

## The Subtext: The beast with two backs By Beeb Salzer

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# the subtext

by beeb salzer

## the beast with two backs

Iago torments Brabantio in the middle of the night, telling him “your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” and that “an old black ram is tupping your white ewe.” The Shakespeare canon is, except for the history plays and a few others, filled with images of sex that are often focused on young love and how mutable it is. Only one look is enough to throw Romeo and Juliet into a paroxysm of desire. They marry in an instant and then have one night of sex before Romeo flees and Juliet takes her death-simulating cocktail.

When I designed *Romeo and Juliet* in Russia, the actress playing Juliet was just finishing her studies at the academy and was only slightly older than the character she played. I designed what I thought was a rather chaste virginal white nightgown for her to wear in the bedroom scene before Romeo leaves. My assistant who was supervising costumes was adamant that the young, somewhat modest actress must lose

her underwear for the gown to look right. I went along even though I didn't think it made much difference in a thousand-seat house and under dim early morning light. I hoped that the girl was not so concerned that it would ruin her performance. She was, but it didn't.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lysander and Demetrius and Hermia and Helena, aided by some magical Vixine, switch partners in one of Shakespeare's do-si-dos. I guess that in Elizabethan times there was instantaneous lust, while in our day we either have years of cohabitation before marriage or friends with benefits.

There is probably a future doctoral dissertation on sex in theatre because there is so much of it. What percentage of shows are based on male/female desire? Female/female? Male/male? Starting with Aristophanes the sex was explicit and rude. The public seems to more readily accept sex in comedy. In the late 1800s and early 1900s George Feydeau and Frank Wedekind were both writing plays about sex. Feydeau wrote bedroom farces such as *A Flea in Her Ear*, Wedekind wrote the drama *Spring Awakening*. Feydeau was popular while Wedekind waited years before his work was able to be produced.

Today, a list of writers and their plays with erotic elements would take up all the space I'm allotted in this column. Many plays have nudity and a few have simulated sex, or so



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I've read. Years ago my wife and I were given house seats in the front row to *Oh! Calcutta!*, the review that revealed a variety of pudenda in its skits about sexual proclivities. Not much work for a costume designer but lots of body makeup.

But costume designers more than other designers are responsible for the sexiness of a production. They make what is too small bigger and what is big smaller. They pinch and lift, reveal and hide. An older actor years ago in a Shakespearean production refused to wear tights because his legs were like match sticks. So I designed a compromise, a pair of pants that were in some way historical. Costume designers are diplomats, well versed in helping actors feel sexy.

Lighting designers are also called on to heighten the desirability of actors who know, or think they know, what colors make them look best. More than that, lighting designers are called on to create the appropriate look for erotic scenes. Pinks and lavenders set the mood or maybe moonlight fits a scene. Going one step farther, lights that erase wrinkles or saggy necks are part of a lighting designers bag of tricks. In film, it is possible to use net or grease on the lens but no such options are available in theatre. Lighting and costume designers who makes actors look sexy tend to be in demand.

Set designers have fewer tools. They can design a set that is soft with fabric rather than one with hard surfaces. As with a gun over the mantle, a bed on stage is just waiting to be

used. Scale can often play a part, intimate rather than grand. And set color, as with light color, can create a mood.

All of the things I have mentioned are clichés ready to be ignored. Make a sexy dress of burlap, light a scene in white, or, heaven help us, in puke green, make a set of sheet metal, and still create a mood that makes an audience's blood pressure rise, that is what great artists do. Of course, actors and playwrights have a responsibility greater than designers. (But I'm still waiting for a time when a nude actor gets me to listen to the lines.)

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Last October, the *New York Times* Sunday Book Review section focused on sex in literature. Several authors wrote about how hard it was not to be maudlin, silly, or gross, while a few said it was not hard at all. I suspect that sex scenes in the theatre have the same problems, and some writers and directors find it hard and some easy.

What is sexy? Nudity, or, as in olden days, a glimpse of stocking? Today, seduction is not one sided, either sex can employ it; it's not based on poetry but on skin. Language or sight? What would Shakespeare write today? ❖

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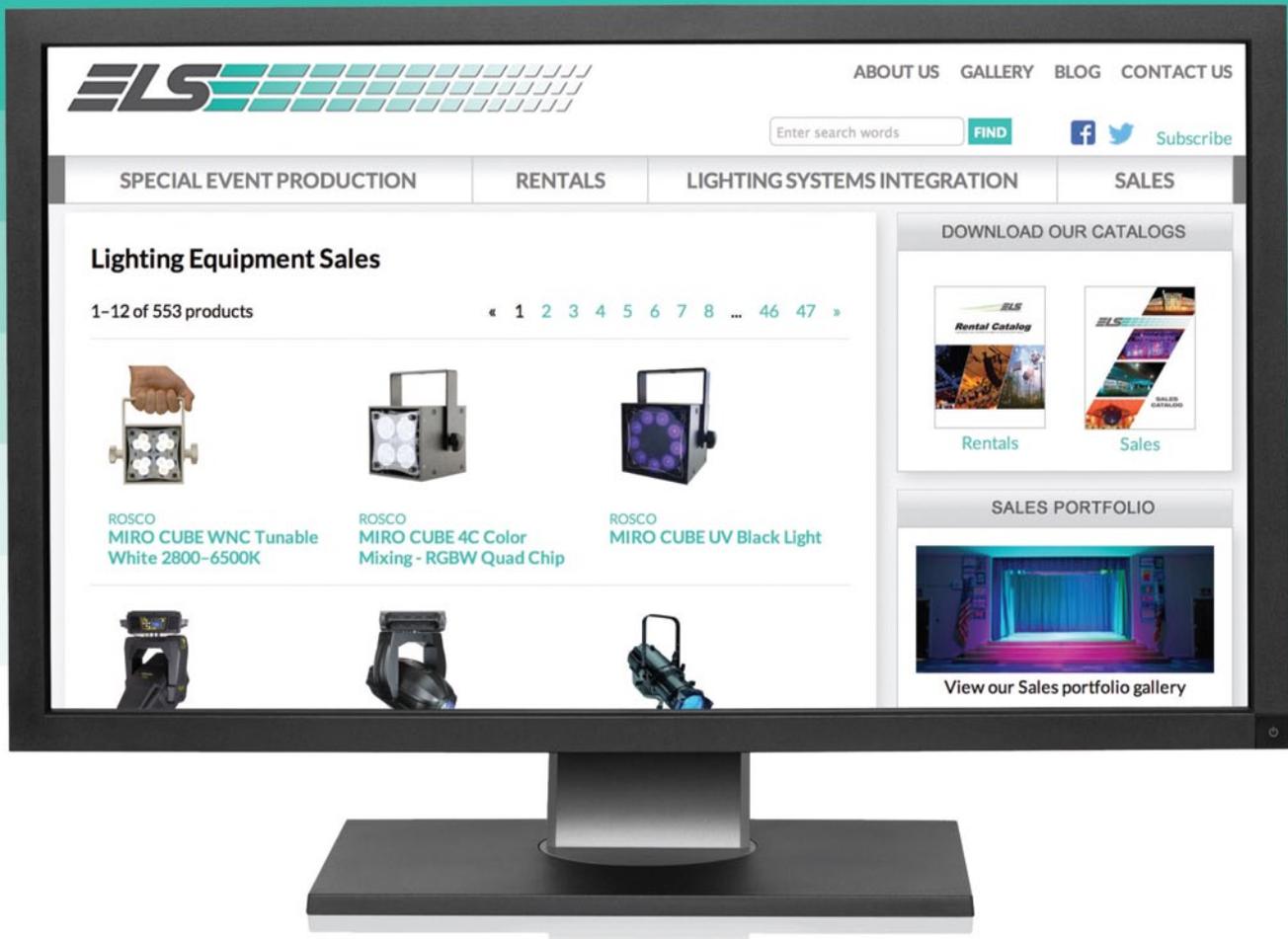
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