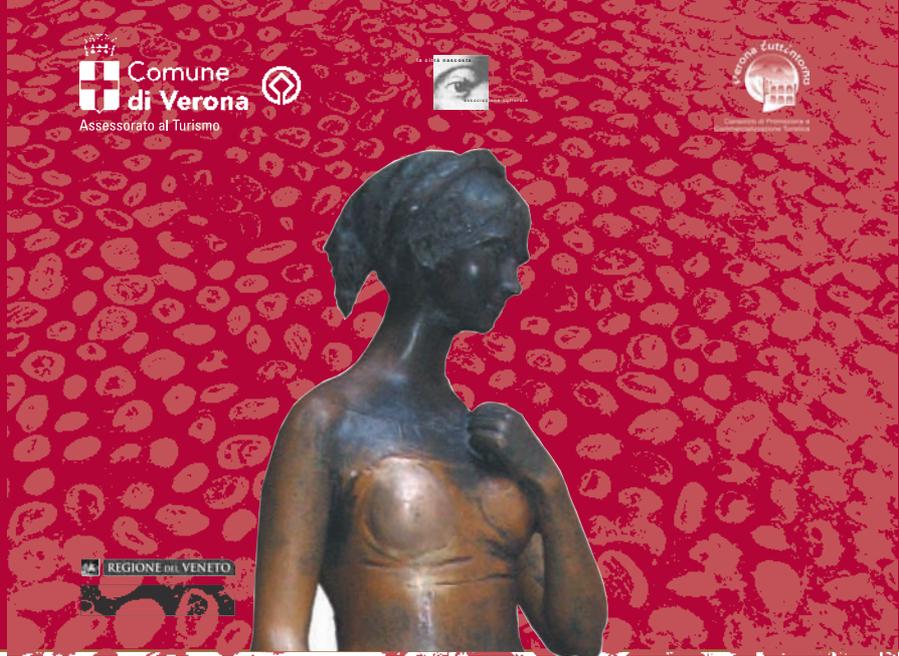


Verona, city of love.
On the ancient stones... in Juliet's footsteps



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This walk, in the heart of the Scaligera city is on the trail of a dream, just as love itself is a dream. The real world remains outside our itinerary: we are following a graceful myth that moves lightly in the ancient squares, among the streets and the shadowy courtyards. Here it is easy to imagine the stories, the players and the events appertaining to the past. This is where Juliet's spirit haunts Verona.

The illusion of a love that is pure and uncontaminated, that lasts for all time and belongs to the magic world of dreams. Is it a story? Is it a legend? Is it theatre? It doesn't really matter. In any case it is a dream that we invite lovers everywhere to dream with us...



Juliet's House: the balcony and the "towered house"

The starting point for our walk has to be the thirteenth century "casa torre" or 'towered house' in Via Cappello, which popular tradition has always identified as being the Capulet residence and the home of Juliet's family. In actual fact this building – originally a stable belonging to the Dal Cappello family – was bought and renovated in neo-medieval style at the beginning of the twentieth century by the City Council under the direction of Antonio Avena, then responsible for all the museums in Verona. An antique sarcophagus was inserted into the façade and so became the celebrated balcony. In the courtyard, the sculptor Nereo Costantini forged the willowy form of the adolescent Juliet, thereby breathing life into that site everlastingly consecrated to the legend, and where nowadays the public imagination can relive the events of the masked ball, and the precise moment of the party when love was born. The meeting between Romeo and Juliet, the young descendents of the Montagues and the Capulets – two warring households – took place during Carnival time of the year 1303, in the reign of Bartolomeo della Scala. Their story first appeared in Italy at the beginning of the sixteenth century in a work published by Luigi Lo Porto. Then, a few years later it was re-told by the Dominican priest Matteo Bandello in an aristocratic symposium set in Verona. The hugely successful plot quickly began to circulate spread beyond the Italian borders. We do not know whether Shakespeare ever actually came to the Veneto region, and nor do we know how he became acquainted with these sources. But what he did know how to do was to combine historical fiction and his own invention, weaving a parable of universal love into his poetry. The lovers' story unfolds swiftly in the space of just five days: their meeting, their love, the fight, the flight, the poisoning and then their deaths. It is a cautionary tale whose hounding rhythm burns brightly from the very first moment right up until the tragic epilogue. It is a lyrical and ever-topical masterpiece



Herb Square

Herb Square. The Domus Mercatorum



The area of the medieval cloth dealers

Street sign indicating the present day
Corticella Sgarzerie

Volto Barbaro – street sign

of human emotions.

Following the red thread that unites the two lovers we reach Piazza delle Erbe where we can conjure up the vision of Juliet and her nurse out on a confidential stroll. The figure of the nurse was created by the English playwright and was a novelty for the Elizabethan theatre. Hers is a character that abounds with domestic humour, ably woven into the tragic story so as to offer several episodes of popular comic relief, which lighten the tense atmosphere of the play.

Piazza delle Erbe stands at the heart of the historical city, and with its ancient Roman forum, conserved its status as being the hub of economic life even during the Commune and the Scaligera eras. This square is a testimonial to the architectural and "institutional" changes that swept over the city during the transition period from the Communes to the Signoria, and even nowadays it represents the vital nerve centre of the city.

We may imagine that the two women - the young girl and her nurse - stop to admire the new facade of the Domus Mercatorum, an historical wooden construction that was rebuilt in stone in the year 1301 as seat of the organisations governing the artisans and commerce. They then head towards the area known as the Sgarzerie, situated in the small square, which today bears the same name Corte Sgarzerie. This originally used to be the deposit where rolls of material were stored and then subjected to careful quality control checks. The buying and selling of woollen materials was concentrated here whereas formerly it had been divided between different establishments.

Was this innocent vanity? A feminine desire for new clothes to make herself more attractive in her lover's eyes? We can imagine Juliet as a young teenager - she was fourteen years old - in this domesticated scene, still unaware of her tragic destiny.

Our dream takes us elsewhere. The tragedy moves irrevocably and we must move to the nearby Volto Barbaro behind the Mazzanti houses, already defaced by the Scaligera blood of Mastino 1 who was stabbed to death here in 1277 by conspirators from a rival family. Historical records tell that his brother Alberto reserved an exemplary punishment for the killers: after putting them to death their houses were burnt to the ground and ashes from the bricks were used to pave the new road leading from Piazza Erbe to the Navi Bridge.

We can imagine this sinister place as being the setting for the violent quarrel between the young men belonging to two rival families. The exchange of abuse ended in Juliet's beloved cousin Tybalt's killing Mercutio who was Romeo's friend.

Romeo, distraught, chases Tybalt through the streets of the city, and catches up with him to strike the deathblow in "the road near to the Borsari gate (Porta Borsari)" as Bandello relates. Nowadays there is a stone commemorating the bloody events on that site. This violent succession of events acclimatises us to the atmosphere of thirteenth century Verona, dominated by the murky atmosphere of internecine fighting between the important rival families. This mood offers wide scope to Shakespeare's imaginative powers. The great dramatist sees Italy, and the Veneto region in particular as being a place with an exotic appeal and where everything is taken to extremes – political intrigues and passionate love affairs, mortal rivalries and bloody vendettas. The setting becomes theatre, and the theatre mirrors real life.

From the murder of Tybalt, death itself becomes a player in the drama. The situations, tied to one another by a tragic sense of destiny, run inexorably towards the plot's cruel finale. Bartolomeo della Scala is furious and he condemns Romeo to exile. The young Montague leaves Verona and is desperate at being separated from his beloved. "There is no world beyond Verona's walls..... only Purgatory,.... And hell itself." We like to dream that his voice still reverberates like a far-off echo around the harsh walls that surround the place that marked

The Square of the Signori – façade
Communal Palace (photo by Ceschi)

The Courtyard of the Old Market - seen
from above (photo by Ceschi)



The Lamberti Tower

The Square of the Signori: façade of the
Scaligera Palace (photo by Ceschi)

The Courtyard of the Law Courts:
the well

his destiny: the austere courtyard of the Palazzo Comunale. With colonnades on three sides of the building, the walls decorated throughout with alternating terracotta pink stone and white tufo, and the majestic stone staircase which was added on in the fourteenth century, this area (nowadays called that Cortile del Mercato Vecchio or Courtyard of the Old Market thanks to the selling of fodder there during the late Middle Ages) still conserves all the grandeur that comes with the wielding of power. The Palazzo Comunale is an urban castle embellished with towers, of which two still exist. In particular, the highest is the Lamberti Tower, which takes its name from the original family who owned it and offers a splendid view of the city from above.

“There is no world outside Verona’s walls... save purgatory, and hell itself” shouts Romeo in his pain, and we, today, entranced by the beauty of these settings must agree with him! In this silent part of the city the stones narrate to anyone who knows how to listen, the cruel story of love and death, youth and tragedy that they have witnessed. The very same story that guides our footsteps today. A little further on and we are in the Piazza dei Signori. In Medieval times this area was probably cluttered with small shops and houses. It was transformed into the typical residential area that we know today during the epoch of the Scaligera dynasty. The building of the impressive family palazzo and graced with a porticato was begun by Alberto in the year 1285. There was also a garden, which extended as far as the area nowadays called the “Cortile del Tribunale” and containing a large well.

Before this building work could be authorised, the local Statutes, which banned the construction of fortified palaces in the immediate vicinity of the Palazzo del Comune had to be modified. This was the first public manifestation of the power of the Scaligera family. Alberto, who was a fair and generous ruler was called honorato padrone by the common people. He left the now consolidated territories of the Signoria to his son Bartolomeo. Over the centuries the square became a kind of public drawing room for the city. With the later additions of the Loggia del Consiglio and the Prefettura Palace as well as the enlarging of the Scaligera cemetery this square, which is surrounded on four sides by medieval buildings became a natural setting for spellbinding performances of the Shakespearian tragedy. An unforgettable performance directed by Renato Salvini was held here in 1950. The two lovers’ first meeting at the dance was acted out under the Loggia del Consiglio, with an exceptional Vittorio Gassman playing Romeo and Edda Albertini as Juliet, and the statue of Dante had to be moved in order that the audience could see. The entire city was caught up in the event. Horses and carriages crossed the streets in the city centre and, at the tragic culmination of the play the bells of the Lamberti Tower rang out the death toll.

As well as being a magnificent memento to the dead, the nearby Arche Scaligere are also a tribute to the persistence of memory. These Arks, or sarcophagi form a sepulchral monument for the Verona Signoria and represent one of the most original and elevated examples of Gothic sculpture. They form an authentic “stone garden”. In front of the Church of Santa Maria Antica is the marvellous monument that did not exist in Juliet’s times when the only funeral monument was that of Alberto. This is a sarcophagus, of ancient Roman inspiration and has a lid with two sloping parts showing representations of a kneeling Alberto being presented to the enthroned Virgin Mary by two angels, and on the other side he is portrayed in civilian dress holding a sword.

Juliet’s gaze is pensive as she meditates the pretence of her own death. She is determined to go ahead, but her soul is fearful, almost as though she herself can predict the tragic destiny that awaits her. A few steps from the Scaligera cemetery love appears once again. Romeo’s tormented spirit calls us to admire one of the most exquisite



The Scaligera Arks (sarcophogi);
seen from above
(Archive photo courtesy of the Museum of
Castelvecchio)

Romeo's House

Juliet's Tomb
(Photo by Brenzoni – Perbellini)

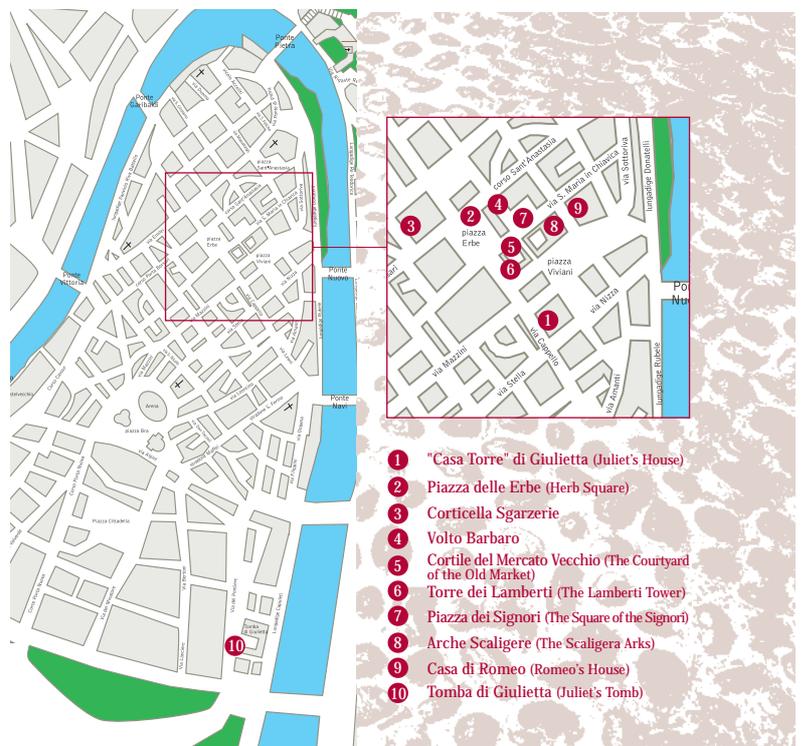
medieval houses in Verona. This is the Casa Nogarole, which is traditionally thought to have belonged to the Montague family. Romeo's house is like an urban castle showing the importance of the family. Its outer terracotta walls are still surmounted with crenellations facing the road and on the remains of the corner tower.

Outside the circle of the Scaligera city walls the epilogue to the tragedy unfolds at Juliet's tomb. It was set here thanks to yet another intervention by Superintendent Avesa in 1938. The finale of this timeless story is set in an isolated place within easy walking distance of the city centre.

The stone sepulchre stands in an underground room inside the cloister of the church of San Francesco al Corso, part of the picturesque ruins of a monastery which lives again today in the memory of that myth.

Here ends our walk mid-way between historical fact and legend: life, dream and theatre.

For all those who have followed us we would like to recall the advice of Alfred de Musset who wrote: "...do not leave without throwing a flower on Juliet's tomb... the power of the Scaligera family is extinguished, but the love of the two unfortunate lovers still lives on in the memories of us all, and will do so for as long as poetry exists".



- 1 "Casa Torre" di Giulietta (Juliet's House)
- 2 Piazza delle Erbe (Herb Square)
- 3 Corticella Sgarzerie
- 4 Volto Barbaro
- 5 Cortile del Mercato Vecchio (The Courtyard of the Old Market)
- 6 Torre dei Lambertini (The Lambertini Tower)
- 7 Piazza dei Signori (The Square of the Signori)
- 8 Arche Scaligere (The Scaligera Arks)
- 9 Casa di Romeo (Romeo's House)
- 10 Tomba di Giulietta (Juliet's Tomb)