

Romeo and Juliet: Character Sketches

Romeo:

Used to be the leader of the Montague gang. A fierce fighter, he has backed away from that destructive life in search of greater meaning. Friar Laurence is his mentor in this. Romeo is lifelong friends with Benvolio and Mercutio... very close...which can be seen clearly by the way they play. His search for something else in life leads him to fixate on love. He is in love with the idea of love in the beginning, but when he finds the real thing, everything changes.

Juliet:

Note that I have taken out all references to her being 14 years old. Juliet is highly intelligent, mature beyond her years and has huge depth of emotion...extraordinary for someone who has been so closely kept at home. With distant parents, the nurse is her only confidant. She, like Romeo, sees the uselessness of the feud that is destroying Verona. That they feel the same way, further binds them together and gives them strength to cross the barricade.

Benvolia:

Kinswoman and constant friend of Romeo and Mercutio... but there is more there with Mercutio. She is a fierce gang fighter with a reputation to match. But now, like Romeo, she wants to leave it behind and find a new life.

Mercutio:

'Mercurial (adjective) subject to sudden or unpredictable changes of mood or mind.'
Mercutio overflows with imagination, satire and sexual double entendres. Hot-headed. Dislikes pretensions and posers. Kinsman of the Prince and the Montagues. Lifelong friends with Romeo and Benvolia.

Tybalt:

Edgy, vain, aggressive, fashionable. Leader of the Capulet gang. Renowned swordsman. Could be played as an aloof but dangerous patrician or as someone with almost uncontrollable nervous energy ready to explode into violence at any moment.

Nurse:

Usually played as a kindly duffer who cannot stop talking, injecting comedy into the play. That works, but she could also be played as a person of intelligence who hides it and her deep feelings, especially for Juliet, behind a stream of comic words. Childless and husbandless, her entire wellbeing is dependent on the Capulets. Juliet puts her in a very difficult position when she falls in love with a Montague.

Friar Laurence:

Franciscan friar, with all that means regarding deep love for both humanity and nature. A calm, decent and thoughtful man, skilled in the use of herbs, he also is put in a dangerous position when Romeo, whom he mentors, falls in love with Juliet and then kills Tybalt. When he helps the two lovers, he runs foul of all the powerful elements in Verona... the Prince, who banished Romeo, and both the Capulets and the Montagues.

Friar John:

Friend of Friar Laurence and deeply looks up to him as his mentor. Abashed when things go wrong and the letter cannot be delivered to Romeo in Mantua. Could double as a townsfolk in the opening scene, a guest at the Capulet party and perhaps a Watchman.

Capulet:

Head of an ancient and noble house in Verona. A decent and thinking man, he is starting to doubt why the feud with the Montagues need continue. Might have moved on this, but he gets overtaken by events: the death of Tybalt, Juliet's refusal of Paris and then the ultimate tragedy at the end of the play.

Lady Capulet:

The fraught environment in Verona has worn her down and keeps her pre-occupied. She seems cynical and prone to anger. Young when she bore Juliet, her love for her child seems very distant, as was often the case in noble families. She leaves her upbringing to the nurse. What is the state of her marriage to the significantly older Capulet?

Montague:

Head of an ancient and noble house in Verona. Genuinely cares for his wife and son, Romeo. But he loses all... which should be deeply felt in the final scene of the play.

Lady Montague:

Unlike Lady Capulet, she remains deeply focused on her family. I see her as someone who, behind the scenes, is pushing her husband to end the feud. The banishment of her son is too much for her.

Apothecary:

A small but vital role to quote 'Shakespeare in Love'. He/she represents the marginalised of Italian society, too focused on struggling to survive to care about the lives of the nobility or the niceties of the law. Could be played straight or with a clear chip on the shoulder about this.

Paris:

A handsome, aristocratic and genuinely noble man whose misfortune is to get caught up in the hurricane that is Verona. Though usually played as a rich, aloof and not overly bright person, I think he could be very different... a truly noble, kind and thoughtful man. The audience should sympathise with Paris in my view.

The Prince:

Tries to keep the lid on the violence endemic in Verona, but his/her efforts are complicated by familial links with the key families. Mercutio and Paris are both relatives. While he/she/they is a commanding personality and has the authority to throw people in jail, it doesn't happen, causing deep regret in the end.

Balthasar:

Montague gang member. Probably on the young side. Looks up to Romeo as the great fighter. Probably has heard loads of stories about his exploits. Doesn't understand why he would ever want to back away from the gang, but is still eager to help and serve his idol.

Petra:

I have combined the roles of servant and Peter into one. (May double as a Capulet gang member in the first scene.) A comic relief character, she is not educated (cannot read), but has a lovely native wit...saucy and quick with a rye comment.

Sampson, Gregory, Chiara:

Capulet gang members. Loads of swagger, especially when top fighter Tybalt is around. They will be party guests in the Capulet party scene, will back Tybalt in his fights with Mercutio and then Romeo and may double as Watchmen.

Abraham, Mariana:

Montague gang members along with Balthasar. With Romeo having dropped out of the gang, they look up to Mercutio as their top fighter. Again, full of swagger with quick tempers. Will double in other ensemble roles.

Watchmen:

Mixed ages and genders. They are not professional soldiers or polizia, but have been drafted into service by the Prince as part of their civic duty. Lower class members of society would rotate into these roles when ordered to. Probably unskilled workers or tradespeople. Appalled by the violence at the end of the play.