laugh and gasp as the comedy threatens to topple into tragedy” (xv). Luhrmann takes this literally in both *Romeo + Juliet* and *Moulin Rouge*, creating a romantic comedy and making

it “topple into tragedy” (xv). Using this connection to the popular films of the time, Luhrmann again references the cinema.²

Luhrmann’s films also show an evolving relationship with romantic comedy; it is mimicked in *Strictly Ballroom* and then increasingly pushed to its limit through *Romeo + Juliet*, ending with a flourish of the genre in *Moulin Rouge*. Each film, dominated by romantic love that is offset by comedy and/or sometimes tragedy, can be seen as some form of a romantic comedy—a genre that Evans and Deleyto find ever changing. As Potter recognizes, a romantic comedy can be much more than it seems. When considered as a coherent trilogy, Luhrmann’s films each suggest that so can a fairy tale, tragedy, and musical. On the surface, these films seem to only parallel in their style and theme of romance. However, Luhrmann questions definitive genre labels, and at the same time, references the film industry that defines these labels.

In addition to referencing the movie musical and love themes popular in the cinema throughout his films, Luhrmann also makes references to the film and television industry, creating films that are self-aware. In his book entitled *Becoming Film Literate*, Vincent LoBrutto discusses this phenomenon in his chapter, “Self-Referential Cinema—*Man with a Movie Camera*.”³ LoBrutto notes that “audiences are lured to [self-referential] films because they appear to show the backstage glamour and drama associated with moviemaking as well as insights into the process” (190). There are, according to LoBrutto, two different types of

² During the time Luhrmann’s films were released, romantic comedies were booming. Rubinfeld notes that the five year period between 1995 and 1999 “were a time of record new releases and ticket sales for the genre” (xiii). *Strictly Ballroom* was released in 1992 just before this wave of romantic comedies, *Romeo + Juliet* was released in 1996 amidst the wave, and *Moulin Rouge* was released in 2001 just after this wave. Luhrmann uses this reference to such a popular genre to both reference the cinema and maintain the audience’s familiarity with each story.

³ In this chapter, LoBrutto mainly discusses Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*, a film that, as an experimental documentary, refers to itself. His introduction to the chapter, containing information more pertinent to this paper, speaks more broadly about the use of self-reflexivity in film.

self-referential films—films that reference other films and films that reference themselves. Films that reference other films do so by “recreating a shot, repeating dialogue, or replicating visual characteristics” of other films, and a film that references itself “is not about the making of another film—it is concerned with the one that is currently being watched by the viewer” (190).

Luhrmann’s films use both of these characteristics as a way to illustrate their self-reflexivity and draw attention to the fact that they are aware of popular culture and in many ways derived from that culture. While some of his self-referential devices are external—using film and television within the films to further the plot—other references are internal, replications of scenes and images from other films. As the trilogy progresses, Luhrmann moves from a more external use of self-reflexive devices to a more internal approach. *Strictly Ballroom* uses elements of filmmaking and a few selected scene replications as a tool for self-referentiality, and *Romeo + Juliet* references the cinematic externally through its use of television broadcasts and internally through the use of scene titles and Shakespearean quotes. *Moulin Rouge*, however, references other films internally throughout. Almost every scene can be traced to a scene in an earlier film. Using these self-reflexive references to film, Luhrmann reminds his audiences that they are watching a film, increasingly taking away the realism that many directors cling to.

Using these devices, Luhrmann creates a cinematic and theatrical subtext within each of his films. These subtexts, held together by references to popular culture, lie at the very heart of the Red Curtain Trilogy. In the following chapters, Luhrmann’s films will be individually explored in terms of their references to theatre and cinema, untangling the web of myth that Luhrmann so carefully weaves while also considering the functions these myths

serve. Ultimately, Luhrmann demonstrates that ideas, images, and stories can be recycled into something more than their original meaning, a sense of resignification that he uses repeatedly throughout his films. Using these bits of recycling and his own unique flare for spectacle, Luhrmann celebrates theatre, cinema, and popular culture, creating films that can only be described in his own words, “Spectacular, Spectacular.”

Chapter One

Strictly Ballroom and the Replication of the Non-Diegetic Musical

Luhrmann's first film, *Strictly Ballroom* begins the mythological alliance between theatre and film that permeates the Red Curtain Trilogy. Using the non-diegetic musical as a popular culture guise, the film provides a commentary on life as performance, pointing out audiences during each dance scene, both public and private. Film and theatre are brought together by the commercialism of the genre itself.

Strictly Ballroom tells the story of a ballroom dancing champion, Scott Hastings (Paul Mercurio), who defies federation rules by creating his own steps. Teaming up with a frumpy beginning dancer, Fran (Tara Morice), Scott not only discovers his own individualism but also learns that people are not always what they seem. Throughout the film, Scott is hounded by his mother Shirley Hastings (Pat Thompson) and her partner Les Kendall (Peter Whitford), who desperately want Scott to win the Pan-Pacific Grand Prix—the biggest of all ballroom dancing competitions. Scott, disregarding his mother's warnings, dances his own steps at his first competition of the year, and as a result, his partner Liz Holt (Gia Carides) leaves him for another more experienced competitor. While Shirley and Les struggle to find Scott a suitable partner, Scott secretly practices his new steps with Fran, transforming her into a beautiful girl and a wonderful dancer. When Shirley, Les, and Liz discover Scott's secret, they are outraged and eventually convince Scott that performing his new steps would be a mistake, telling him his father did the same thing and has become a failure because of it. At the Grand Prix, Scott and Liz, newly reconciled, are about to take the floor as his father Doug Hastings (Barry Otto) tells him his secret—he, like Scott, wanted to dance his own

steps, but he is a failure because he did not go through with it. Scott, inspired by his father's story, reunites with Fran and dances his own steps, ultimately winning over the judges and audience members. The film ends as the entire audience joins Fran and Scott on the dance floor, signifying a happily ever after.

The tone of *Strictly Ballroom* is far from serious. Following a mock documentary throughout the opening scenes of the film, Luhrmann creates a mixture of genres that encourage audiences not to take the characters too seriously. Dancers wear garish costumes on the dance floor, costumes that are more reminiscent of Halloween than ballroom dancing. Female dancers wear gobs of makeup and their hair is usually permanently fixed in some wacky design. While the characters all find ballroom dancing a serious "sport," audiences are encouraged to see the frivolity of it all. Much of the comedy lies in the fact that many audience members have never seen competition ballroom dancing and do not believe that dancing "one's own steps" would be a life-changing tragedy. It is this playful tone that undermines the driving force of the film: the non-diegetic musical.

In *Strictly Ballroom*, it is the music that guides the main characters through their dancing performances, signifies change over time, and signals the different emotions of the characters. In a film about dancing, music obviously plays a key role in supporting the main action of the film. However, the music does not play a background role to the dancing and plot of the story. The very first scene opens the idea of competition ballroom dancing with Johann Straub's "The Blue Danube Waltz." This waltz, with its changing tempos, governs the pacing of the opening scene. With each changing tempo the film editing follows, echoing images when the music repeats itself and speeding up or slowing down with the music. As the ballroom dancers enter the stage area, the repetitive slow tempo of the waltz allows cuts

to different couples, slow motion shots, and repeating images. The scene proceeds with normal speed and editing as the music levels to its primary tempo.

Similarly, in the last scene of the film, Scott and Fran dance the Paso Doble, the Latin dance of male dominance through bullfighting. When the music is cut, Scott looks up to see Fran's grandmother and hears her words, "Listen to the rhythm. Don't be scared." Like the first scene, film speed is slowed to emphasize the dream-like nature of the event. The music, cut off so that the couple will no longer dance their non-federation steps, is not there to guide them. However, the couple begins to dance to the music within them. Scott and Fran dance anyway, and as they dance their music is heard faintly beneath the clapping of the crowd until the loud blaring music of the competition returns. Music and rhythm in this scene also govern the pace of the film. As in the first scene, the camera cuts to different views of the dance beat by beat, suggesting that the camera itself is also dancing with the music.

Music also signifies change over time in the film. Throughout the film, Cindy Lauper's "Time After Time" follows Fran's transformation into a beautiful dancer and helps to narrate her new partnership with Scott. The song, about being faithful to a partner and trusting that he/she will be there when needed, is played throughout Fran and Scott's rehearsal sequences. As Fran and Scott change together, the song remains the same, suggesting that their developing relationship was there all along. Fran, the once awkward and unattractive beginner, transforms through the course of the song into the romantic lead, and Scott, the overbearing, arrogant dancer, becomes more open minded and accepting. The song's romantic overtones identify the pair as a romantic couple from the beginning, yet their romantic relationship comes only as a transformation during the rehearsal process with the song as a backdrop. Using this song for change, Luhrmann aligns the film with other popular

non-diegetic musicals. These films use the “change song” as a form of montage to represent the progression of the characters’ relationships. In *Dirty Dancing*, “Hungry Eyes” by Eric Carmen functions in much the same way. Using this link to popular films, Luhrmann creates a signifier that places *Strictly Ballroom* into popular culture.

The music also relates the different emotions of the characters, and each song is chosen to signify what each character feels and/or does, replacing dialogue in some scenes altogether. The beginning of a career-long method for Luhrmann to deal with music in films, this technique will pervade his works and culminate in *Moulin Rouge* with the use of diegetic song. When Liz is about to walk out on him, Scott uses dancing to try to coax her into staying. Dancing the tango, their dance is both a conversation and a performance, and the music highlights the tension between the couple as they argue about Scott’s non-federation steps. When Scott finds Fran behind the curtain at the State Championships, he begins to dance with her to Doris Day’s “Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps.” This song questions the nature of their relationship with lyrics that both acknowledge their budding romantic relationship and question its intentions:

If you can't make your mind up

We'll never get started

And I don't wanna wind up

Being parted, broken-hearted

So if you really love me

Say yes, but if you don't dear, confess

And please don't tell me

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. (www.lyricsdepot.com)

This song captures Scott's confusion about who he should be with as well as Fran's confusion about her obvious feelings for Scott. The film ends with John Paul Young's "Love is in the Air," commenting on Scott and Fran as a couple. Luhrmann uses these songs as a second dialogue, fueling the transition from *Strictly Ballroom* as a non-diegetic musical to *Moulin Rouge*, a diegetic musical.

In *Strictly Ballroom*, Luhrmann focuses on competition ballroom dancing which is a performance art complete with makeup, costumes, and rehearsed movements. The very first shot of the film, shadows of dancers on a scrim, instantly sets up competitive ballroom dancing as a form of theatrical performance. This scrim is also much like a movie screen, a projection of what is about to happen. The dancers, preparing to go out onto the dance floor, are in an area that is backstage. From their movements, it is clear that they are working out their routines and nervously chattering before they are called out to perform. As they enter the performance area, the film goes into slow motion, highlighting each dance maneuver and its syncopation with the music with on beat cuts to different couples. Wearing bright, showy dresses, extravagant make-up, and highly original hair designs, the women on the dance floor float around in dance as if they were part of a garish show.

The film concentrates on dance as performance. When characters dance, there is always another character or group of characters watching. Audience members at the competitions clap and shout for their favorite couples, and the camera lingers on the crowds watching the competition. When Fran and Scott team up and begin dancing together, Scott's father, Doug, watches them just as they watch him when he dances alone. As Scott tries to

regain Fran's trust when his family mistakes Tina Sparkle (Sonia Kruger) for his new partner, he dances with her backstage. His family, finding the two dancing, watches them until the dance is over before interrupting. This is not a cultural practice, either, as Luhrmann demonstrates Fran's Hispanic family doing the same thing. As Fran and Scott dance the Paso Doble for her family, the same performative aspect can be seen. Dance, in this film, only happens when there is an audience, signifying theatrical performance. Characters are constantly performing for audiences, suggesting that life, from Luhrmann's point of view, is nothing but performance. This on-screen audience also serves as a meter for the film audiences' reactions. When Scott and Liz are dancing in the opening scene, audience members scream out their number as if they were watching a sport from the stands. Luhrmann, using this audience, encourages film audiences to support these characters much like they would support sports teams. He provides an example, a protocol for how his film audiences should feel about these characters, limiting individual interpretation.

Also referencing the performance aspect of theatre, Luhrmann uses the color red throughout the film. Many of the scenic elements are red, especially in places and during times of performance. At the studio, it is no coincidence that all of the doorways are red. Every entranceway—the door frames, conventional doors, and swinging doors—is marked as a theatrical enter or exit mark. Using this coloring, Luhrmann stages much of the dramatic action around the entrances to emphasize theatricality. When Liz rushes out of the kitchen screaming, frustrated by Scott's refusal to dance sensibly, she rushes through the red swinging doors. The camera remains motionless as she stops in front of the doors to scream, compelling audiences to notice the hyperbolic elements of this "performance." When Shirley has her breakdown because Scott has lost his partner, she similarly falls apart in front

of a red doorway. Likewise, the competition rooms are surrounded by red curtains. During scenes of competition, every wall is draped in red material, making almost every shot bathed in red, and drawing a connection between the obvious comic elements of hyperbole and Luhrmann's version of competition ballroom dancing. While these places all signify performance through the use of red scenic elements, they also add to the overall almost parodic tone of the film. Luhrmann, here, is equating performance with hyperbole.

In other more serious scenes, red is used to emphasize performance in a far different way. In one rehearsal sequence, Scott and Fran go to the roof to dance only to be dancing in front of a large, sparkling Coca-Cola billboard. As the billboard is revealed, it is first a shimmering red behind the dancing couple, an imitation of the red background of competition. As the camera cuts to a long view of the scene, the billboard is seen as a stark contrast to the black of night. The billboard also functions as a method of product placement—an advertisement for soda becomes a red curtain. Popular culture serves as the background, the dividing line between performers and audience members, and Luhrmann uses this reference to popular culture iconography throughout the trilogy to blur that line. When Scott and Fran perform for Fran's family, the atmosphere is similarly reddish in hue. Red lanterns adorn the porch as the couple show the unbelieving family that they are practicing dance. Here, performance is serious. Fran's father and grandmother help the couple with their non-federation steps, creating a stark contrast between Scott and Fran's families. At the Pan-Pacific Grand Prix, Fran wears her red sparkling dress as she and Scott defy the rules of the dancing federation. Fran's dress becomes a reminder of both her and Scott's rooftop dancing and the personal embodiment of performance over mandated steps. This use of the color here suggests that while performance may be interpreted as an instance

of zany over-reaction, performance can also be found in love. Weaving a web of red visuals, Luhrmann suggests that red may be used for moments of ridiculous comedy as well as somber or romantic scenes. As the aforementioned studies of the color have shown, red is the color of uncertainty—a color that can be used to evoke many different emotions. This uncertainty in the symbolism of the color is much like the definition of theatre, the constant balancing of comedy and tragedy.

Referencing the cinema, Luhrmann creates a modernized movie musical, adding to the body of non-diegetic musicals discussed by Feuer. Like Feuer's list of non-diegetic musicals, such as *Footloose* and *Dirty Dancing*, *Strictly Ballroom* possesses a deep connection to music and dancing, essential characteristics of a musical. Forming a parallel to movies like *Dirty Dancing*, *Strictly Ballroom* uses a soundtrack that speaks to the content of the film. Background music is used to emphasize emotions as well as communicate those emotions. When Scott and Fran practice their own steps together, "Time After Time" is played in the background. The lyrics of this song both emphasize the growing relationship between Fran and Scott as well as remind audiences of the rehearsal montage. The lyrics, which repeat the phrase "time after time," comment on the repetitive rehearsals that the couple must undergo in order to create their own steps. These scenes are reminiscent of *Dirty Dancing* where "Hungry Eyes" plays through a montage of similar dance rehearsals. Also at the end of the film—again like *Dirty Dancing*—a final song is played that sums up the ending of the film, and everyone joins in to dance together. In *Dirty Dancing*, this song is "I've Had the Time of my Life," but in *Strictly Ballroom*, "Love is in the Air" fills a similar purpose. This song cues Scott and Fran to finally make their relationship official and also prompts Mr. and Mrs. Hastings to resolve their conflicts, joining the young lovers in

carefree bliss. As all of the spectators of the Pan Pacific Grand Prix join them on the dance floor, the camera lifts, giving the audience a full view of the entire dance floor consumed by couples in love. This far too “happily ever after” ending undermines the entire film, mocking the endings of so many films that do the very same thing.

Luhrmann also creates a traditional romantic comedy story line through this film. Like many romantic comedies of the 1990s, *Strictly Ballroom* tells the story of the struggle to find love. For Fran, this struggle is to find a mate that will accept her as she is, and for Scott, the struggle is to find a partner that will accept his non-federation dance moves. Cherry Potter includes an analysis of the film in her book on romantic comedy, noting that the film “has all the elements of a traditional fairytale” (248). This, according to Potter, makes it a romantic comedy. Potter finds that Luhrmann references the Cinderella story. Fran, as Cinderella, is transformed into a beautiful woman, and after her transformation is complete, she gets her prince in the end. Scott, as Prince Charming, searches to find the right woman for him, only to realize that she was there all along. This fairy tale plot lies at the heart of the film and continues throughout Luhrmann’s trilogy, setting up a series of films based in the ultimate unreality.

Yet there are other elements within the film that point to romantic comedy. Like Rubinfeld’s definition of romantic comedy, the film has both elements of romance and comedy, and, most importantly, the romance dominates. Throughout the film there are many hyperbolic and comedic elements—exaggerated acting, strange character types, and funny exchanges. Shirley Hastings, Scott’s mother, is continually exaggerated, always talking loudly so she will be noticed and screaming from the top of her lungs when she does not get her way. Liz, Scott’s first partner, is also exaggerated in much the same way. In an early

scene, Liz walks out of the kitchen where she and Scott have been discussing his new dance steps only to scream hysterically. Strange character types like Doug Hastings and Barry Fife also bring comedy into the film. Doug Hastings, keeping to himself throughout most of the movie, dances alone in one scene when the studio is empty. His wide-eyed stare and bizarre habits make him both interesting and funny. Federation president, Barry Fife (Bill Hunter), is also a strange character. Much of his interaction with other characters is funny, including the final scene when he struggles to disqualify Fran and Scott from the competition, revealing his toupee. Comedic exchanges also happen throughout the film. When Shirley, Liz and Vanessa try to hide the fact that Scott has chosen a beginner partner over Tina Sparkle—as the name suggests, a beautiful, skillful dancer who wants to be Scott’s partner—they create an unbelievable story to try to explain the situation:

Tina Sparkle: Fran? Wasn’t she that girl that f...

Shirley Hastings: Well! Here we all are!

Scott: Where is she?

Shirley: Who?

Scott: Fran.

Shirley: Fran who?

Tina: Fran. You know, the girl that fell down.

Shirley: Oh she went home, darling, don’t worry about **her**.

Scott: What?

Vanessa: She went shopping, Scott.

Liz: No, she had to make a phone call.

This scene, confusing Tina Sparkle completely, is one of the funniest exchanges in the film. All of the characters save Scott act like clowns, painted and unrealistic. Tina Sparkle is also continuously made fun of throughout this scene. She is everything that is fake and glamorous—she does not even seem human. In a recurring exchange during the film, Wayne continuously asks Scott for advice on a dance move, the bogo pogo. Dance is a way of life—it is on every characters' mind at every moment. Whenever Wayne sees Scott he asks about the dance step, and every time Scott ignores him, running off to do something else. This suggests that Scott is being separated from his family and the other dancers. He is not like everyone else. At the Pan-Pacific Grand Prix, Wayne finally asks Barry Fife, who almost ignores him much like Scott, suggesting that he too is not like the rest of the competition ballroom dancing following. However, seeing Vanessa, Wayne's partner, Barry does not hesitate to help if he can dance with a beautiful young girl; Barry, much like his followers, is only in the profession for its glamour and beauty.

These comedic elements, though, are overshadowed by the romantic scenes between Fran and Scott. When Doug Hastings dances by himself in the empty studio, the scene interrupts a romantic rehearsal scene with Fran and Scott complete with romantic background music. The scene begins with a rehearsal between Fran and Scott. When they notice someone is coming into the room, they rush out to the fire escape to keep from being seen together. Doug enters the room, puts on a record, and begins to dance strangely about the room, humming to himself. As Scott and Fran watch this, they look completely puzzled and shrug off Doug's independent moves. As on-screen audience members, they encourage the film audience to do the same. Scott and Fran laugh and climb the stairs to finish rehearsal on the rooftop. As the scene ends with Fran and Scott in an embrace, the camera floats down

the side of the building to peer through the window at the still dancing Doug. This opposition between the romantic and comedic continues throughout the trilogy, leaving little gray area between the two and often even confusing them.

Many of the comedic scenes are preceded or followed by scenes between Fran and Scott, forming a dueling dynamic of comedy and romance. The confused Tina Sparkle scene is prefaced by Scott and Fran slowly dancing together behind the curtain. In this scene, Scott reaffirms his budding relationship with Fran and Scott's family discovers this relationship. After the Tina Sparkle scene, Fran and Scott have an intimate conversation in a darkened alley at her home. When her father sees the two, he assumes they are conspiring in their romantic love for each other, a relationship that he does not approve of. In the funny exchanges between Wayne and Scott, Scott ignores Wayne mainly because he is rushing off to see Fran. These book-ended scenes create two opposing plot lines—the ridiculousness of the federation dancing world and the somber, reflective world that Fran is a part of.

As he does throughout his trilogy, Luhrmann's *Strictly Ballroom* employs devices that constantly remind audiences of the film's self-reflexive nature. In *Strictly Ballroom*, much of this self-reflexivity is external. Doug Hastings uses an old fashioned video camera to capture Scott's new steps at the opening competition. As the scene is taking place, the camera cuts to Doug, filming the action with wide eyes and a slightly open mouth as if he is completely inspired by what Scott is doing. As a version of Luhrmann on the screen, Doug sifts through the glamour and glitz to find the beauty of something new and different to film. During the scene, the music abruptly shifts from blaring Latin music to an echoing sound as if a singer were singing "Oh, Ah, Oh." The speed of the film also changes, as Scott and Liz dance in slow motion. Drawing a parallel to the first scene in the film, Doug's film seems to

capture the true artistic image and not just the flashy attractions that the other characters dwell on. Later in the film, Doug watches his own film of the competition with a projector. The images, in slow motion, flicker on the screen, and the camera cuts to a view of the wide-eyed Doug, tears in his eyes and the light from the projection flickering on his face. Doug is watching a film that illustrates the purpose behind ballroom dancing competitions—beauty stripped from bright colors and bawdy outfits. He, like Luhrmann, has found something new to support.

Although the film contains much more obvious references to film, *Strictly Ballroom* also makes several internal references to another film with a similar plot line, *Dirty Dancing*, in order to align itself with popular non-diegetic musicals of the time. Many of the rehearsal scenes in the film contain similar images to that of *Dirty Dancing*. At one point during a rehearsal on the rooftop, Fran practices her steps alone as Scott lounges on the roof. This shot parallels a shot in *Dirty Dancing* when Baby (Jennifer Grey), the inexperienced tomboy turned dancer, practices by herself as her experienced, bad-boy dance instructor Johnny (Patrick Swayze)—who is lounging in a very similar position to Scott's—watches her. Both of these moments in the films happen as the male leads are discovering what true talent their partners have, looking past the surface of these women to find their inner beauty and talent. Directly after this scene in *Strictly Ballroom*, Scott announces to Fran that they are ready for competition, paralleling a similar scene where Johnny is prepared to dance with Baby for the first time on stage. Also in the film are the similar shots of the dancers' feet as they practice—both instances where the female leads make a mistake in their footwork. The final shot of *Strictly Ballroom* is also an echo of the earlier film—a crane shot that lifts to reveal

the entire dance floor full of people dancing. These scenes seem stolen from another film, providing a stark contrast to the overall tone of the film.

As the first film in Luhrmann's trilogy, *Strictly Ballroom* is a springboard for pairing elements of theatrical and cinematic through the use of popular culture. Emphasizing both elements of theatre and cinema through imitation of non-diegetic musicals, Luhrmann makes his first attempt at fusing the two mediums together using the popularity of the genre as the glue that will hold them together. Using this framework, Luhrmann also provides a starting point for his continuing fascination with performance. Presenting filmic audiences in every dance sequence, he sets up the idea of performance as life. In one key scene, Barry Fife, watching the dance competition, even peeks behind the red curtain to see yet another performance—Fran and Scott dancing their own steps. The red curtain, then, divides two aspects of performance, the federation mandated steps and the new, different steps created by the duo. This suggests that performance takes place on both sides of the curtain, and sets up a dual focus that Luhrmann pursues throughout the trilogy: “real” life vs. performance. Luhrmann also achieves a hyperbolic tone that increasingly pervades the remainder of his films, complete with exaggerated characters, story lines, and formal techniques. Calling on mythic references to both forms, Luhrmann begins a pattern that can be seen to progress throughout the remainder of the trilogy.

Chapter Two:

William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet as Middle Ground

Luhrmann's second film, *William Shakespeare's* Romeo + Juliet, is a modern, pop-culture translation of Shakespeare's famous tragedy. The story remains much the same, but the way in which it is told is significantly varied. The film features many of the elements that *Strictly Ballroom* prepared audiences for—exaggerated character types, hyperbolic, unrealistic acting, and tension between romantic scenes and scenes of ridiculousness. As in *Strictly Ballroom*, Luhrmann links theatre and film through popular culture references, adapting Shakespeare's original work to fit into a modern world. Instead of merely using a popular genre to entice his audiences, however, Luhrmann applies popular culture to a Shakespearean adaptation. Using the Shakespearean story infused with popular culture, Luhrmann adds to many of his cinematic and theatrical references, exaggerating the same elements to a greater degree and forming a middle ground between popular culture and traditional values for his second film in the trilogy.

Set in Verona Beach, a place reminiscent of Miami, the film begins with the characterization of Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio), a young man with a history of quickly falling in and out of love. Juliet (Claire Danes) is a young and inexperienced girl who has been sheltered from life by her parents. Romeo is a Montague, Juliet a Capulet—two families who have been consumed by feud. When these two meet at a ball, they instantly fall in love. Renouncing the boundaries of their parents, they agree to secretly marry. On the day of their marriage, Tybalt (John Leguizamo) murders Romeo's best friend, Mercutio (Harold Perrineau Jr.). Romeo, consumed by his anger over losing his best friend, kills

Tybalt, and as a result, he is banned from Verona. Meanwhile, Juliet's parents have arranged for her to be married to Dave Paris (Paul Rudd), a successful American businessman. In order to get herself out of this plot, Juliet seeks the advice of Father Laurence (Pete Postlethwaite) who suggests that on the eve of her marriage she take a sleeping potion that will make her seem dead for twenty-four hours. When her family goes to find her, she will seem dead and will be immediately entombed in her family's crypt. Father Laurence promises that he will send word to Romeo to tell him what has happened, and when Juliet awakes, she will be able to be reunited with her husband. Juliet takes the potion as directed, but Romeo never hears of the plan. When Romeo's friend tells him that Juliet is dead, Romeo rashly goes back to Verona to kill himself by her side. Juliet awakes to see Romeo dying and takes her own life as well.

This film employs musical devices much like *Strictly Ballroom*—revealing emotions and providing backdrops for visual montages. Yet *Romeo + Juliet* goes one step further, adding live music to the soundtrack and emphasizing performance through music instead of just performance with music. Like *Strictly Ballroom*, *Romeo + Juliet* uses music as a tool for revealing characters' thoughts and emotions and supporting the action of the film. Songs such as "Pretty Piece of Flesh" by One Inch Punch, "Everybody's Free (To Feel Good)" by Quindon Tarver, and "Young Hearts Run Free" by Kym Mazelle emphasize the youthful ignorance and playfulness that the Capulets and Montagues both possess. As the Capulets and Montagues wage war, the soundtrack blares with screaming rock music, and in scenes of love between Romeo and Juliet, the music fades into love ballads.

Romeo + Juliet also, however, features recorded live music within the film. The first image of the Capulet ball is one of musical performance—Mercutio lip synching to "Young

Hearts Run Free.” Using someone else’s words as his own, Mercutio makes the music his dialogue, a relationship that the soundtrack of *Strictly Ballroom* suggests. Also at the Capulet ball, a soloist sings “Kissing You,” the love theme of the film, as a performance for the guests. As the performer sings the song, Romeo and Juliet exchange glances and smiles, and the scene climaxes as the couple share their first kiss. The music crescendos as they kiss, forming a connection between the two characters at their first meeting and signifying that connection as one of “love at first sight” romance. When Romeo and Juliet are married, they are serenaded by a choir of young boys singing “Everybody’s Free (To Feel Good).” Sung by this choir, the song identifies the free will that Romeo and Juliet possess, allowing them to marry against the will and knowledge of their parents. However, the song title also suggests that Romeo and Juliet are not completely free from the consequences of their actions; they are only free to feel good.

Live music, then, is a way to perform instead of a tool used to perform. Unlike *Strictly Ballroom* where music is used as a backdrop for performance, *Romeo + Juliet* uses music as a form of performance. Whereas *Strictly Ballroom*’s dancing scenes use music to engage in performance, *Romeo + Juliet* features scenes where music, itself, is a performance. Mercutio’s performance at the Capulet ball, the choir of young boys, and the soloist all add songs to the soundtrack that further the plot of the film, but these songs are foregrounded for audiences because they require attention that is both visual (watching the character sing the song) and auditory (hearing the character sing the song). Building on the already formed association of music and the theatrical performance found in *Strictly Ballroom*’s dancing scenes, *Romeo + Juliet* adds a further step in the connection that allows music in the film to become the central instrument of performance.

Like *Strictly Ballroom*, *Romeo + Juliet* accentuates moments of performance using camera techniques such as slow motion. On their way to the Capulet ball, the Montague boys speed in their car blaring “Young Hearts Run Free.” Mercutio, at the center of the car, lip syncs the words as a precursor to his performance at the ball. At that moment the film uses slow motion, emphasizing Mercutio’s singing and the group’s drunkenness. The film cuts to a shot of Mercutio standing on the platform of the Capulet staircase surrounded by dancers as he continues the song at normal speed. The camera then takes the perspective of Romeo, high on drugs, who notices people around him and their mini-performances: Capulet singing with beautiful women by his side, Tybalt and Lady Capulet in a shocking embrace, and Capulet by himself making a sound similar to that of a snake that is about to attack. Each character in this scene is also wearing a costume, suggesting that each character in turn is embodying another character. Luhrmann changes the Shakespearean ball into a costume ball, creating a scene where all of the characters are in “costume” for the performance extravaganza. This scene, complete with an audience and a musical/dance number, is one of the major direct references to performance within the film. As in *Strictly Ballroom*, Luhrmann adds the presence of an on-screen audience. In this instance, however, the audience is not a meter for how film audiences should perceive what is happening—the on-screen audience functions as a comparison to the main characters of the film. During this scene, shots of each of the main characters reveal that they are all drunk and high. The Capulets are just like the Montagues.

Building on this idea of using camera techniques to signify and enhance performance within the film, *Romeo + Juliet* also contains instances when actors overact, forcing the audience to note the scene as a performance of the character. When Lady Capulet speaks to

Juliet about Paris, her speech becomes a performance. Dressing in a Cleopatra costume for the ball while speaking to her daughter, Lady Capulet speeds about the room. The film moves at a faster pace to emphasize her performance, but her acting style in this instance is also unrealistic. For example, on entering the room, Lady Capulet speaks her lines swiftly, telling the nurse to leave. As soon as she closes the door, she freezes with a surprised look on her face and then rushes back to the door to let the nurse back in. This tiny segment of the scene is noticeably unrealistic, and the same tone is continued throughout the scene. This is reminiscent of Luhrmann's treatment of characters in *Strictly Ballroom*, larger than life characters that seem to defy the conventions of realism. However, *Romeo + Juliet* doubly emphasizes these anti-realistic scenes through editing techniques, making both the characters and the world in which they live fantastical. Achieving this anti-realism, Luhrmann creates a performance-based world full of characters who are obviously acting.

Luhrmann also uses Shakespearean referents throughout the film, an internal means of referencing performance. Most noticeable is the Shakespearean language used throughout the film. Much of the dialogue is exactly as Shakespeare wrote it. Using this poetic form, Luhrmann is able to contrast the harsh, modern world of Verona Beach with the original Shakespearean setting. This not only emphasizes the performance aspect of the film but also provides a constant reminder of its adaptation. Luhrmann also adds Shakespearean references in the signs that surround Verona Beach. Signs for businesses like "The Merchant of Verona Beach," "Out Damned Spot Cleaners," and the "Pound of Flesh" and "Rosencrantzky's" restaurants litter the world of the film, referencing other Shakespearean plays: *The Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. As seen in *Strictly Ballroom*, commercialization is given a function. Much like the Coca-Cola sign signifies a red curtain

in the latter, signs for businesses—albeit phony ones—add additional flavor to the filmic world. This functions to create a world much like the real world—popular culture’s influence is seen everywhere. Advertising and icons are important in this world; they are the backdrop for the action, a backdrop that both comments on the commercialism of the modern world and the even the commercialism of Shakespeare in that world.

Luhrmann also uses a convention of Renaissance theatre in the film—giving Mercutio a cross dressing costume for the Capulet ball. Dressed as a prostitute or showgirl, Mercutio ends up dancing and singing for the Capulets and their guests much like a renaissance performer would put on a dress and makeup to perform a female role in a play. However, Mercutio’s dress is not an attempt to recreate the effect of Renaissance drama—it is an attempt to signify that drama as performance. Mercutio’s costume is in no way discreet, showing off his manly legs, chest, and beard. It is with these prods that Luhrmann constantly reminds his audiences that the film itself is a performance complete with actors, costumes, and scenery. Yet, at the same time, Luhrmann redefines the context of Shakespeare’s language, creating a new way to look at it. Signifying Shakespeare’s works with these references and recreating their meaning to fit into a more modern context, Luhrmann defines performance for the Renaissance and then redefines it as amenable to the 1990s.

Shakespeare, for Luhrmann, is not only universal but also timeless.

Like *Strictly Ballroom*, *Romeo + Juliet* also features red scenic elements, especially during moments of heightened emotion. During the duel between Mercutio, Romeo, and Tybalt, the scene is often framed by an old red stage-like orifice. Fighting near this landmark, the characters are seen as performers on a once flourishing stage. When Mercutio is killed, the camera remains motionless on him in the foreground as Romeo runs to his car in

the background and leaves to pursue Tybalt. The frame, however, is littered with red elements: a red car, red clothes of the bystanders, and a red-lettered billboard. This billboard, reminiscent of the billboard in *Strictly Ballroom*, is white with a large red word printed on it: L'amoure. French for love, this word stands as a constant reminder of Romeo's love for Juliet, even in this moment of hate for Tybalt. Luhrmann, then, moves from an advertisement for soft drinks to an advertisement for love. A progression from *Strictly Ballroom*, *Romeo + Juliet* features a plot-centered advertisement—Luhrmann wants audiences to know that the characters in the film need love. Although it is hard to miss the sparkling Coca-Cola reference in *Strictly Ballroom*, audiences are given only a few glances of the billboard in this film, signifying the fact that the characters are not aware of the overarching theme that dominates the work. While the word love is sprawled on a billboard in this world, audience members are overwhelmed with other advertisements for specific products, a commentary on materialism and the absence of love in a world so focused on that materialism.

Building on the use of red from the previous film, however, *Romeo + Juliet* also includes many scenes washed with a red tint. In Romeo's first scene, the screen is tinted red as he performs his monologue through voice over. When Romeo hears that Juliet has been laid to rest in her family tomb, he cries out and falls down in his grief. This scene, too, is dominated by the reddish hues that surround him. These scenes, set up in opposition, form bookends for the characterization of Romeo. The first, taking place at sunrise, depicts Romeo as a thoughtful and reflective person, and the second, set at sunset, shows him as a rash, unthinking individual. Yet each of these red-washed scenes features a type of performance. After Romeo's monologue, Benvolio approaches him to speak to him about

his sadness. In the following conversation, Romeo must turn off his thoughtful mood and become a defensive Montague, if only for show. Likewise, Romeo's rash moment prepares him for shedding the mask of Montague to be with his love, Juliet, if only in death. This red tinting emphasizes change in Romeo, and like red curtains, signifies where his emotions begin and end.

Also referencing the cinematic, *Romeo + Juliet* is a middle ground for elements of the musical, combining elements of both the classical and contemporary form. Like *Strictly Ballroom*, non-diegetic songs are chosen for the soundtrack and are played to correspond with the action of the film. For example, in the opening sequence to the film, the background music is suddenly interrupted by the lyrics "the boys, the boys" as the Montague men are being introduced. Also, "Love Fool" by the Cardigans plays in the background as Romeo and Juliet plan to be married. The title of the song, itself, speaks to the action of the film, but its chorus lyrics, the only part of the song used in the film, seem to signify what Romeo and Juliet think of each other:

Love me, love me

Say that you love me

Fool, fool me

Go on and fool me

Love me, love me

Pretend that you love me

Leave me, leave me

Just say that you need me. (www.lyricsdepot.com)

Romeo and Juliet, both desperate for the other's attention, are being fooled by love. They fall in love so quickly that they do seem to ask each other to be fooled by love, and this song's chorus addresses the issue without the characters themselves portraying it. A continuation of *Strictly Ballroom*'s non-diegetic musical form, *Romeo + Juliet* perpetuates the identification with the genre's rebirth in the 1990s.

Along with the non-diegetic music that guides the action of the film, however, Luhrmann adds diegetic music to the soundtrack. The chorus of boys sing "When Doves Cry" as Friar Lawrence finds out about Romeo and Juliet's intentions to wed and serenade the couple with "Everybody's Free (to Feel Good)" as they are married, Mercutio lip-synchs "Young Hearts Run Free," and a woman at the Capulet ball performs "Kissing You." All of these songs, like the non-diegetic songs within the film, speak to the action of the film, sometimes even guiding it. "When Doves Cry," sung not by Prince but by Quindon Tarver, captures Romeo's defiance against his parents and his will to separate himself from their views, and "Everybody's Free (to Feel Good)," as discussed earlier, provides the perfect backdrop for the couple's wedding, as they are asserting that they are free to make themselves happy, regardless of the consequences.

The remaining two performed songs incorporate dance, an element that is not as present in this film as in *Strictly Ballroom*. Both of these songs take place at the Capulet ball, making the dancing and singing seem not so out of the ordinary. Mercutio, performing the first number, lip synchs "Young Hearts Run Free" as he stands on a large staircase surrounded by dancing men. Wearing skimpy and glittering women's clothing, Mercutio dances as he sings, and the camera varies its angles from medium shots of Mercutio singing to shots of the full staircase. Reversing the classical image of many women surrounding one

man, this scene uses the male dancer's choreographed dances to serenade a man dressed as a woman. This is much like early Hollywood musicals in which directors such as Busby Berkeley created a spectacle of the female body. Here, Mercutio parodies that image, making a spectacle of himself as a man playing a woman. Using this reference to the Berkeley-esque image, Luhrmann identifies his own film within the glamorous, showy scenes that Berkeley created and references the theatrical performances that those scenes sought to imitate.

Within moments of this performance, the tempo fades as Des'ree performs "Kissing You." As the song begins, the guests of the ball stand in front of her to watch her sing. Romeo and Juliet meet during the opening of the song, catching each other's eye through a large fish tank. Juliet is whisked away by the Nurse to dance with Dave Paris, but she does not dance with him fully. Her dance is more about trying to see Romeo through the crowd. As the song ends, Romeo and Juliet speak for the first time. They run to the elevator to get away from everyone as the music swells again. When the elevator stops, they run out, but run back in to escape Lady Capulet and Paris. All of this running and embracing to the reprise of "Kissing You" becomes a dance, choreographed and perfectly executed. Romance for Luhrmann, then, is an artificial creation that constitutes performance. These two scenes incorporate dance during moments of musical performance, a common feature of the traditional movie musical. Forming the beginnings of a movie musical, *Romeo + Juliet* finds a way to bridge the non-diegetic movie musical of the 1990s with the Hollywood musical of the 1940s and 1950s. This delicate balance will be overturned later in *Moulin Rouge* as Luhrmann creates a modern-day replica of the early Hollywood musical.

Building on *Strictly Ballroom*, Luhrmann moves from romantic comedy to Renaissance tragedy in this film, yet the film is filled with overbearing comedic elements. *Romeo + Juliet* is no doubt a tragedy. Two young lovers, blinded by their youth, decide to marry, and through a series of misfortunes, end up killing themselves by the end of the film. However bleak this ending is, the main part of the film is told in a format very similar to romantic comedy. In her discussion of *Strictly Ballroom*, Potter takes the time to note that the plot of Luhrmann's first film "has similarities with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (which was to be Luhrmann's next film), in that it is a story of how innocent young love is threatened by the feuding and power machinations of an older generation intent only on furthering their own self-serving ambitions" (248). Also like *Strictly Ballroom*, *Romeo + Juliet* is filled with exaggerated characters and funny exchanges that are either emphasized from the original Shakespeare or are not in the original play at all. Mercutio is one such exaggerated character. When the Montagues are waiting to attend the Capulet ball, they are picked up by Mercutio, dressed in a glittering female costume. Mercutio's queen mab speech is thus emphasized both by Mercutio's outrageous costume for the ball and his animated, crescendoing delivery. All of the Montague men are portrayed in this humorous way. In the first scene of the film, Luhrmann introduces the "Montague boys." This group of kinsmen is just that—a group of boys. While filling up at the gas station, the Montagues taunt a group of nuns. When threatened by the Capulets, one Montague cowers in a nearby car, continuously beaten with a purse by a woman in the back seat. Also, whenever the Montagues are seen in a car, they are always singing the lyrics to the music playing in the background. These added humorous elements amplify the comedy within the film and throw an audience prepared to see a Shakespearean tragedy off balance. This surprisingly comedic

and tragic combination emphasizes the romance between Romeo and Juliet and makes the tragic ending seem even more tragic.

These comedic elements are, as seen in *Strictly Ballroom*, prefaced and followed by romantic scenes, making the romantic scenes between Romeo and Juliet seem even more touching. Before the couple first meets, Mercutio sings in front of the Capulets and their guests, imitating a female performer with his gestures and costume. Following this scene, Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time, looking at each other through an aquarium. Juliet is then whisked away to dance with Paris. This is even humorous as Paris makes strange hand gestures to try to impress Juliet, who merely laughs at him. Another intimate, romantic scene between Romeo and Juliet follows as the couple shares their first kiss and makes vows of love by the balcony. This romantic scene, traditionally performed as Romeo climbing up the balcony to speak to Juliet on the balcony, is made even more erotic and sensual. Luhrmann sets this scene in the Capulet swimming pool, just outside Juliet's window. As the couple woo, they fall into the pool in an embrace, referencing the many other romantic comedies where water acts as an enhancer for sensuality. These combined scenes are followed by Romeo's frantic conversation with Friar Lawrence, during which he exaggerates his speech, alternating between a fast paced excited tone and a thoughtful, reminiscing slower pace. The comedy therefore encases the romantic, creating a stronger emphasis on the romantic than the comedic.

Alternating back and forth between the comedic and romantic, *Romeo + Juliet* seems very much like *Strictly Ballroom* in tone. Even the element of parody found in *Strictly Ballroom* is carried over into *Romeo + Juliet*. The opening sequence, a parody of a modern-day action film, introduces all of the characters in freeze frames much like the parody of

documentary found in *Strictly Ballroom*. However, there are many elements that counteract these similarities. If the Montagues are the comedic characters in the film, the Capulets are their opposite. Never shown with smiles on their faces, the Capulets are daunting reminders of the serious elements of the story. Tybalt, in his costume for the Capulet ball, even dresses as the devil with his kinsmen at his side as his demons. These scenes are constant reminders that, although the film has many of the elements of the traditional romantic comedy, the film will ultimately end in tragedy as the myth dictates.

Moving a step further than *Strictly Ballroom*, *Romeo + Juliet* also uses primarily external self-reflexivity instead of the internal references, primarily in the film's opening and closing shots. Luhrmann uses television news broadcasts for both the prologue and epilogue of the original play. The film opens with an image of a snowy television, approaching the camera. As the television comes into view, the snow flickers to the image of a news anchor who then delivers the opening speech of the play. Adding yet another popular culture reference to the film, this newscast is complete with live footage and a square icon for the story in the upper right hand corner of the screen, making it seem as real as possible. Similarly, the epilogue takes the shape of a television news broadcast. As Romeo and Juliet's covered bodies are loaded onto an ambulance, the picture grows noticeably different, a replication of the tiny dots seen up close on a television screen. The picture comes back into focus as the television screen once more becomes visible. Again, the news anchor sits at her desk, delivering the speech as if she were delivering the evening news. With the end of the speech, the television screen returns to snow and fades into the background. Playing the role of the commentary for the action of the film, the nightly news becomes an indicator for

the importance and popularity of the modern media. It also becomes the red curtain that Luhrmann literally raises and drops in his other two films.

As bookends, these two mock-television broadcasts suggest the permeation of television and news in the modern world—the television has overcome the stage. Television also furthers the narrative in two instances—informing Romeo of the opening shoot-out and of the Capulet ball. Luhrmann, in creating this link to news broadcasts, is suggesting that the media, just like the commercial world of advertisements, tells people what to think and what to do. Audiences are supposed to hear the prologue and epilogue of the play, taking it with them as an insightful interpretation of the entire work. Luhrmann, giving this role to a news reporter—someone chosen to factually represent unbiased stories to the public—sets up a different interpretation. His representations of the prologue and epilogue become a mere segment in a news broadcast, not the end all, see all of the show. Once again, the influence of the media looms over the entire film: the story is told by the media and not a narrator.

Using a more internal means of referencing itself throughout the remainder of the film, *Romeo + Juliet* is littered with references to Shakespearean adaptation. The entire city of Verona Beach is portrayed as the center for Shakespearean adaptation. The shops, billboards, and street signs all adapt familiar Shakespearean titles and lines into common life. However, this adaptation is referencing adaptation itself—lines from Shakespeare’s history plays are given new meaning in Luhrmann’s Verona Beach. In an opening shot, a billboard reads, “Shoot forth thunder,” a reference to Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part II*. This line is taken from Suffolk’s speech as he chastises the Captain for his pride saying, “O that I were a god, to shoot forth thunder / Upon these paltry, servile, abject drudges” (4.1.104-105). This billboard is seen directly behind a prostitute dancing for an interested customer, a display of

the drudges that Shakespeare describes. With this billboard, Luhrmann comments on the world of Verona Beach, directly aligning it with the immorality that Shakespeare has his own character recognize. A billiards hall that Romeo and Benvolio frequent is called “Globe Theatre,” an adaptation of the theatre Shakespeare’s plays were performed in. In this hall, a sign displaying a handgun reads, “I am thy Pistol and thy friend.” This line, taken from *King Henry IV Part II*, is adapted from a line spoken by a character named Pistol. Shakespeare’s character named Pistol is literally translated into the image of a gun. As Capulet speaks to Paris about his daughter, they stand in front of a poster that reads, “Experience is by industry achieved. Capulet.” This line is taken from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, another Shakespearean play. In this instance, the line is again adapted from its original context. Antonio’s reflection on Panthino’s youthful inexperience becomes the Capulet motto for industry, hanging on the wall of his office. Ironically, this poster becomes the background as Capulet tells Paris that perhaps Juliet is too young to marry. These references all speak to issues of adaptation, relocating Shakespeare’s original words to a new and different setting—a constant reminder that the film is in itself an adaptation. With these reminders of adaptation, Luhrmann refuses to separate his work from its original context. No matter how different the overall look of the film may be, he maintains the film’s connection with Shakespeare’s play throughout.

Through these references to the theatrical and cinematic within *Romeo + Juliet*, Luhrmann repeats many of the same mythic references he evoked in *Strictly Ballroom*, strengthening their connections. He uses many of the same elements, but delves deeper into commentary—commenting on the media, Renaissance drama, the musical, and adaptation. Building on many of the alliances between theatre and cinema that are seen in his first film,

Luhrmann uses popular culture to revive a Shakespearean tragedy, accentuating the film with eye-catching visuals and modernizing the overall atmosphere of the film. Unlike *Strictly Ballroom*, however, this film ultimately ends in tragedy. Using a much darker and deeper mythic foundation than *Strictly Ballroom*, Luhrmann places his lighthearted popular culture infusions in a far different world. In doing this, Luhrmann also accentuates the artfulness of the film with camera angles and varying speeds, a feature that will play a prominent role in *Moulin Rouge*. One step forward from *Strictly Ballroom* in many aspects, this film takes the alliance between theatre and cinema to another level, yet the foundation for such an alliance remains the same—popular culture.

Chapter 3:

Moulin Rouge and the Fruition of Red Curtain Cinema

Moulin Rouge (2001), Luhrmann's latest film, represents the culmination of his Red Curtain Cinema form; however the final product of this form is not something new. In fact, Luhrmann uses many of the ideas already set forth in Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly's classic MGM musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Using the same self-awareness and slightly parodic tone, Luhrmann returns to a film that celebrates the musical form and makes his own reincarnation through musical homage. Theatre and cinema are increasingly referenced within the film, and the popular culture references that can be seen in his earlier films become even further exaggerated. With his final film, Luhrmann creates a world in which popular culture's influence can be seen everywhere—in the songs, dances, and even characters' lines—and that influence, unlike in his previous films, is bombarding.

Set in Paris at the turn of the 20th century, the film tells the tale of a young writer Christian (Ewan McGregor) who falls in love with a courtesan Satine (Nicole Kidman). Christian and Satine hide their forbidden love from the Duke (Richard Roxburgh) and Harold Zidler (Jim Broadbent), Satine's boss, because Satine is not allowed to fall in love. The story revolves around the creation of a play, a musical that Zidler describes as a "magnificent, opulent, tremendous, stupendous, gargantuan, bedazzlement, a sensual ravishment." The Duke provides the funding, holding the deeds to the Moulin Rouge as collateral. Following the Bohemian ideals of freedom, beauty, truth, and love, the show becomes a staged representation of the relationship that Satine and Christian have—Satine is the beautiful courtesan, Christian the penniless sitar player, and the Duke as the evil Maharaja. When

Zidler and the Duke find out about this relationship, the Duke threatens to kill Christian if the relationship continues, and the show is altered to end the way he wants it to end—the star must marry the Maharaja instead of the penniless sitar player. Satine makes Christian believe that she no longer loves him in order to save him, but they are reunited before everyone during the performance. As the curtain falls and the actors prepare for curtain call, tragedy strikes as Satine falls down, dying with consumption. This story line follows the Orphic myth as seen in the opera *La Boheme*, a version of which Luhrmann recently produced.

In its use of music, *Moulin Rouge* goes one step beyond the other films in the trilogy, using music as an indicator of the characters' different emotions as the characters themselves sing about them. The emphasis in *Romeo + Juliet* on performance through music is augmented, making all music throughout *Moulin Rouge* about performance. Like *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo + Juliet*, music in *Moulin Rouge* acts as an emotional gauge—identifying and amplifying characters' emotions and actions. In her first song, Satine is characterized as a courtesan with “Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend.” The lyrics, calling for gifts instead of sentimental gestures, describe the type of person that Satine is in the beginning of the film—a “Material Girl.” Luhrmann, here referencing Howard Hawks' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, instantly connects the character of Lorelei Lee (Marilyn Monroe) with Satine, equating the two as “gold-diggers.” Like Lee's fascination with diamonds, Satine is focused on monetary gain from her nightly escapades. However, Luhrmann re-signifies this focus—Satine is so focused because she is a prostitute. Similarly, Christian's first song, “Your Song,” identifies him as a poet and a dreamer. The original “Your Song,” co-written and performed by Elton John, makes many of the same connections. The song

was the first of Elton John's to chart, a connection that Luhrmann's character shares—it is the song he sings to prove himself and his musical abilities to Satine (www.wikipedia.com). Luhrmann, again, uses the song to re-signify its original.

Throughout the film, songs such as these are combined to create references to different emotions, contexts, and mythological structures through music. For example, in their first duet, Christian tries to convince Satine to fall in love with him using a compilation of “All You Need is Love” (The Beatles), “Up Where We Belong” (Joe Cocker and Jennifer Warnes), and “I Will Always Love You” (Whitney Houston). As the song begins, Christian sings “All You Need is Love,” trying to convince Satine to fall in love with him. However, the song has repeatedly been used as an anti-war statement, an argument that should there be more love in the world, there would be no need for war. The same re-signification occurs in the songs to follow. Referencing these different songs from three very different artists at the same time, this performance calls on mythic elements of love and connects the viewers' knowledge of these love songs with the lovers in the film. However, in choosing to resignify these songs in a different context as exemplified in “All You Need is Love,” Luhrmann strips the signifier of its original meaning and gives it a new one: a song originally about wartime is transformed into a love ballad. Viewers are encouraged to perceive the song differently, and the song's original meaning is lost. Luhrmann, in doing this, designifies the song from its original interpretation. In doing this, he is exemplifying the trend of taking songs such as this out of context, creating yet another reference to popular culture.

Moulin Rouge! takes this connection one step further, however, as the characters themselves relate their own feelings through song. Unlike in Luhrmann's previous films, *Moulin Rouge* calls special attention to music and its connection with performance by taking

the explicit form of a musical. Movie musicals, especially popular in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, drew many of their inspirations and source material from the theatre. In her preface to *Movie Musicals*, Jane Feuer notes that “musicals not only *showed* you singing and dancing; they were *about* singing and dancing, about the nature and importance of the experience” (x). Many movie musicals told stories that directly related to the theatre—*Singin’ in the Rain*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Showboat*, and others. Characters in these stories are busy trying to create a musical shows, and they sing and dance in rehearsals as well as in normal life.

Carrying on this tradition for the new millennium, *Moulin Rouge!* uses the techniques of the backstage movie musical to build on the emphasis of music with performance that is seen in early forms in *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo + Juliet*. Unlike his first two works, however, Luhrmann so emphasizes the combination of dance and song in *Moulin Rouge* that he actually creates a musical instead of merely evoking the elements of the genre. Finally calling his films out for what they are, Luhrmann goes out of his way to refer to the musical genre, constantly emphasizing the film as a part of that genre. Like other backstage movie musicals, *Moulin Rouge!* uses a theatrical setting as a backdrop for a film that ends with the culminating performance of that show. Characters use song as a means of representation, both in expressing their feelings to the audience and their feelings to each other. Joining *Strictly Ballroom*’s use of music for dancing—an act that often replaces dialogue throughout the film—and *Romeo + Juliet*’s use of recorded live songs that speak to the mood of the scene, *Moulin Rouge* uses songs precisely as dialogue. The characters express themselves through the lyrics of popular songs, using the words of others to speak of their emotions, suggesting that they do not have feelings that are uniquely their own. As seen in *Romeo + Juliet*, popular culture becomes a mouthpiece of expression. Whereas Luhrmann

uses television and non-diegetic music for this function in *Romeo + Juliet*, popular songs and tunes have been cut and pasted into the film to represent what each character thinks or feels. This technique draws audience members into the film, allowing them to identify with the characters on a personal level, but it also makes the characters seem a mere byproduct of the times. Satine, Christian, and the other characters become representative members of a world in which popular culture dominates. Luhrmann offers this exaggerated world of pop culture influence as the world of the film. As a result, this world becomes a commentary on the pervasive nature of popular culture, and it suggests that we are not able to escape from such an influence.

Also drawing from golden age movie musicals, *Moulin Rouge* uses songs that are familiar to audiences, constantly making references to audience members' experiences and memories and drawing them closer into the story. Each song references a different time period or famous musician that gives audiences a connection to the song. For example, when Satine's first song briefly changes into "Material Girl," audiences recognize the song as Madonna's 1984 hit. The song is referenced in its original form but given a new meaning within the context of the film. While Madonna's original version of the song shows how a girl might choose men for money over romance, Satine sings a lyric from the song to literally situate her character as a prostitute, accepting money for sex. However, in referencing Madonna, Luhrmann also makes another allusion to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Madonna's video for the song references the film, making Luhrmann's re-signification of the original film double: not only is he referencing a singular work but also referencing another work that is a re-signification of that work. Luhrmann's ultimate creation becomes one about signification and re-signification. Using these significations and re-significations, he

repeatedly acknowledges that meanings can be cycled and recycled into different contexts. Luhrmann encourages audiences aware of the songs' original contexts to rethink their meanings and imposes his own interpretations of the music on audiences unaware of the songs' original contexts. Music, then, furthers the plot of the film while at the same time forging a connection between the audience and the characters of the film.

If *Romeo + Juliet* adds to Luhrmann's emphasis on performance, *Moulin Rouge!* is all about performance. Within the plot, there are many performances: the show ("Spectacular, Spectacular"), the elaborate means taken to trick the Duke, and the entertainment at the Moulin Rouge. The most obvious reference to performance is that of the actual theatrical show that the characters strive to create throughout the film. However, there are other plot elements that contribute to Luhrmann's emphasis on performance that are not so obvious. For example, the subplot of tricking the Duke is entirely about performance. The night Satine is supposed to meet and woo the Duke, she mistakes Christian for him, causing a bit of confusion once the truth is revealed. Zidler brings the Duke to Satine's room, still occupied by Christian, to introduce them. Satine forces Christian to hide, constantly looking over her shoulder to make sure that he is not in view. When Christian trips, knocking over some of the objects in the room, Satine performs for the Duke to divert his attention. She dances, shouts, and finally sings in order to get Christian out of the room. Ironically, the song Satine sings is an excerpt from "Your Song," the very song that Christian performed for her to get his job as the writer of the show. Taking the song from its original context in order for Christian to perform it and then taking it from Christian's context in order to divert the Duke, Luhrmann makes a statement about signification and re-signification yet again. From that very first night when Satine mistakes Christian for the Duke, to the following scene

where the creative team pitches an unwritten play to him, to the end where Satine must prove herself to the Duke in order to save Christian's life—the characters have to perform to keep their secrets safe from the Duke.

Like in his previous films, Luhrmann accentuates these moments of performance with anti-realism produced by camera techniques and overacting. Many performance scenes are not shot at normal speeds. There are many instances where slow motion or accelerated motion is used to define and emphasize moments of performance. For the song, “Spectacular, Spectacular,” Luhrmann combines the use of regular film speed with accelerated speeds to create a chaotic scene of deception. During the “Roxanne” number, Luhrmann uses the opposite effect, slowing the action down to reflect the somber tone of the scene and emphasize the sensuality of the song. Another re-signification of song in the film, “Roxanne” was originally performed by The Police on their debut record first released in 1978. Lead singer Sting wrote the song after walking through the red-light district in Paris, wondering what it would be like to fall in love with a prostitute (www.songfacts.com). Luhrmann literalizes this fantasy. In the film, this song becomes the basis for the pressure on Satine and Christian's relationship. Songfacts.com notes that Sting originally thought the song should be a tango, but it was confused by the band's reggae style. Luhrmann, however, drops the original reggae feel and makes the song a dramatic tango. “Roxanne,” then, loses some of its original meaning and context to a literal translation of the song's lyrics accompanied by Luhrmann's own agenda—the transformation of the song into what Sting had originally envisioned. The song, then, is referenced as a literalization of Sting's original intent—Christian is, in fact, in love with a prostitute. Using this story line, Luhrmann seems to suggest that the story is familiar to audiences—those that have had previous exposure to

the song already know the context and the meaning behind it. This familiarity reaches out to audiences, inviting them into the recognizable world of popular culture, and for those who do not recognize the song's original context, the song becomes merely a literalization of Christian's situation.

Characters in these scenes are almost always larger than life, played as unrealistically as possible. During the opening performance at the Moulin Rouge and throughout the film, Harold Zidler seems more of a cartoon character than a night club manager. When he goes to check on Satine after her fall and finds her ready to impress the Duke, he jumps and shouts like a child, "Everything's going so well!" Seemingly speaking more to the camera than to the other characters, Zidler instantly breaks the fourth wall that many other filmmakers have strived to maintain. This moment becomes a break in the reality of the film, a wink to the audience. Satine, too, becomes overly dramatic in many scenes when she is performing. When she attempts to seduce Christian, Satine becomes a wild woman, growling like a tiger and rolling on the floor. These unrealistic elements draw attention to each performance, singling them out whether they are taking place during musical numbers or during regular conversation. Singling these elements out, Luhrmann emphasizes role-playing through unrealistic overacting and creates a clear distinction between reality and performance.

Unlike *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo + Juliet*, however, *Moulin Rouge* is entirely about performance as it combines all of the traditional elements of performance—theatre, music, and dance. Whereas *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo + Juliet* use dancing and live music as instruments of performance separately, *Moulin Rouge* combines those elements to create a movie musical. Satine, reflecting on her life as a courtesan, sings "One Day I'll Fly Away," signifying her own struggle through music. Characters also perform through dance.

The Moulin Rouge itself is an arena for dance performances at the beginning of the film. The “Diamond Dogs” use costume and makeup to accentuate their performances and they are greeted by thousands of male audience members. Through singing, dancing, and acting, these characters perform for a different range of audiences. Using these performances, Luhrmann thus creates a hodgepodge of mythic reference. Drawing on the ideals of post-modernism, Luhrmann takes ideas from the works of others and recreates them to fit into his own concept, and by using these ideals, he references a time in which post-modernism was not present.

In *Moulin Rouge*, the color red and its connection to performance is also emphasized to a greater degree than in the two prior works. Red is used everywhere in the film, from the spinning red windmill of the night club to the red lighting. From its outward sign of the red windmill, to its name meaning “red windmill,” to its inner core, the Moulin Rouge is designated as a place for performance. This night club has a red curtain, from behind which audiences catch a first glimpse of the performers, and all of its walls are red. From behind this red curtain, Zidler’s “Diamond Dogs” emerge as the performers for the thousands of men that await them. Much of the lighting within the club is also red in color—both reinforcing the connection with theatre as well as introducing the idea of the club as a satanic underworld of the Orphic myth. Satine’s elephant bedroom is also full of red things. Its carpets, walls, and decorations are mostly red, signifying the element of sexual performance in a prostitute’s bedroom. As Satine performs for Christian, trying to make him fall in love with her, she dances in front of these red items and at one point wraps herself up in a red floor mat. Wrapping herself in her own red curtain, Satine acknowledges that she is a performance in herself. As a courtesan, Satine is not recognized as a person—she is what she does. She is

the combination of many mythic characters referenced throughout the film—Lorelei Lee, Roxanne, and Madonna. Her performance has to be in a physical form—her long, curly hair, her provocative outfits, and her dramatic makeup are a part of that performance. It is no coincidence, then, that her hair is blazoned red and her lips are always perfectly rouged.

Red clothing is also an indicator of moments of performance in the film. Satine, when she knows she must perform for the Duke, changes from her light pink costume into a deep red dress. Although she changes for her scene in her bedroom, Satine puts her red dress back on for her solo musical performance, “One Day I’ll Fly Away.” Zidler, in his opening appearance, wears a red overcoat as he sings about the greatness of the Moulin Rouge. Both of these characters wear red as they perform dance and musical numbers. The color adds definition to their performances, highlighting them as characters who are performing for audiences, known or unknown.

Using billboards as he does in *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo + Juliet*, Luhrmann inserts a cut-out billboard in this film, featuring only the word, “L’amoure.” This sign is pointed out in one of the first scenes as Christian and his followers sing about the children of the revolution. As they sing, the words “beauty,” “freedom,” and “truth” are written in the sky and as the characters sing “love,” the sign lights up with a sparkling red color. Acknowledging the presence of this sign, Luhrmann makes sure that audiences see where it is and identify it with the acting troupe’s plan to perform a play that features love, thereby linking the sign with performance. This is quite contrary to the same sign’s use in *Romeo + Juliet* as it is not acknowledged or even shown in full view. After identifying the sign’s presence, Luhrmann inserts portions of the sign into the backgrounds of different scenes. For example, as Christian looks out of his window, hoping to see Satine, the sign is present,

reminding audiences of his love. Love, then, becomes its own billboard, like the advertisement for Coca-Cola in *Strictly Ballroom*. When Christian first arrives in Paris, he wants to fall in love so that he can write about it, and he ironically rents a room just over the large billboard advertising love. When Christian tries to convince Satine that they should continue their affair with the song, “Come What May,” the sign is visible, as a reminder of their love and their performance of love. As a billboard, this sign becomes a representation of advertisement and popular culture. Its presence indicates that popular culture dictates what love is and where it resides. However, in this film Luhrmann ultimately disproves the importance he has placed in popular culture throughout his films. While the literal signs of love are all present, Luhrmann seems concludes in the end that those signs are not enough to create a “happily ever after.”

In *Moulin Rouge*, Luhrmann creates a modern day homage to the movie musical, complete with all of the conventions of the classic musical. Like the classic movie musical, characters sing and dance at specific times during the film as musical numbers. Luhrmann, like earlier directors of movie musicals, incorporates songs and tunes that are recognizable to the viewer. Musical artists from the 1980s and 1990s, like David Bowie and Madonna, are mainly represented among the songs incorporated into the film. Characters sing the songs themselves, and each song applies to what the character feels at that particular moment. Like the classical musical, characters sing for different reasons, sometimes in performance and sometimes just in reflection. They sing to each other and they sing by themselves. When they sing, they often perform a dance routine to accompany the music. Other conventions, such as the dream sequence are also in place. Featured in other movie musicals such as *Oklahoma!*, *The Red Shoes*, and *Singin’ in the Rain*, the dream sequence often features

unrealistic or uncharacteristic song and dance numbers. In *The Red Shoes*, characters perform in a ballet that represents the struggle of getting and keeping performance ability. Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) in *Singin' in the Rain* envisions the opening number of his film in a dream-like sequence. Set pieces are exaggerated and, as in *Oklahoma!* and *The Red Shoes*, music is emphasized. In *Moulin Rouge*, however, this convention is also mocked. As Christian sings “Your Song” to Satine, they step out of Satine’s room onto a cloud that allows them to dance over the skyline of Paris. The moon sings to them, and their clothes become sparkly, creating the same anti-realistic effects that the classic films use. When the song is over, the two are magically placed back in Satine’s room as if the dream sequence never happened. Using these conventions, Luhrmann fashions the film as a tribute to the classic movie musical.

Along with these conventions of the movie musical, Luhrmann adds references to other movie musicals within the film. At the beginning of the film, Toulouse-Lautrec and his theatrical friends invite Christian to stand in for the main character of their play. When Christian decides to help them, the audience realizes that these Bohemians are attempting to create *The Sound of Music*. The song they create together is one of the most recognizable songs from the musical, the main theme also entitled “The Sound of Music.” Even the plot elements they describe fit the original movie musical: it takes place in Austria, the male lead is a naval officer, and the female lead is a nun. The characters, therefore, are creating a musical that has already been created. With this, Luhrmann comments on his own art form, making it perfectly clear that his own intentions are much the same—he intends to reproduce a form that has already been created.

Other references to movie musicals abound within the film as well. During the dream sequence when Satine and Christian dance on a cloud, Christian runs up to a street lamp on the cloud and jumps on it. This one movement is an echo of another classic movie musical, *Singin' in the Rain*. In this musical, Don Lockwood sings the title song and at one point jumps on a similar street lamp. This is one of the most referenced scenes in musical history, and Luhrmann continues to add to the musical references just in case his audience members miss this reference. During this same scene, Satine and Christian begin a ballroom dance reminiscent of the famed Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers numbers within their musicals. Satine's first song is taken not from popular music but from the 1953 musical, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Singing "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend," Satine becomes a re-signification of Lorelei Lee. As in the analogous scene in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Satine is surrounded by men offering gifts of love but will only take diamonds.⁴ Referencing all of these scenes from movie musicals, Luhrmann is finding a place for his musical among the classics.⁵ These references pay homage to the musical genre, resulting in a work that is highly self-reflective.

Pushing the reference to the romantic comedy even further, Luhrmann creates *Moulin Rouge* with both overbearing comedic elements and romantic references. Whereas many of the characters in *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo + Juliet* are humorously exaggerated, all of the characters in *Moulin Rouge* perform at least one moment of exaggerated comedy, even the romantic couple themselves. Like the characters surrounding the romantic couples in the previous films, the secondary characters perform exaggerated scenes for comic effect.

⁴ In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, men surrounding Lorelei offer hearts, a gesture of love, but she only accepts gifts of diamonds. It is also interesting to note that both of these scenes take place in bars in Paris, creating an even stronger parallel between the two films.

⁵ This is reminiscent of the concept behind *Singin' in the Rain* as discussed by Jane Feuer and as will be discussed in greater detail in the conclusion of this paper.

Toulouse repeatedly makes funny remarks in his drunken state; Harold Zidler uses exaggerated facial expressions and often embellishes his speech, comically emphasizing every word; and the Duke is often comically oblivious to everything around him. Even Christian and Satine are exaggeratedly comic. When Satine believes that Christian is the Duke, she tries to seduce him, and ends up crawling on the floor and moaning, creating a humorous spectacle of herself. When she realizes that he is not the Duke, Satine forces Christian to hide, and they both try to trick the Duke as Christian gives Satine the words to seduce him. This scene is complete with the exaggeration of both characters as Satine ends up dancing about the room, trying to distract the Duke, and Christian runs about the room looking for a place to hide, even trying to hide behind a curtain that only covers his face.

Like the comedic elements of the film, romantic elements are also pushed to the limit. Similar to *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo + Juliet*, there are many scenes where the lovers are together in a romantic setting. However, these moments are usually exaggerated with elements of scenery. For example, when Satine and Christian decide to become lovers, their rendition of Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" is accented by the window behind them, in the shape of a heart, exploding in pink glitter. This adds to the fantasy of the film, and also poignantly points out the emphasis on love and romance. Luhrmann seems to be overemphasizing the obvious, creating a film that has all of the fantastical elements of love. Love is the major theme of the film—seen in the emphasis on love in the Bohemian ideals and the generically love-centered mise-en-scene. These accents make it completely obvious that the couple is falling in love, and this over-emphasis adds to the anti-realism that the entire work embodies. Luhrmann is making it clear that commercialized on-screen romance is purely fictitious.

However, as in *Romeo + Juliet*, the romantic comedy references are shattered with a tragic ending. This, too, has some precedence in the movie musical genre. Although many of the classic movie musicals end happily ever after, some musicals, mostly either more modern musicals or those from the Depression, do end tragically. Movie musicals like Jerome Roberts and Robert Wise's *West Side Story* (1961) feature plots of anger and jealousy and end with a tragic death. *Moulin Rouge* is no different. The opening of the film—showing Christian hunched over his typewriter with a voiceover telling the audience that the woman he loved is now dead—and the ending of the film—when Satine dies—form serious bookends to an otherwise comic film. This is a common feature of musicals during the Depression age. Lloyd Bacon's *42nd Street* (1933) features a lively enough opening, but the first ten minutes focus on the serious aspects of putting on a show. Similarly, the ending seems quite out of place compared to the remainder of the film, showing the director of the show Julian Marsh (Warner Baxter) sitting on the fire escape stairs, still unappreciated by his show's audience. However, unlike the serious bookends that make up Depression films such as *42nd Street*, *Moulin Rouge* exhibits a mixture between the two time periods. There are many moments during the film that remind audiences Satine will die at the end, including a cut to her death scene during her first musical number. Satine is often seen coughing up blood, a sign of her impending death. Through these references, Luhrmann creates the façade of the fairy tale romantic comedy constantly interjected with the reality of tragedy and death—a mixture between the unhappy bookends of Depression age musicals and the tragic modern musicals such as *West Side Story*. For Luhrmann, love is a fairy tale and death is real—the duality of these two elements within the film work against each other throughout.

It is this duality that drives the play, undermining instances of romance with the finality of death.

Moulin Rouge, unlike *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo + Juliet*, contains all internal, plot references to film. Along with the already mentioned references to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Singin' in the Rain*, the film also makes references to French New Wave films using similar shots and familiar images. During Satine's opening performance at the Moulin Rouge, her costume and routine parallel that of Lola in Jacques Demy's 1963 film, *Lola*. In this film, Lola (Anouk Aimee), a prostitute, dances in a sparkling costume with a top hat for her barroom performance. Satine and Christian's first kiss is reminiscent of Bernadette and Gerard's kiss atop a stadium in *Les Mistons*, also a New Wave film directed by Francois Truffaut. As Bernadette and Gerard kiss, they are framed in a medium shot that looks out on the city of Paris, and a cut to a close up reverses this shot, giving the viewer a different angle of the kiss. Similarly in *Moulin Rouge*, Christian and Satine kiss in front of a window that overlooks Paris, and as they kiss, a 360 degree pan reverses the shot so that the viewer sees the kiss from the opposite angle.

These references to the New Wave movement in France signify Luhrmann's acknowledgment of previous innovators in cinematic form. Luhrmann places himself in the situation of the New Wave filmmaker, reacting to social changes by returning to a style of film. New Wave directors reacted against film as mere entertainment, citing it as a unique art form. These directors celebrated American directors such as Alfred Hitchcock that succeeded in creating that art form in the very commercial environment of Hollywood. Luhrmann, too, reacts in many of the same ways. With *Moulin Rouge*, Luhrmann is celebrating film as art, referencing Francois Truffaut, the most well-known of all New Wave

directors, to do so. He is also, however, reacting against a similar wave of popular disinterest in the movie musical genre. While the proponents of the New Wave sought to draw academia into the cinematic field, Luhrmann attempts to draw attention to the movie musical genre by revisiting an approach to the genre. Alluding to the ground-breaking approach that the New Wave directors took during the 1950s and 1960s, Luhrmann places *Moulin Rouge* in a similar movement, a renewed approach to the movie musical in the United States.

As the finale for Luhrmann's trilogy, *Moulin Rouge* represents the fruition of Red Curtain Cinema. Strengthening the same connections between theatricality and cinema as seen in his earlier films, Luhrmann creates a film that not only merges the two mediums but also pays special attention to the popular culture surrounding the theatre and cinema.

Luhrmann compiles references to many other films, signifying them and then re-signifying them within his own context of the film. With each signification, he references works that are important within the context of the film and useful in understanding the film. Luhrmann, in using these references, speaks to audiences who may be familiar with their original contexts, using others' work to strengthen his own. Audiences not familiar with the original contexts of these references are introduced to a re-signification of them. Many of his recycled lyrics have been reborn with the younger generations who, like audiences of classic movie musicals, may not have seen or remember their original referents.

Luhrmann's film reenergized the movie musical genre—he, like his predecessors, has succeeded in paying homage to the form. Millions of audiences have seen and/or own the film. Other directors have continued with this re-signification, referencing *Moulin Rouge* within their films. Films like *Chicago* (2002) and *Phantom of the Opera* (2004) reference Luhrmann's post-modern form and other films like *It's a Very Merry Muppet Christmas*

Movie (2002), *The Cat in the Hat* (2003), and *EuroTrip* (2004) contain spoofs of the film (IMDB). With its over-the-top approach to musicality, performance, and self-awareness, this film easily places itself among one of the most innovative films of the 21st century.

However, this form is not as new as it first appears. Ultimately, Luhrmann creates the fruition of his own form by following earlier model. Continuing the re-signification of other filmic texts, he succeeds in recreating the ideas found in *Singin' in the Rain* within a post-modern context.

CONCLUSION

Roland Barthes, in his theories of mythology, defines myth as an everyday occurrence:

Myths are nothing but this ceaseless, untiring solicitation, this insidious and inflexible demand that all men recognize themselves in this image, eternal yet bearing a date, which was built of them one day as if for all time. (155)

Recognizing myth as a “demand” that people must adhere to, Barthes argues that myth stipulates meaning, and every myth can have a different interpretation for different individuals. Baz Luhrmann, in his Red Curtain Trilogy, encourages much the same thing, referencing the mythologies of theatre and cinema to create a hybrid of the two. Luhrmann encourages his audiences to have a sense of recognition and appreciation for the two art forms that will last forever. However, through these mythic references, Luhrmann creates a trilogy of films that are not fully ambiguous in their meaning. His mythologies are recognizable within the context of each art form, and the way in which he repeatedly invokes them suggests that Luhrmann leaves much room for individual interpretation. As in his own documentary on the making of his films, *Behind the Red Curtain*, Luhrmann clearly addresses the connections to both theatre and cinema throughout each film, repeating and transforming the references throughout the trilogy. Luhrmann appears to believe that one need only recognize the referents he places in his films to understand their meaning. However, he could not be more wrong.

As seen in the previous chapters, theatre is addressed in Luhrmann's films as myth. Using references to performance, theatrical imitation, and social signifiers of theatre such as the color red, Luhrmann catches an audience's attention, drawing them into a world of the theatrical. However, he uses these invocations as myth. Throughout the progression of the trilogy, Luhrmann uses the same referents to theatre, repeatedly evoking images as signifiers for the theatrical and progressively building on them. Performance is foregrounded throughout, from the emphasis on spectatorship in *Strictly Ballroom*, to the prominence of exaggerated performance in *Romeo + Juliet*, to the actual fruition of theatrical performance in *Moulin Rouge*. Live performances as seen in these films become a signifier of the theatrical in the same way that the color red is used to emphasize the theatricality of those performances. Placing these same signifiers throughout his trilogy and progressively accentuating them, Luhrmann creates a step ladder for a cinematic form that is ultimately all about theatricality.

Similarly, Luhrmann also references the cinematic as myth throughout the trilogy. Using signifiers such as the use of the movie musical and romantic comedy genres as well as a certain degree of self-reflexivity in each of the films, he draws attention to the fact that the films are not reality—they are merely movies. In *Strictly Ballroom*, the “happily ever after” ending seems to spring from nowhere. In a fit of romanticism, the entire audience of the Pan-Pacific Grand Prix joins in to dance with Fran and Scott, and all of the problems of the film fade away without a trace. *Romeo + Juliet*'s nightly news bookends function similarly, reminding audiences that the story was merely the “two hour's traffic of [the] stage.” Ultimately, with *Moulin Rouge*, Luhrmann combines the unrealistic, fantastical elements of the movie musical along with the fantasy romanticism as seen in other films that pioneered

that romanticism. He uses these signifiers to identify his films as films, not mask his story as a realistic reflection of life like so many film directors of today attempt to achieve. In order to achieve this, Luhrmann pairs reality with fantasy, constantly setting them against each other. In *Romeo + Juliet*, he pairs the modern visual translation of Shakespeare's play with the text's original speech. This dual focus is emphasized throughout the film, creating a constant opposition between the two. Seen again in *Moulin Rouge*, this struggle becomes about the fantasy of love and life against the finality and inevitability of death. As the trilogy progresses, this struggle becomes more obvious as elements of realism and fantasy are presented in a starker contrast. As these elements are contrasted, however, elements of the musical are progressively added, suggesting that the fine line between reality and fantasy is more concrete in a musical.

Also seen in these films is the constant reminder of popular culture and its influence on society. In *Strictly Ballroom*, Luhrmann references popular culture through its form. Modeled after *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Strictly Ballroom* has similar characters, a parallel plot line, and comparable scenes. Using such a popular form for the foundation of his opening film in the trilogy, Luhrmann immediately sets up the importance of popular culture to audience understanding. Adapting from Shakespeare for his second film, he continues a tradition that Shakespeare himself began. Shakespeare, during his time, constantly adapted ideas from popular story lines. Character types and plots in Shakespeare's plays were familiar to audiences, but people came to see the shows even when they already knew what was going to happen. Luhrmann counts on the same response. Whereas Shakespeare uses mostly words to create these references, Luhrmann uses images and music. All of the signs within *Verona Beach* reference a Shakespearean play, but the words become re-signified into

a new meaning. Luhrmann uses the images onscreen to reference genre, using subtitles and introducing characters at the beginning of the film much like the opening sequence of a television show or action adventure movie. *Moulin Rouge*, as the third and final film in this collection, is filled with references to popular culture. Repeated images from earlier films, songs and lyrics from popular hits, and character references from other works create a web of popular culture that surrounds the characters within this world, interweaving a sense of referentiality within the film. Using these references to popular culture, Luhrmann creates a foundation for audience understanding. Popular culture becomes the method by which he invokes the mythology of theatre and cinema within the films.

Jane Feuer, in her article entitled “The Self-reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment,” speaks about what she calls “the myth of integration.” This myth, she argues, suggests that “successful performances are intimately bound up with success in love, with the integration of the individual into a community or a group, and even with the merger of high art with popular art” (35). Through performance, as Feuer suggests, two art forms that are typically in opposition can be fused together, integrated into one form. Feuer goes on to say that the reasoning behind creating and resolving this duality in film is to include different audiences in the vision of the film:

Everyone knows that the musical film was a mass art produced by a tiny elite for a vast and amorphous consuming public; the self-reflective musical attempts to overcome this division through the myth of integration. It offers a vision of musical performance originating in the folk, generating love and a cooperative spirit which includes everyone in its grasp and which can conquer all obstacles. By promoting audience identification with the collectively

produced shows, the myth of integration seeks to give the audience a sense of participation in the creation of the film itself. The musical film becomes a mass art which aspires to the condition of folk art—produced and consumed by the same integrated community. (36)

Musicals that then identify themselves as such are attempting to integrate themselves into popular culture, a culture inclusive of different types of people. Feuer concludes in her article that the self-reflective MGM musical presents a “contradiction between live performance in the theatre and the frozen form of cinema by implying that the MGM musical *is* theatre, possesses the immediate and active relationship to its audience” (38). Cinema as theatre, then, is, according to Feuer, found within the self-reflective musical produced by MGM during the Golden Age.

Luhrmann adds to this discussion, creating a trilogy of films that all speak to this relationship. As in Feuer’s argument, Luhrmann attempts to bridge the gaps between cinema and theatre through self-reflexive tone and content. Luhrmann attempts to create this same integration throughout all of his films, moving progressively from the popular 1990s genre of the non-diegetic movie musical to the reincarnation of the classic movie musical. Referencing cinema and theatre side by side, Luhrmann integrates the two mediums into what he calls a “theatricalized cinematic form.”

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Luhrmann also attempts to reverse the decline in the movie musical genre by creating a trilogy that continuously moves toward the creation of a musical. *Moulin Rouge* becomes the result of this introspection, a reinvention of the musical for a new millennium. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 3, many of the ideas behind *Moulin Rouge* can also be seen in Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly’s *Singin’ in*

the Rain. Created at another time of decline for the movie musical, *Singin' in the Rain* is a celebration of the form. It, like *Moulin Rouge*, references other musicals before it, drawing from the conventions and themes that previous movie musical directors and writers created. Many of its scenes focus on the self-reflexivity of the film—Don (Gene Kelly) announces his love to Kathy (Debbie Reynolds) only after creating the right scenic mood complete with a beautiful sunset, a balcony, and a slight breeze.

Luhrmann does much the same thing with *Moulin Rouge*. Like *Singin' in the Rain*, *Moulin Rouge* was created in a time of stagnation for the movie musical. Many of the musical-like films of the 1990s were a continuation of the form in a non-diegetic fashion, yet Luhrmann pushes the envelope, bringing back the classic movie musical by creating an homage to the genre—a modernized version of *Singin' in the Rain*. The deconstruction and rebuilding of the genre found in *Singin' in the Rain* is also a major part of *Moulin Rouge*. However, *Moulin Rouge* also attempts to modernize the musical genre through the use of technology and post-modern editing techniques. Whereas *Singin' in the Rain* provides a commentary on the technology that preceded the film, *Moulin Rouge* exemplifies the technology that helped create it. While both films allow for not only the referencing of theatre and cinema, *Moulin Rouge* is also about the referencing of pop culture. To Luhrmann, pop culture seems to be just as important. The mythic references in *Moulin Rouge* signify that Luhrmann is familiar with the genre, but this does not necessarily mean that the product loses the magic that the classic movie musicals exude.

Luhrmann, in creating his Red Curtain Cinema, creates a reactionary text to film history. His films reverse the trend of phasing out movie musicals by progressively adding elements of the movie musical into his films, offering popular culture as a means to justify

this reversal. Luhrmann's continual emphasis on the theatrical and cinematic form, along with the integration of the two, erases the fine line between theatre and cinema and suggests that the two may work together. The result is a delicate balance between the two mediums that he creates, ultimately achieving a theatricalized cinematic form that is both self-referential and entertaining to the masses.

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