Romeo and Juliet
Is for Zombies

At the end of our last chapter, we left Juliet up in her bedroom, imagining what it might be like to wake in the grave world from which Thomas Nashe claims public theater summons up the dead. As you recall, Nashe imagines that such a wake-up call will prove highly satisfactory to all concerned. London’s authorities shall witness the distraction of its idle multitudes; said multitudes shall get high on successive hits of affect; public theater and its avatars shall grow and prosper. Nashe summons up “brave Talbot (the terror of the French)” from Henry VI Part One to illustrate theater’s appeal and invites his readers to contemplate the “joy” Talbot would have felt, had he known, that two hundred years on “his bones [are] newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least (at severall times)” provided by London’s theaters.

For Nashe, theater becomes akin to a mode of archival tourism or touring. It takes you everywhere and nowhere. Its chief currency lies in the “proper names” it keeps in motion and the stories they condense. By its employment and recruitment of biosemiotic wetware (actors, writers, and spectators), public theater keeps the likes of Talbot “freshly dead,” periodically opening the grave for successive revivals. The company’s “shadows” or actors body forth such names and deeds whose bones were long since picked clean. And, come the end of the play,
those names, twinned with the faces and names of certain actors, perhaps, find themselves inscribed in the memories of the audience—the audience become wetware to theater as a mnemotechnical relay to the grave. By their theatrical translation, Talbot’s dust-bound deeds are rescued from the kinetic dead zone or media purgatory of the unturned, worm-eaten pages of a chronicle. Welcome, we might say—fanfare, please—to the public theater: that latest, new-and-improved apparatus of secular resurrection. That’s Nashe’s pitch, anyway.

But Juliet’s not so sure. Up in her bedroom, vial of sleeping potion by her side, she’s still wedded to the thought of actually waking up. She’s turned off by the thought of Talbot Tybals. Revivals, she thinks, prove scary: “a faint cold fear thrills through [her] veins.” She wants to live, plans on dying so as to live. Unfortunately, the play she’s in seems headed into Nashe’s tomb world, and she worries that she and it might get stuck there, that the theater might become, in effect, a crypt. We join her at the moment she wakes or “rises,” as the stage directions have it, in the tomb (5.3.147). But we do so obliquely, via the cinematic delegates recruited to her survival in Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami’s Where Is My Romeo (2007). This short, three-minute film depicts a series of women in an unidentified movie theater watching the last minutes of Franco Zeffirelli’s Romeo and Juliet (1968). At no point in its three minutes does Where Is My Romeo give us direct access to the Zeffirelli film. Neither does it deliver its soundtrack. Instead, we watch the film as mediated by the women in the movie theater. We hear the soundtrack by way of a muted, muffled, distanced rendering of the dialogue and music but with no guarantee that this accords with what the women hear. Juliet’s suicide unfolds, therefore, through the film’s succession of reaction shots, through these women’s faces, as we listen in on the auditory stimulus that augments the screen images they see and we do not. Even as it completes a set of familiar circuits—Romeo and Juliet may be recognized; Zeffirelli’s film comes to its end; the audience emotes on cue—Where Is My Romeo does not allow us to move beyond the scene of cinephilia (the on-screen image of an audience watching a film) that it takes as its habit and its haunt. We do not make it out of its movie theater. We struggle and fail to motivate the images it offers, to transform them into the semblance of a narrative.

Our aim in this chapter is to inhabit Romeo and Juliet (c. 1595–97) from within the uncertainties, the mis/recognitions, and mis/directions that Where Is My Romeo produces by its off/staging of the play, by its summoning of Shakespeare to a scene of metacinematic commentary and reflection. We are interested in the film’s own investments and contexts, but more so in what might be said to be its unintended or chance consequences for the play. Crucially, for our purposes, we think the film represents back to us the function of the spectators in Nashe’s sales pitch, offering to our eyes one iteration of the so very many audiences that have served and serve still as the biosemiotic relays to what Derrida names the “still-living palimpsest . . . the open theater of narratives which bear the name[s]” “Romeo” and “Juliet” and so also the title, Romeo and Juliet. The film attenuates our access to the play, this yoking together of two proper names to form a third, a third that takes on the form of a title, a title keyed to a story, to a niche in our archives and libraries become tombs. It asks us to approach