

**Interacting With the Bard in the Barn:  
An Interview With Peter Skagen on *Rodeo and Julie-Ed***

**Introduction:**

An interactive dinner theatre event that was conceived, directed, produced, and hosted by Peter Skagen, *Rodeo and Julie-Ed* is an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* that combines country music and dance with a partly scripted and partly improvised *Romeo and Juliet* romance narrative. The production begins with the Wailin' Valley Barn Dance. At this barn dance, the audience is introduced to the two feuding families: "The McCoys are slick tractor-selling Richie Riches, and the Hatfields are biker, trailer trash."<sup>34</sup> Throughout this production, the audience is rarely passive as they are expected to take sides in the feud, gossip, eat the elaborate barbeque beef dinner, and sometimes drink their inhibitions away. *Rodeo and Julie-Ed* has been produced at various locations including the Lynnwood Ranch, Symons Valley Ranch, and the Calgary Stampede.

Peter Skagen obtained an MA in film production from California State Northridge before pursuing an active career in the film industry. He is the former instructor of directing at the Vancouver Film School. Skagen also works extensively as a film actor and his productions credits include, *Monte Walsh*, *Tom Stone*, *Roughing It*, and *Lonesome Dove*. Prior to the creation of *Rodeo and Julie-Ed*, Skagen performed as a Vegas singer in the interactive performance *Tony 'n' Tina's Wedding*.

In this interview, Skagen describes his adaptation process for *Rodeo and Julie-Ed*. He explains how the sight of a cigarette box entitled *Romeo and Julieta* spurred him to re-conceptualise Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in order to suit Calgary's "Western flavour." *Romeo and Juliet* was chosen as the adaptation text for his Western interactive

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<sup>34</sup> FFWD staff. Theatre. <http://www.greatwest.ca/ffwd/Issues/1999/1111/the2.html>.

production because it recounts a familiar romance narrative and assures a certain level of audience interaction. By using such a well-known narrative, Skagen harnessed the audience's own horizon of expectations and allowed for character recognition, audience participation, and internal direction. In this interview, Skagen discusses how interactive nature of this performance allowed the audience to defy their traditional passive role. Rather than encouraging an audience member to simply escape into a visual landscape, Skagen's interactive performance allowed for active escapism as audience members experienced the production physically.

### **Interview With Peter Skagen:**

**MM: Could you begin by briefly describing the text, performance, and history of *Rodeo and Julie-Ed*?**

PS: I used to be an actor in a pretty famous opera, which was called *Tina and Tony's Wedding*, which many people have heard about. It's an interactive show based around a goofy Italian wedding. And the beauty of that show and those kinds of shows is that they are in fact interactive in the sense that the audience gets to not only take part in the play, but to be inside the play. So, they have an experiential theatrical event to go to rather than something that involves sitting and watching. After doing about one hundred performances as the Vegas singer in that show, I decided to write my own version – a Western version. Because of course I live in Calgary, which is famous for its Stampede and Western flavour. So, I thought about it for a while. I started thinking - what would be an interesting Western event? I came up with a barn dance and of course a love story. My background in English literature led me to *Romeo and Juliet*. That's where the basic idea came from. I changed the name to *Rodeo and Julie-Ed* and I used as the basis of the show the family feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys at an annual barn dance wherein Rodeo Hatfield falls in love with Julie-Edwina McCoy.

**MM: There has been a debate in our office as to what constitutes a Shakespearean adaptation. How would you define a Shakespearean adaptation? Based on this definition, would you classify *Rodeo and Julie-Ed* as a Shakespearean adaptation?**

PS: What is a Shakespearean adaptation? Well, I suppose anytime you're using a Shakespearean work as the foundation or the basis of your play, you're doing an adaptation – no matter how general or specific it is. Of course in my case, we've got *Rodeo and Julie-Ed*, so I've ripped the title right off of Shakespeare - right off the start. And of course, I used the general shape of the text as the foundation for this play.

Interesting scholastic question, but I think as long as that's the foundation of your work, then it's an adaptation.

**MM: Aside from *Romeo and Juliet*, are there other sources that influenced the creation of *Rodeo and Julie-Ed*?**

PS: Aside from the interactive theatrical events that I described earlier such as *Tony and Tina's Wedding* and many other shows that have come out of New York. Otherwise, I stuck completely with Sir William and *Romeo and Juliet*.

**MM: How did the concept for *Rodeo and Julie-Ed* originate?**

PS: I was sitting in my office trying to come up with a good idea to use as a basis for my new interactive theatrical event. It had to be a Western. Okay, this is a bit of a stretch – you might not believe this, but this is true. I have a collection. I think everybody has a little collection of something. I collect cigarette boxes of all the strange things. There's a brand, which I think comes out of the Dominican Republic, which is called Romeo and Julieta. So, I was leaning back in my chair looking around my office trying to dream up a good idea and my eyes landed on my cigar boxes and I saw the words Romeo and Julieta. The fact that the names were different than the original Shakespeare suddenly struck something in my brain and the whole play just came together in my head in about five minutes.

**MM: What was your first step in the adaptation process?**

PS: Well, obviously, read the play. I already had enough experience with screenwriting and theatrical writing, acting, the whole idea of interactive theatre. So, that was all well set. So, I simply read the play and started to filter through my existing craft - the play, into a structure that I knew I could work with and that would make for an entertaining show.

**MM: Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is generally performed as a tragedy. What motivated the choice to convert this play into a comedy?**

PS: Show biz. Simple show biz. You know, interactive theatre is about having a good time. It is about actors being generous with the audience. Interacting with the audience and including them in the story, getting them on side with the Hatfields or the McCoys, sort of whipping up the romance, and creating the tensions between the couple and the two families. It was about fun and I simply couldn't end it on a tragic note. So, I went to the end of *Romeo and Juliet* - to the tragedy, but in my case, I simply invented a little device, a conceit, if you will, that allowed the lovers to survive. So they used their deaths, their supposed deaths, to solve the families' problems.

**MM: Is *Rodeo and Julie-Ed* written in Shakespearean verse or in contemporary language? Could you describe the language used? Is the language reflective of a Calgary dialect?**

PS: Well, it's certainly not written in verse. It's written with a bit of a certain Southern twang because I based it on the well known family feud between the Hatfield's and the McCoys, which took place in the Southern states: Kentucky and Virginia. So, the show's not necessarily meant to be done necessarily with a Southern accent, but more with a countrified manner of speaking. So, it's absolutely not written in verse.

It doesn't exactly follow the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* although it does generally do so. The fact is that I actually did three different versions of the show over the three years that it ran. So, I have three slightly different versions of this script. The first one is very close to the original plot and the text. The second one is a little farther away – to make it a little more entertaining for the crowd. And the third one was just a little farther away still. But, they're still basically and obviously reflective of the plot.

The language, as I said, is pretty much countrified. It has almost a hill-billy sound to it. There were in fact some Calgary references in the first draft, which local audiences really appreciated as well.

**MM: What effect were you trying to achieve by mixing country music and dance with a classical Shakespeare storyline?**

PS: It's just simple fun. Simple fun with a story that people understand and are familiar with: *Romeo and Juliet*. You add on the counterpoint of the country music and the country setting and it seems to bring up – not only the fun, but the familiarity aspect of the show. So that people basically know beforehand the story that they're coming to see. And they get a kick out of the fact that it's been turned in this particular way. And they get to take part in it.

**MM: In FFWD weekly it is written, "There is nothing like Shakespeare in this little saga."<sup>35</sup> Would you agree with this statement?**

PS: There is nothing like Shakespeare in this little saga? No, I don't agree with that at all. Certainly there's nothing from the original play. There's no text from the original play. The names have been changed to protect the innocent. We don't have Romeo; we have Rodeo. We don't have a Paris: we have Ferris and so on and so forth. I think that anyone that comes to the show looking for evidence of the classics or some deep, you know, academic pondering, they're not going to find it. This is a work of fun.

**MM: How is your identity embedded in this adaptation?**

PS: Well, obviously I come from a long theatre background, screenwriting background, acting background. So all of those skills and experiences are brought into the adaptation of this show. I've worked in interactive theatre for a lot of years and I know what it takes to make an audience laugh from moment to moment, keep them entertained, and pay

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<sup>35</sup> FFWD Staff. "Review of *Rodeo and Julie-Ed* by Peter Skagen." *FFWD Weekly* Online. 11 November 1999. <http://www.greatwest.ca/ffwd/Issues/1999/1111/the2.html>. 20 January 2003.

them off at the end of the show. So, obviously anytime you're writing anything your whole life experience comes to play in it and finds its way into the text. I like to think that's true for any writer. It certainly is for me.

**MM: *Rodeo and Julie-Ed* combines many forms of theatre: cabaret, dinner theatre, dance theatre, musical theatre, and interactive theatre. How is the form stylistically your own?**

PS: Interesting question. I think you have to see the show to figure that one out. I think it's stylistically my own in the sense that I personally move the show from one point to the next based on my knowledge of what I think is entertaining for the crowd. If you watch the show, you can draw your own conclusions as to how it may be similar or unlike other shows. My style is going to be obvious, but I don't know if I can describe it to you though.

**MM: Is *Rodeo and Julie-Ed* reflective of an Albertan or Canadian culture?**

PS: Well, I think again in the sense it's written by a Canadian that grew up in Calgary, though I spent a little time in L.A. Definitely it's going to have my stamp on it. I can't point to anything, except for a few lines of dialogue that from knowledge says, "Hey, this is absolutely reflective of Alberta or Calgary or Canada." I think a good work of theatre has to have an international appeal to it and I am sure I attempted to do that with this show. But, again I think you would have to watch the show and draw your own conclusions.

**MM: Is there a geography or setting written into the play, as there is in *Romeo and Juliet*? If so, how does the establishment of place help create identification between the performers and the audience?**

PS: Yes, there is geography and a sense of place in the show. We are no longer in Verona or anywhere else in Europe. We are in fact in the fictional town of Wailin' Valley. I think the fact that it is fictional contributes largely to the fun of the show. Because we've taken it out of any actual location in the world that people could relate to and we've made it a place unto itself. So, when Alice goes through the looking glass, you know, there are more things available to the writer and to the reader when we're in a place that we're not familiar with. So that is exactly what I attempted to do with this show. Not to put it anywhere in Calgary or anywhere in the United States or anywhere else that may exist, but in a fictional place so that when the audience walked in the door they would have the chance to experience something completely new. Even though, yes, it's based on those themes, based on *Romeo and Juliet*, based on a barn dance; it's a new world for them to enter into, and to experience, and to have the fun of.

**MM: *Rodeo and Julie-Ed* seemed to have a very successful run at the Calgary Stampede. How did the Stampede audience affect the production?**

PS: Only that they drank a little bit more, I'd have to say. People out for the Stampede are out to have a good time and they tend to tip a few beers. And they did. And they had a little more volume than my regular crowds did. It also had an international flavour. We had people from all over the world at those shows. And, we had nothing but good feedback. I was personally gratified by that – to see that the show works for an international crowd.

**MM: How does a production of *Rodeo and Julie-Ed* create an environment that wards off audience inhibitions? Is this performance environment reflective of the Calgary city environment in any way?**

PS: I don't think it is reflective of the city environment in any way. Like I said, we took the setting to a completely fictional place. In terms of the interactive nature of the show - when I rehearse my actors and train them to do the show, one of the most important things that we talk about right from the beginning is how to interact with the audience. That is the key. That is the key motive of this whole show. Some people in the audience don't want to participate, they do not want to get involved, they don't want to be dragged up onto the dance floor or feel like they are being made fun of or that they are being embarrassed in any way. This kind of theatre is all about generosity and about being generous towards those people. It's about being generous towards people's needs and often their latent desires to in fact get involved. The actors themselves are the ones who have to judge person by person through the audience: who's in the mood to be involved and who isn't? That is key in training actors for these kinds of shows. That's how it's done. Of course we warn everyone beforehand. We put notices on their placemats letting them know there's no requirement to interact or get involved and so on and so forth. But essentially it comes right down to the actors and their sort of empathy towards the crowd, and their understanding of the show, and their understanding of people. Having done so many shows, how best to involve this particular person? That's how it's done.

**MM: In a review in *On the Town*, the audience experience is described as, “Unlike conventional theatre where we sit and observe, we actually became part of the cast; we danced, we gossiped, we took sides in the feud. We went to a barn dance and were caught up in the soap opera – we had a blast!”<sup>36</sup> For an audience, how is participating in this event a cathartic or liberating experience?**

PS: It's cathartic and liberating in the sense that they can get involved physically themselves in not only in the unfolding of the show, but also in the direction that the show takes. Because you see, my actors sit right in the audience at the dinner tables with the guests of the show. So, in other words, Julie-Edwina McCoy may be sitting at your table when you show up to the show. In fact, my actors are out in the parking lot when you arrive. Whipper the town cop will be out in the parking lot frisking the guests and making sure that they don't have any guns or contraband as they come in to the show. The show actually starts when you arrive in the parking lot. Then it continues from there.

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<sup>36</sup> Michael & Karen. "Review of *Rodeo & Julie-Ed* by Peter Skagen." *On The Town*. n.p. n.d.

The actors are constantly talking to you, relating to you, getting you to help them out with their problems, asking you what you should do about certain issues, and so on and so forth. If you want to play, it's sometimes getting you up on stage, getting you involved in the actual action of the play – chatting up with Big Boy McCoy, for example, or making announcements, singing songs, dancing, and all the rest. By the end of the show, the audience has the feeling that not only did they go to a show, but that they were involved and they were part of the story and they had influence over the story. And it's cathartic in the sense that that's an experience that people just don't typically have. We go to the movies or the theatre and we watch. Now we get to go watch if we want to and get up and walk right into the movie screen if we want to, and really take part in the show. And most people say it's terrific and I personally love that kind of theatre.

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