

## Analysis of Types and Forms of “At-Risk Youth” Portrayed in Dance Works: Focusing on Matthew Bourne’s <Romeo + Juliet>

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### Abstract

*There is no standardized concept of “at-risk youth,” but from an overall perspective, they are youth exposed to various crises. “At-risk youth” are categorized into personal, familial, educational, and social crisis areas, encompassing factors such as family background, educational difficulties, and mental health issues. There is a dance piece that addresses these “at-risk youth. Matthew Bourne created a dance piece that addresses “at-risk youth” in <Romeo + Juliet>. Currently, Matthew Bourne is a popular choreographer from England who reflects certain social phenomena and does not differentiate between classic art and public art. In 2019, Matthew Bourne collaborated with young creators to reinterpret <Romeo + Juliet> as a narrative centered around youth. In this dance work, youth is both the subject and the expression of the story. In <Romeo + Juliet>, “at-risk youth” are depicted in various forms. The work explores mental health issues including homosexuality, trauma, and depression among teenagers, as well as societal issues such as violence and weapons. The stage depicted how teenagers perceive themselves and how they navigate the challenges faced by “at-risk youth”. We would like to interpret the work in relation to the types of “at-risk youth” and the expression methods of the performance. Of course, there may be differences when examining performance cases in other countries compared to youth in Korean society. However, It has meaning in itself to analyze Matthew Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet> in various ways in relation to “at-risk youth” and to examine social phenomena from a broader perspective through this.*

**Keywords:** At-Risk Youth, Romeo and Juliet, Matthew Bourne, Dance, Ballet

### 1. Introduction

In modern society, “at-risk youth” or “youth at risk” refers to members of society who possess risk factors. This term describes adolescents who have issues stemming from personal problems or social environments, and who are in a state of ‘self-management’ deficiency.[1] The age range for using the term “at-risk youth” varies among studies, referring to adolescents aged 10 to 18[2], 12 to 21[3], or even 12 to 24.[4]

There are also differences in the definition and types of at-risk youth. Koo Bon-Yong et al. (2006) defined “at-risk youth” as those in difficult situations who find it hard to reach universal development milestones, giving examples such as adolescents exposed to violence, sexual violence, substance abuse, anxiety, and

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suicide.[5] “At-risk youth” are often classified as targets for guidance regardless of location, becoming subjects of social management.[6]Hwang Yeo-Jeong, Lee Jeong-Min, and Kim Soo-Hye (2020) classified

types of “at-risk youth” into several categories: those inside or outside the home, those exposed to harmful substances, smartphone over-dependence, and gambling in daily life, those with experiences of violence or sexual violence, and those with self-harm, suicide attempts, and trauma, categorized by psychological and emotional characteristics.[7]

Summarizing the types, “at-risk youth” can be seen as having emerged from or possessing risk factors and exhibiting various forms. Due to the social environment and physical, cognitive, and emotional developmental characteristics of adolescence, these “at-risk youth” find it challenging to integrate into society. This difficulty leads them to experience various forms of crises.[8]

There is a choreographer who boldly showcases these social issues on stage. Choreographer Matthew Bourne is an artist who expresses social realities in his performances. He is also influential in the fields of musicals and theater. Matthew Bourne has tackled social issues like homosexuality, gender issues, and complexes in his ballet work <Swan Lake>, aiming to dismantle fixed perceptions.[9] In his ballet <The Nutcracker>, he addressed social realities such as children's rights and the loss of humanity.[10] Choreographer Matthew Bourne re-choreographed the dance work Romeo + Juliet using "at-risk youth" as a theme. This research does not aim to compare Shakespeare's <Romeo + Juliet> but to examine the types of “at-risk youth” depicted in Matthew Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet> and the forms of choreography. Analyzing the types and forms of “at-risk youth” in Bourne's dance work <Romeo + Juliet>, which addresses social issues, holds significant value in artistically expressing important problems in modern society. This analysis can enhance social awareness, foster empathy and understanding of the difficulties faced by adolescents and provide a visually compelling examination of youth issues on stage. Furthermore, it highlights the need for research as it promotes social dialogue and change from various perspectives.

## 2. The Roles and Story Structure in Matthew Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet> (Character Composition)

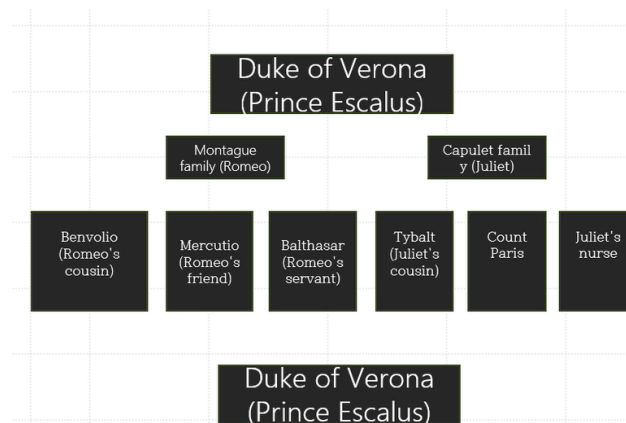


Figure 1. <Romeo + Juliet> Character Composition

Matthew Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet> was reimaged in 2019 and performed by the New Adventures company that he founded. Briefly examining the content through the character diagram above, the "Verona Institute" symbolizes a standardized system in the form of a youth prison. The character who plays the role of the guard in this place is Tybalt. Tybalt forcefully educates and controls the students, representing the unjust older generation of modern society. He commits sexual assault against Juliet and expresses hatred towards the homosexuality of Mercutio and Balthasar, exercising his unjust power. In contrast, the character of Reverend Bernadette Lawrence plays a role in understanding the students. The protagonist, Romeo, is a

young man from the wealthy Montague family, but he struggles to adapt to his environment and experiences adolescent love through his relationship with Juliet. However, he is depicted as a "troubled teen" who suffers from mental abuse and trauma caused by a murder involving a weapon. Juliet is portrayed as a confident and brave adolescent, yet she becomes a victim of sexual assault by Tybalt. Benvolio, Balthasar, Mercutio, and Paris are Romeo and Juliet's friends, all of whom are teenagers.

### **3. Types of "At-Risk Youth" in Matthew Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet>**

Hwang Yeo-Jung, Lee Jung-min, and Kim Soo-Hye conducted a policy study in 2020 on the state of at-risk youth. For this purpose, they categorized the concept and scope of "at-risk youth," and the present researcher referred to this to examine the types of "at-risk youth" depicted in Matthew Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet>.

#### **3.1. Romeo of the Montague Family from the Home Environment**

The home environment during adolescence acts as a significant cause providing the situation for "at-risk youth." Kim Young-ran (2014) views the primary cause of responsibility for "at-risk-youth" as the family, mentioning that social risks have been provided from the collapse of the family. Miller and Brown (2020) state that the style of parenting influences adolescents. They also noted that various family-related factors, such as conflicts within the family, the form and structure of the home, are associated with adolescent behavior, academic performance, and psychological instability during adolescence.

Hwang Yeojung, Lee Jungmin, and Kim Soohye (2020) classified the types of "at-risk youth" based on experiences inside and outside the home. Since Matthew Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet> does not contain content about running away, which is an experience outside the home, the present researcher examined <Romeo + Juliet> based on domestic experiences.

Matthew Bourne portrayed Romeo as a form of "at-risk youth" formed by his parents' misguided parenting style. Romeo is the son of Senator Montague and Brie Montague. Although his parents hold a high social status, Romeo fails to meet their expectations and is forced to enroll at the Verona Institute. Even during their separation, Senator Montague and Brie Montague exhibit a harsh parental demeanor by moving stiffly and hurriedly handing over a bag to Romeo. This portrayal shows Romeo as an "at-risk youth" who, even at home, does not receive love or attention. From his initial enrollment at the Verona Institute, he is seen hunching his shoulders and walking without confidence. Such portrayal by Bourne depicts Romeo as a youth abandoned to irresponsibility by his parents, drifting away from the priorities of the older generation.

#### **3.2. Substance Use, Trauma, and the Suicide of <Romeo and Juliet>**

According to the National Forensic Service's 2023 Drug Evaluation Report, substance abuse among teenagers in South Korea has increased, with a rising trend of poly drug users in their teens and twenties. Adolescent drug use can lead to death or accidental fatalities. Furthermore, it can trigger various potential crimes, necessitating prompt intervention.

Matthew Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet> showcases the issue of adolescent substance use. On the surface, the choreographer's intention appears to be the depiction of youth freedom; however, by intricately portraying the aftermath of drug use within the work, Bourne reveals the negative consequences of substance abuse on stage. It can be inferred that there is a profound intention behind the choreography to instill awareness about drug use.

The first scene that evokes the idea of substance use is the party scene at the Verona Institute. Before the party, the students move in a uniform and synchronized manner, expressing a sense of frustration by clenching their fists and striking the floor with their legs. However, in the party scene, the movements differ significantly from the earlier group choreography. The movements of the hands and feet become free, with characters tilting their heads back to look at the sky, displaying vacant expressions, and exhibiting

movements that seem to suggest a feeling of floating or being in a hallucinatory state. This resembles the conditions following drug use, as Bourne vividly embodies the experience of substance consumption.

The second scene that alludes to drug use appears in Act II of <Romeo + Juliet>. It is unclear whether this scene is meant to illustrate the reasons for drug use or the circumstances following it, but it is certainly connected to substance abuse. In the past, Juliet suffers from hallucinations and visions due to Tybalt's sexual assault, while Romeo impulsively kills Tybalt, experiencing trauma in the process. During this ordeal, both Romeo and Juliet consume drugs, ultimately leading to their suicides.

Matthew Bourne chose the theme of substance use to express the tumultuous rebellion of youth, capturing the essence of adolescent freedom. However, there is an implicit critique that highlights the dire consequences of impulsive choices regarding drug use, culminating in delusions, trauma, and suicide.



**Figure 2. Party Scene of  
<Romeo + Juliet>**



**Figure 3.  
Trauma Experienced by  
Romeo and Juliet Figure**

### 3.3. Juliet's Experience with Sexual Violence (Tybalt & Juliet )

In 2010, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family defined sexual violence as sexual acts committed against another person without their voluntary consent. Sexual violence can be considered a series of forced and controlling acts involving physical, verbal, and mental violence [14]. According to a 2014 survey by the Korean National Police Agency on age-specific victims of sexual violence crimes, 22.2% of victims were adolescents, with 12.9% being under the age of 15 [15]. For these "at-risk youth," the government provides support such as facilities for the protection of sexual violence victims, psychological counseling, medical and legal services. However, for the perpetrators, only relatively weak social laws, such as electronic ankle bracelets, public disclosure of personal information on communication networks, and restrictions on employment in institutions related to children and adolescents with disabilities are applied.

Matthew Bourne used the issue of sexual violence among "at-risk youth" as the subject of his stage adaptation of <Romeo + Juliet>. In Shakespeare's original play, Juliet is a 13-year-old adolescent, while in Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet>, Juliet is depicted as a late adolescent in her teens. In Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet>, Juliet is portrayed as a brave and defiant young woman. However, she is sexually assaulted by Tybalt, who oversees the Verona Institute. Tybalt, an authoritative figure, has large muscles and extreme movements. In his work, Bourne made Tybalt's walk with large strides and emphasized the movements of his fists and palms to appear threatening. Juliet is expressed as a strong-willed woman who knows how to resist, with movements that emphasize her powerful movements and leaning upper body. However, in the duet between Juliet and Tybalt, Juliet is portrayed as a youth who cannot overcome the oppressive and absolute power of the male and becomes a victim of sexual assault. Bourne expressed the escape from authoritative and coercive elders while also staging the social issue of sexual assault. By providing a stage to publicize social issues such as sexual violence in Romeo + Juliet, Bourne offers an opportunity for reflection and awakening about "at-risk youth" who are defenseless against sexual assault.



**Figure 4. Tybalt Attempting Sexual Assault**

#### 4. Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the types and forms of "at-risk youth" depicted in Matthew Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet>. In Bourne's rendition of <Romeo + Juliet>, the conflict between the established generation and the youth serves as a major axis, within which the forms of "at-risk youth" are revealed. We examined how these types of "at-risk youth" are portrayed in the dance work. The results showed that the types of "at-risk youth" were represented through various issues such as family environment, drug use, trauma, suicide, and sexual assault. Examining social issues through Matthew Bourne's dance work <Romeo + Juliet> is of significant meaning. Firstly, the audience can vividly receive the emotions of "at-risk youth" through Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet>, which distinguishes itself from other productions from the creation process. The auditions for <Romeo + Juliet> were conducted by Harrison Dowzell and Bryony Wood in Nottingham and Southampton, targeting dancers aged 16 to 19 who fall under the category of "at-risk youth," who are passionate and can effectively express the voices of the youth. Some of the participating dancers were exposed to the forms of "at-risk youth" and represented their stance through passionate and energetic movements. These young dancers also reflected on themselves, gained courage, and healed through their participation in the performance, dramatically expressing their emotions to the audience, thus conveying the delicate and vivid emotions of "at-risk youth". Through Bourne's <Romeo + Juliet>, the young participating dancers gained confidence, while their peers in the audience experienced empathy, comfort, and healing, and other layers of the audience were prompted to reconsider the social significance of "at-risk youth."

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