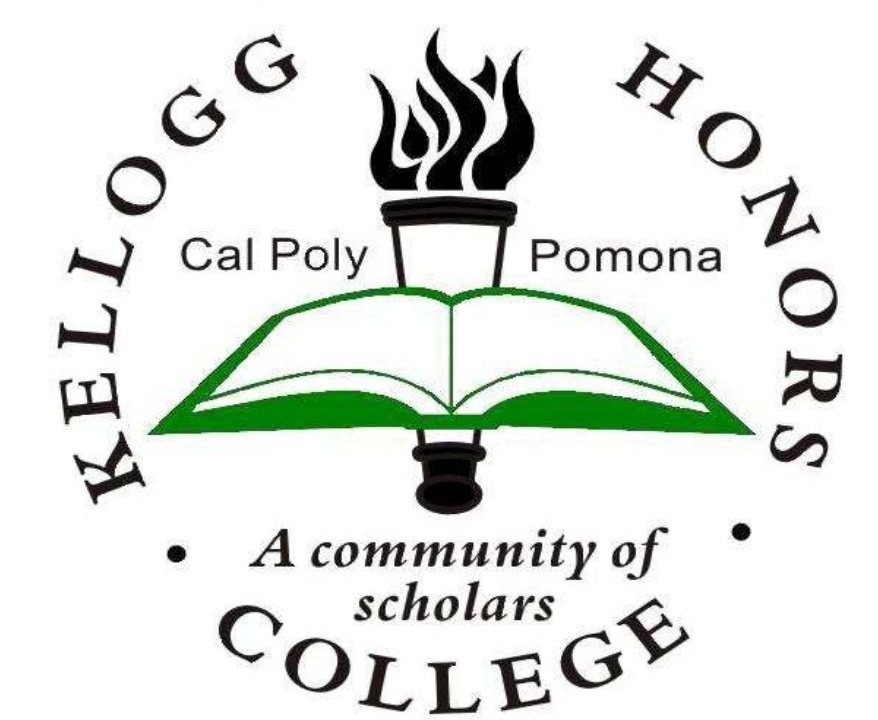# The Arab Rendition of William Shakespeare's
Romeo and Juliet

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Kellogg Honors College Capstone Project

Abstract: The theatre performance of *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare dates back to 1590s. Over the years, theatre playwrights and directors have reinvented this iconic story and adapted it to different settings. This new rendition takes place in the Arab culture during the 1930s, a time when the Middle East was colonized by Western powers. This rendition will depict Syrian society, as it existed in its centuries-old Ottoman era make-up, just prior to the transition into colonial and post-colonial modernity post-colonial. It is an expression of the Arab world's nostalgia and yearning for a simple, more dignified time before the cataclysmic turmoil and cultural identity crisis ushered in by the colonial period. The goal of this project is to showcase graphic design in a fusion of culture and theatre. Along side an in-depth research on the history of *Romeo and Juliet* and of William Shakespeare, two promotional posters are designed as marketing material which are highly inspired by Arabic pattern making and the Turkish manuscript style. They reference the time period of the play and highlight the beginning and end scene within the typography "R" and "J". The "R" poster is set in the beginning where Romeo and Juliet meet each other for the first time. The "J" poster is set in the end where the newly wed Romeo and Juliet flee the village with haste before they get caught. The use of jewel-toned colors is inspired by the elaborate and ornate nature of Arabic designs. The two posters work cohesively together, when placed side by side, the "R" and "J" connect seamlessly as a set, signifying the star crossed lovers union. The typography in the poster and heading is custom designed for the project, inspired by Arabic fluid lines.

Artistic Inspiration

I chose to set Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in an Arab context to enhance the drama and the couples' forbidden love. Having it set in an Arab culture during the 1930s where female and male interactions were considered taboo if it was outside family boundaries, took place of the family feuding in the original playwright. The feuding is not necessarily between Capulet and Montague, but more of the internal struggle between culture/tradition and love. To me, a "feud" within the heart is more powerful than a physical "feud". Family honor is very important and sacred within the Arab culture, so when Romeo and Juliet are caught talking, it not only affects her reputation but also her family's reputation. They get put to shame and gossip goes around. Even though they were just talking, the fact that it was at night in secret makes it seem it was much more than that. People start making up rumors and no longer associate themselves with the Capulets. This means the Capulet business goes down because no one wants to buy from him anymore. Tybalt, her brother, starts to loose friends and engages in fights because people make inappropriate jokes about his family.

Back then, the only way to redeem the family's honor is to kill Juliet. The logic behind this is to make a statement in front of the neighborhood that this is her punishment for dishonoring the family. This again, goes against Islamic teachings; people put culture over religion in sensitive cases like this. This is why Tybalt chases after them at the ends because he intends to kill Juliet, even though Romeo and Juliet are religiously married now. Romeo does not allow this and kills Tybalt, but not before Tybalt stabs Romeo. Now that Romeo is on his deathbed, their options are very limited. He needs immediate attention but they do not dare go back to the neighborhood because they both will be killed instantly. The closest neighborhood with a healer is a three-day journey. Romeo will die on the way. When Rome will die, Juliet has nowhere to go. She cannot go back home. Women at that time were not educated or able to work, so she could not sustain herself without Romeo. He comes up with a solution where they can both be together. He proposed that they kill themselves now before anymore anguish and torment comes upon them. That way, they can both ascend to heaven together and be with each other forever.

I left some characters out like Lady Capulet, Lady Montague, Paris, Nurse, and servants because they did not really have a part in this rendition. The Capulets in this rendition are upper class but maids/nurses and servants were only meant for royalty. I left the mothers out because they would not of added to the character development. Anything that they would of said in the original playwright, I designated for the fathers to say. Its not that Romeo and Juliet had no mothers, they would be in context, just not physically there.

I also rearranged some of the characters, for example Tybalt is Juliet's brother, where in the original playwright, her is her cousin. I did this because I needed a character who was immediate family to get affected by the dishonor and execute the honor killing. It would not be so powerful if he were her cousin. Regardless, Juliet considered Tybalt as a brother in the original playwright anyways. Benvolio is only Romeo's friend, where in the original playwright, he is his friend and cousin. I did this just to simplify the story line because if he were Romeo's cousin, then I would have to tie in Benvolio's lineage, who are not part of the story line.
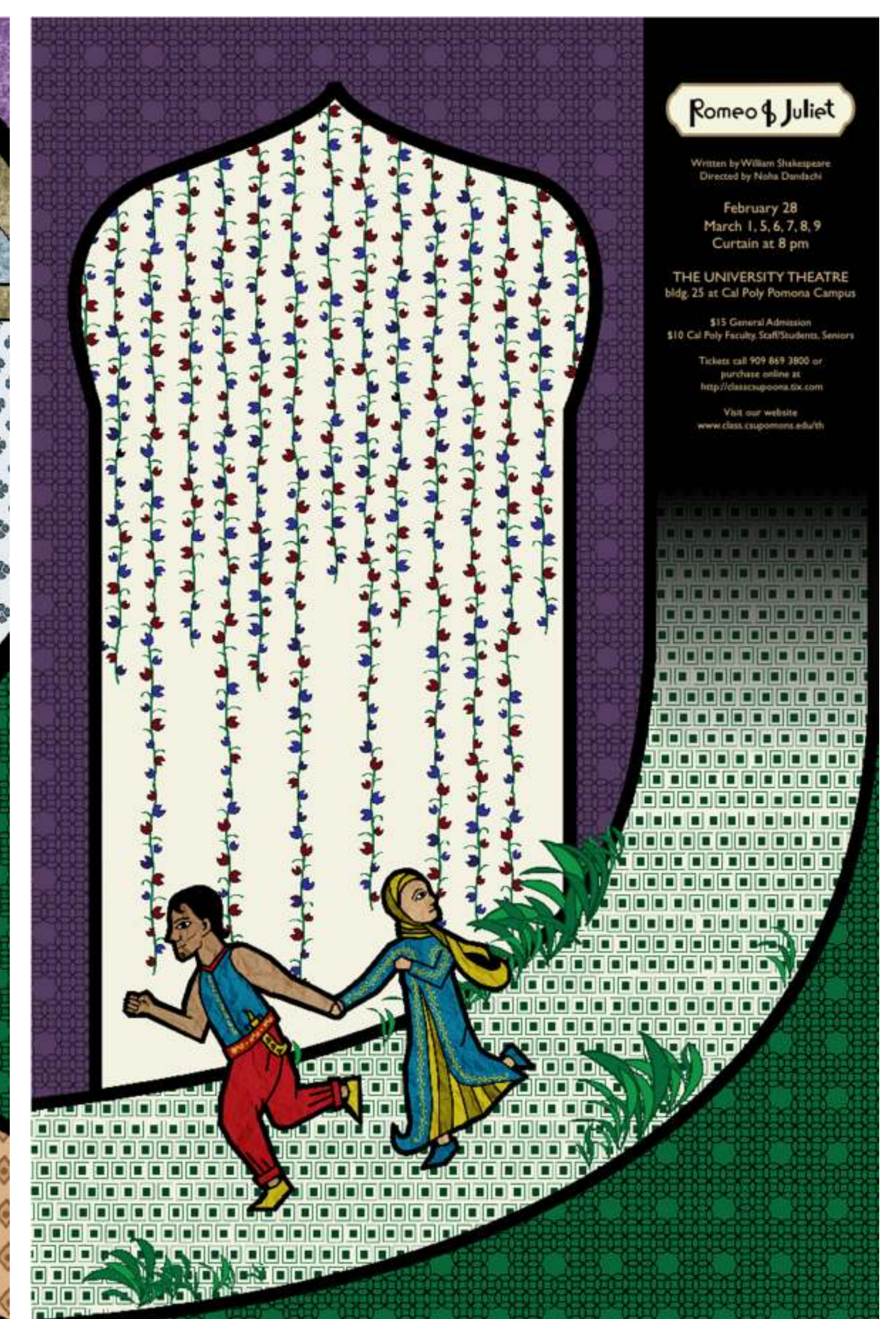
There are many characters that stayed the same, Romeo, Juliet, Capulet, and Montague. There are also characters that I kept but have different names, such as Prince Escalus, and Friar Lawrence. Prince Escalus in this rendition is the mukhtar, who is the elected leader of the neighborhood, but not royalty. He is in charge of looking over the neighborhood and taking care of its people. Juliet is arranged to marry the mukhtar when she turns fifteen, just like how Juliet was meant to marry Paris in the original playwright. Friar Lawrence, in this case, the Shiek, is the Islamic religious figure in the storyline. Romeo and Juliet both seek his help and guidance. He agrees to marry them because he does not want their interaction to be unlawful. He also suggests for them to leave the neighborhood and establish life somewhere else where they can be safe and happy.

The promotional posters I have created fuse my interests of graphic design and set design. The posters designs are inspired by the old Ottoman manuscript style with its flat perspective, use of patterns and textures, and saturated jewel tone colors. I experimented with the typography having the first poster be set in the letter "R" for Romeo. The posters are also renderings of how the set design would look like. The "R" poster takes place in the beginning of the story where Romeo first meets Juliet. He is delivering some baked goods that her father has sent and she opens the door and it is love at first sight. The second poster, "J" for Juliet, takes place at the end where they are married and running away from Tybalt. I have also used the same typography technique where the setting is designed with in the letter "J". When the two posters are set side by side, they look continuous as if it was one piece, RJ. It sets the beginning and finishes at the end. The posters are cohesive in typography, technique, style, color, and execution. The heading typeface "Romeo & Juliet" is also one that I have developed and created on my own.

Romeo Poster
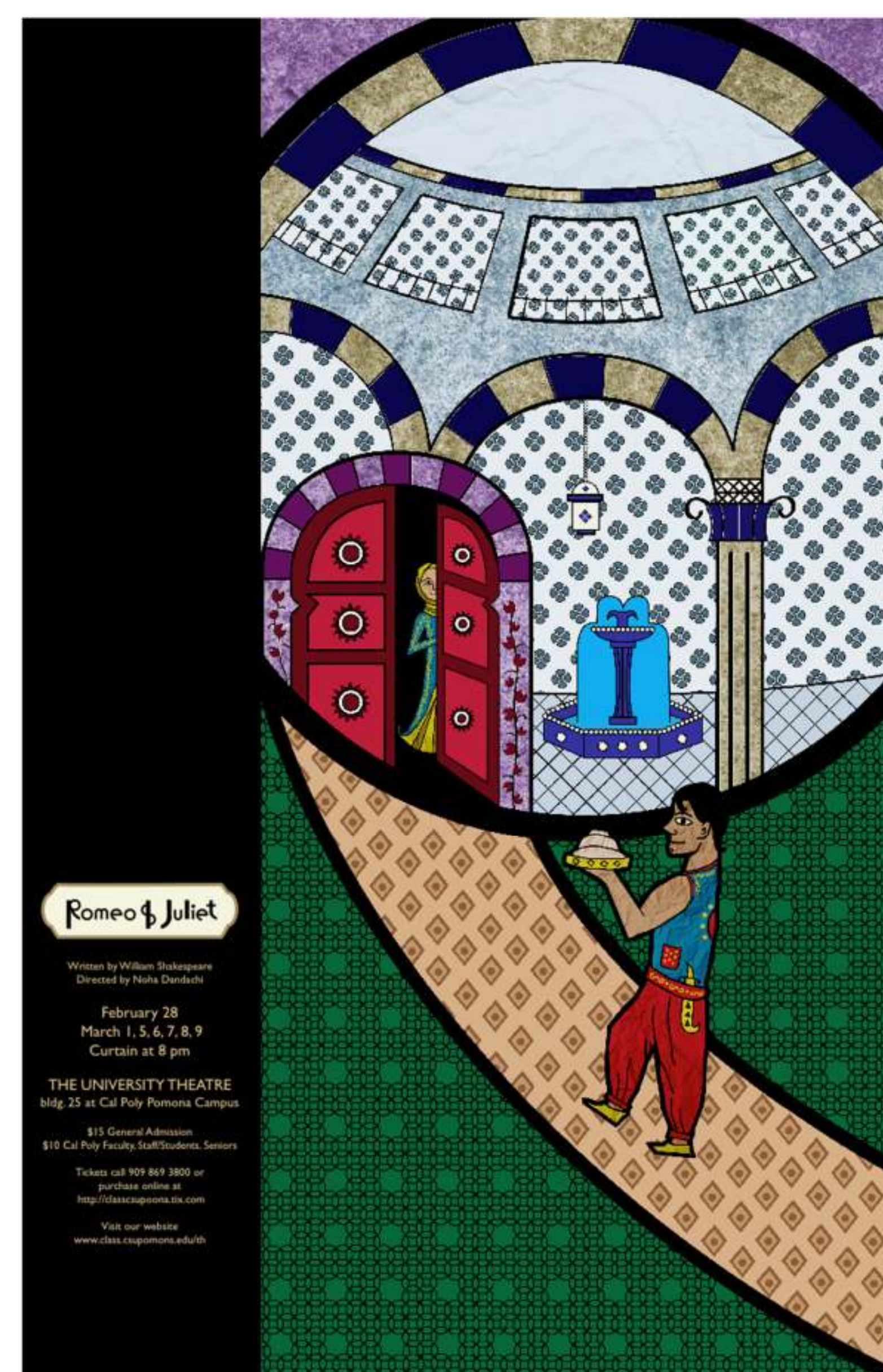
Juliet Poster

Designed typeface