

# Star-crossed lovers

You know the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, but prepare to see it in a whole new light via a groundbreaking gender-fluid interpretation through ballet. By Ella O’Keeffe.

Two households, fair Verona, death-mark’d love and star-crossed lovers. The tale of *Romeo and Juliet* is well-known and understood. As a ballet, it has been danced thousands of times, every moment of love, lust, infatuation, pain and tragedy reinterpreted by performers. Their own experiences woven through movement, each step laden with meaning for an audience to witness. What might happen, then, if the story folded in on itself? If forbidden love was explored through subtext alongside its famous plot and brought into a contemporary context? In Benjamin Millepied’s *Romeo & Juliet Suite*, this is exactly what the director of the L.A. Dance Company is hoping to explore. Performing at the Sydney Opera House in June, the acclaimed ballet involves three couples dancing the *pas-de-deux* main roles with male-male, female-female and female-male pairings across six shows. The dance is underscored by a live cinema component, telling the classic story through a modern lens with footage that takes place in present-day Los Angeles while the dancers move throughout the theatre space.

“For me, it’s really special being a gay man and actually getting to dance with another guy on stage to tell this story,” says David Adrian Freeland, who is the star of the ballet and has performed as Romeo since the interpretation originated in 2018. “It’s so beautiful, and something you dream of and for. Now here we are, where I can dance on stage with someone I’ve known for a really long time, but each day I get on stage, I have to meet them as if this is our first time, and then fall in love with them.” For Freeland, it’s so significant that he is able to be part of showing the audience an alternative way to be portrayed in ballet – a way that might reflect their own reality – when shifting gender roles still isn’t common practice in classical ballet. Nayomi Van Brunt, who joined the ballet in 2019 and will travel to Australia to play Juliet, echoes Freeland’s devotion to representation. Being a Black woman dancing a role traditionally portrayed through the lens of whiteness is significant to her, as well as the different experience that

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comes with dancing across from a female partner. “It’s really cool to see how that dynamic within the partnering changes, or even the emotion between us, which I find really interesting,” she reflects. “There are times I feel like we’re super-vulnerable and emotional, and there’s something about that which is different from what I’ve experienced with male counterparts.” It’s this level of emotion she is able to access when dancing with her partner, Daphne Fernberger, that is reflected back through the audience when the curtains come down.

“There are so many people after shows that are crying and feel seen. It’s really beautiful. We kind of forget because it’s our job, but to get that experience from the audience and hear their perspective and how they feel seen, that’s the most important and beautiful thing – that our art is making an impact on people.”

The classic tale of *Romeo and Juliet* is grounded in tragedy, as much of Shakespeare’s work is. Historically, queer stories have been told in a similar vein – centred around the concept of forbidden love and, ultimately, its devastating end. In many parts of the world today, these stories are still an upsetting reality. For Freeland, this theme is a constant throughout his life and work, but there was something about the classicism of this particular dance that made it easier to process.

“For me it’s layered. I’m queer, and I’m Black, so just death in itself and self-inflicted harm is such a strong and powerful thing, that I kind of have to pull back those layers,” he explains. “In thinking about queer narratives and how they’re depicted and displayed, you’re always hoping they get a happy ending without a disease to take them, or drugs, or suicide, or harm by somebody else. So in this regard, because it’s so tied to a story, I was able to compartmentalise this. But we did have conversations with one of our rehearsal directors at one point. He was like, ‘This is kind of hard for us as queer people, so how do we use that to also make it beautiful? That it’s not this sad thing, within the realm of this story?’ But because Shakespeare wrote it so beautifully, it’s still the same all around.”

He continues: “But you do think about it, and I can only imagine audience members thinking about it. Maybe those queer people in the audience who have lost their partner, or somebody they were dating for a long time and could never tell their families about. Those things still live here in this world. And that’s why I think it’s important we do get to share this ballet more and more, because we are moving the needle in our own silent way.” *Benjamin Millepied’s Romeo & Juliet Suite is on at the Sydney Opera House from June 5–9.*



A dancer from the *Romeo & Juliet Suite*.

JULIEN BENHAMOU, JOSH ROSE



**From top:** Nayomi Van Brunt will travel to Australia to perform. **Left:** David Adrian Freeland as Romeo (centre). **Below:** Van Brunt dancing Juliet on stage in Paris in 2022.

