

DROP DEAD, JULIET!

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT BY
Allison Williams



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Drop Dead, Juliet! is a theatrical variation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Juliet has had enough of the poison, enough of the stabbing and especially enough of the dying. She wants a new story and she wants it now.

Playwright Bio

Allison Williams trained in mask and movement theatre and playwriting, and holds an MFA from Western Michigan University. Her plays include: A musical of THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME (Jenny Wiley Music Theatre, KY), THE TALE OF TSURU (adapted from the Japanese, Western Michigan University and the University of South Florida), HAMLETTE and MMMBETH (published by Theatrefolk), and the commedia dell'arte shows THE SCARLET HEART (Theatrefolk), PANTALONE RIDES AGAIN, and THE TAMING OF PANTALONE. Her short play, MISS KENTUCKY was a Heideman award finalist, and HAMLETTE won a Mark Twain Humor Award. Her radio trilogy, DEAD MEN DON'T CARRY HANDBAGS, DEAD MEN DON'T JAYWALK, and DEAD MEN DON'T CATCH BOUQUETS aired on National Public Radio. Allison's essays have appeared in The New York Times and Magic Magazine. She has told stories on CBC's Definitely Not The Opera, NPR's The Moth, and PRI's Snap Judgment. Allison has also written a YA novel about mental illness, ALL THESE LITTLE STARS, and is working on a YA adaptation of Oliver Twist, set in present-day New York.

Synopsis

The play begins with the last scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Juliet has woken up and found Romeo dead by her side. She pulls out the dagger to join Romeo in death... and decides not to go through with it. She stops the story to the confusion of the other characters. The most confused is Shakespeare himself. Juliet confronts Shakespeare—she wants a better story with more love, less death and more parts for girls. And if she doesn't get the opportunity to re-write it, she threatens to share Shakespeare's secrets with the leading ladies from his other plays. Shakespeare agrees. Juliet's first task is to give most of the male roles to women (Friar Lawrence becomes Sister Lawrence). But after that, things get rocky. The opening fight turns into a dance-off which leaves Juliet pleading with Shakespeare to help her. "Give me one chance to change my

story.” By seeing the first few scenes for the first time, Juliet learns how fickle Romeo is and wonders if their love at first sight story isn’t as great as she thought. When she sees Romeo at the Capulet party, he won’t talk about anyone but Rosaline. She tries to get him to do the traditional dialogue and get into the romantic moments but it’s not working. She wants legendary love; he doesn’t even want to hold her hand. At the same time, Tybalt and other characters have decided that if Juliet gets to stay alive in the play, they should too. Juliet puts them off and pushes Mercutio and Tybalt to fight. Romeo wanders on writing love poetry to Rosaline. He couldn’t care less about Juliet. This infuriates her. She takes her dagger and lunges at Romeo. Mercutio gets in the way and is stabbed. Romeo takes the dagger and goes after Juliet but this time it’s Tybalt who gets stabbed. From here the story moves faster than Juliet can keep track of. She is told that she must marry Paris or die. Romeo is banished. Sister Lawrence tells Juliet to take poison that will make her look dead. Romeo drinks the poison instead and ends up dead. Juliet accuses Shakespeare of having planned for things to end up this way all along. But she agrees that her version of the story was not as great as Shakespeare’s. Shakespeare admits that he hates it when Juliet dies. This convinces her to stick to the script and *Romeo and Juliet* ends as it always does—the tragic love story of Juliet and her Romeo.

Characters

Capulets

JULIET: Confrontational. Thinks she’s right and doing the right thing.

NURSE: Always looking for a way to be centre stage. “There are no small parts!”

LORD CAPULET: Juliet’s dad. A believer in tough love. Wants Juliet to do what he says.

LADY CAPULET: Juliet’s mom. Typical mom. Not sure about the new direction.

GREGORY: Lover of wordplay.

SAMPSON: He does bite his thumb, ma’am.

TYBALT: Prince of Cats. Only one life, though. Doesn’t want to die.

Montagues

ROMEO: Weak. Classic moody romantic lover to the extreme. A big scaredy-cat.

ABRAM: Initiates the dance-off.

MERCUTIO: Generally good natured, when he isn't wishing a plague on your house.

LADY MONTAGUE: Romeo's mom. Willing to stand up for herself... up to a point.

A MONTAGUE: Worried about the Montagues looking bad.

Others

SHAKESPEARE: Thinks he's right and doing the right thing. Proud of his work. He's not arrogant but he does think he's the greatest playwright of all time.

PRINCE/PRINCESS: Authoritative.

FRIAR/SISTER LAWRENCE: Like a modern psychiatrist with an edge. Thinks poisoning Juliet would be a "fun plot twist."

FRIAR JOHN: The stupid one.

OPHELIA: The fragile, silent, "runs off crying" type.

DESDEMONA: Worried. Listens to Juliet.

Themes

Identity, Self-image, Autonomy, Change, Relationships

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ Have you ever been in a position where someone else has made a decision for you?
- ★ Have you tried to change a decision someone has made for you?

- ★ How do you see yourself?
- ★ How do you think others see you?
- ★ Are there elements of your personal story that you wish you could change?
- ★ If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
- ★ Does being a certain gender ever get in the way?
- ★ Do you believe we set our own path in life?

Pre-Read Activities

Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a short poem as their source material. The point is to have students work quickly.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation definition: To make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students adapt the poem into a scene. They don't have to use the words of the poem, but the scene must be connected to the poem. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the scene must have characters and a conflict, and take place in a specific location.
 - » What characters can be derived from the poem?
 - » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the poem?
 - » What conflict can be derived from the poem?
- ★ The scene should be less than one minute. Give groups time to discuss, create, rehearse and present.

- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences of the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Romeo and Juliet Modern Exercise

- ★ As a class, read a synopsis of the original *Romeo and Juliet*. Make sure everyone knows the plot points of the original story.
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group is to make a modern version of the original story. How would they adapt the story to make it fit into a modern context? How will the actions of the characters change? Will the story end the same way in modern times? Why or why not?
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation definition: To make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Change Reflection

- ★ Write a reflection about the direction of your life and one thing you would like to change. Some questions to consider:
 - » Where do you think your life is headed?
 - » What's one thing in your past you'd like to change?
 - » How would that change affect your present?
 - » What life decisions do you have control over?

Change Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group is to create a one-minute scene. A character is given the opportunity to change one thing in their life. Some questions to consider:
 - » Who offers this change?
 - » Are there any consequences for accepting the change?
 - » How does the change affect the people around you?
 - » Does the character reject the opportunity? If so, why?

Fairy Tale Change Exercise

- ★ As a class, choose a fairy tale with a female character at its centre (Snow White, Cinderella, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty).
- ★ Discuss one character decision which would greatly change the story.
 - » For example, Rapunzel doesn't wait for someone to come save her. She cuts her hair, uses it to make a rope ladder and climbs out of the tower.
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create a one-minute version of the new fairy tale based on the one change.
- ★ Discuss afterward: Do students like the new versions or the original?

Gender Change Discussion

- ★ As a class, discuss stories, plays, or movies that have a large number of male characters. Choose one as a class.
- ★ Divide the class into groups. Each group will discuss and decide how the story would change if the majority of the genders in the story changed.
- ★ Groups will share their findings.

Life Decision Scene

- ★ Divide students into pairs. Pairs will create a one-minute scene in which one character makes a life decision for the other character. The second character does not resist.
- ★ Have pairs do the scene again, but this time the second character resists the decision. What tactics do they use to get the first character to change their mind?
- ★ Have pairs do the scene again. This time the second character takes action to not only resist, but go in a different direction. The first character is completely against this. How is the scene resolved?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Drop Dead, Juliet!* individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions.

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. Finish this sentence: "Love stories don't end with funerals, they end with _____."

3. What does Juliet want?
4. What does Juliet tell Desdemona to do?
5. Which characters change from boys to girls?
6. Who is Romeo really in love with?
7. What part does Mercutio usually play?
8. What's wrong with the balcony?
9. How does Tybalt want to change the story?
10. Who says the line "Drop dead, Juliet"?
11. How does Capulet react when Juliet says she won't marry Paris?
12. Who thinks poisoning would be a "fun plot twist?"
13. How many scenes in the original do Romeo and Juliet have together?
14. Finish this sentence: "I hate it when you _____."
15. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. What does "wherefore" mean?
2. Analyze Juliet's use of language. What kind of words does she use? What can you infer about her character based on her vocabulary and word choice?
3. How would you costume Juliet based on her personality? Use the text to support your answer.
4. How does this portrayal of Juliet differ from the original character in *Romeo and Juliet*?
5. In your opinion, why has the playwright chosen to change Juliet's personality?

6. Based on the way Romeo speaks, how would you visualize him? What is his physicality?
7. In your opinion, why does the playwright blend modern and Shakespearean language? What is the impact?
8. What is the significance of the line “Give me one chance to change my story”?
9. What is the significance of the line “Your lines were better”?
10. What is the tone of the play? Cite the text to support your answer.
11. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Drop Dead, Juliet!*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about gender? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about sacrifice? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. What is the playwright trying to say about identity? Cite the text to support your answer.
5. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with decision making with what happens to Juliet in the play.
6. Why does Juliet decide to play the character as Shakespeare intended at the end of the play?
7. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?

- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ Do you agree/disagree with Juliet's choice at the beginning of the play? Explain your answer.
- ★ Do you agree/disagree with Juliet's choice at the end of the play? Explain your answer.
- ★ Have you ever had to give up something for the good of something else (a team, group, family)?

Post-Read Activities

Romeo and Juliet Rewrite

- ★ *Drop Dead, Juliet!* explores what might happen if Juliet decides she wants more love and less death in her story. Divide students into groups and have them rewrite *Romeo and Juliet* from another character's perspective who also wants to change their story. Which character would you change? What aspect of their story would you change?
 - » What if Tybalt decided he didn't want to be so angry and wanted to end the feud between the two families?
 - » What if Romeo really believed in the feud and there was no way he'd ever be attracted to a Capulet?
 - » What if Lady Capulet and Lady Montague had secretly been friends the whole time?

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Character Physical Action

- ★ In the pre-read section, a similar exercise was done without knowing the specific characters. This exercise asks students to connect the personality traits to the character.
- ★ As a class, discuss the personality traits of each character. Create a list of traits for each character.
- ★ Ask students: How do we physicalize personality? Use one character as a model.
- ★ For example, Juliet is described as confrontational. How do confrontational people stand? How do they move? How do they gesture?
- ★ Divide students into groups and give each group a character, without letting the other groups know.
- ★ Each group, using the personality trait list for their character, must discuss and decide upon a stance, a walk, and a gesture for this character.
- ★ Each group will present. Each person in the group will enter the space with their walk, take a stance, gesture, and then walk off.

- ★ Those watching must guess the character simply by looking at the physical action.
- ★ Ask students: Why do we need to give characters a specific physical action?

Sound Design Character

- ★ Have students create a playlist of songs that they think illustrates Juliet's personality. What music would she listen to and why? What type of sounds fit her character? Try the same exercise for Shakespeare, Romeo, Mercutio, and Nurse.

Playwright Process

Playwright Allison Williams talks about her process writing Drop Dead, Juliet! Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

Why did you choose to adapt *Romeo and Juliet*?

I've directed Shakespeare's play with high school students, and I think it's very current: "I like someone my parents aren't into"; "I'm growing up and want to push back against what's expected of me"; "I'm fully committed to the actions I take, even when the action itself isn't all that thought through."

I love how much agency Juliet has, how much she sets her own path. Even her death is a choice—she knows the plan screwed up, she's not deceived the way Romeo was when he thought she was dead. Romeo is a creature of impulse—most of his decisions are made under the influence of alcohol or anger. Juliet is passionate, but she's a thinker. She's willing to make big sacrifices for what she wants. I think we overlook just how big a deal turning your back on your family is—Juliet gave up a lot.

On a purely practical level, it's easier to "spoon" a play that everyone already knows the story of. I can write more sophisticated jokes when we're all starting from the same pool of information.

What was the originating idea for the play? Where did you start?

I started with the idea that Juliet wants to change her story. I honestly didn't know that the play would still end with her death until I got to the scene where she accepts her fate, and Shakespeare admits he doesn't like killing her off, either. When I was revising, I focused on the power of story, and how stories tend to play out along expected or archetypal lines. As a writer, it's hard to kill off a character I like, but if it makes the story better, my loyalty is to the story. So I'm trying to write a fun, funny play that also delivers the theme that sometimes it's better to be part of something bigger than yourself. We all have situations where we give up what we want for the sake of the group or the team or the family, and if we're all in, that can be really worthwhile. Likewise, when we ask people to sacrifice for our own wishes, we have a responsibility to make something great to honor that sacrifice. So we give up our evenings and weekends to rehearse a play, we say no to hanging out with our friends, and at the end we've made something amazing together that couldn't have been created without everyone giving up other things they wanted in that time.

Is there anything you cut that you wished could have stayed in the play?

I love—love!—writing plays for high school actors. That's where I grew to love theatre and I'm glad to be passing that love on. But I'm also pretty profane in my first drafts. Most of the time I'll write several jokes in the first draft that are either "adult" (in the sense that the actors totally already know this stuff but their parents will be shocked) or have curse words in them. I know I need to take them out for the good of the story as a whole, but I also need that step of writing the joke that first comes up, and then figuring out how to write something equally funny, but that fits the script. It's a good mix of honoring my first creative impulse and getting the words on the page, then refining what I have to say in the next draft, so that the audience won't be distracted by language that feels out of place. My first drafts are always a disaster in many ways—stuff doesn't make sense, characters are weird, the ending fizzles—but I can't start making it better until there's something on the page. It's much easier to clean up crappy words than start from nothing!

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

As a writer, my biggest challenge is always getting to the chair. Once I start writing, I can keep going and get it done, but I often find it difficult to get started. I have some tricks: I make writing dates with friends, and I team up with high school classes to hear the play-in-progress read aloud, and those external deadlines help motivate me. I've been like this my whole life—I always wrote the entire paper the night before it was due—and I've finally stopped wishing I had a "better" process or scolding myself for "not doing it earlier." My writing process is to think about it for a long time, then work intensely immediately before the deadline, then tweak a little after the deadline. Basically, the exact same process as putting on a play!

As a playwright, what is your favourite moment in the play?

I really love the death of Mercutio, and the Princess's line: *Why can't you people stop killing each other? I mean, is that so hard? Can't you walk down the streets of Verona and say "hello" like everyone else instead of stabbing each other at the slightest provocation?*