

## “Too Hot for a Pandemic”

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In a sea of guests at a masquerade hosted by the Capulets, Romeo becomes enraptured by Juliet whose beauty he compares to an exquisite gem “too rich for use, for earth too dear.”<sup>1</sup> Despite having their identities concealed by masks in their first encounter, these teenagers from warring families find something worth dying for two kisses later. Roughly four hundred years and a second viral pandemic since Shakespeare penned this love story, romantic rhymers like Romeo may have become a rarity, but the masquerade continues on. Confronted with an ongoing international health crisis and the subsequent enforcement of personal protection equipment (PPE), face masks have become a necessity, a new behavioral custom entwined with socialization. While this compulsory masquerade is far from what is illustrated in *Romeo and Juliet*, habituation of protective masks still impels adeptness in navigating social dynamics and personal relations when it has become increasingly difficult to see others. What does this new ‘normal’ during a pandemic mean for singles searching for love? Is there a Romeo or a Juliet that one can find in midst of new social conventions, paranoia, physical and emotional isolation?

Netflix seems to suggest a provisional solution through their latest dating shows: stay home, unmask, and scrutinize other singles as they embarrass themselves on a global streaming platform. As it has become nearly improbable to engage in real-life meet-cutes, singles have turned to the screen to live vicariously through dating shows like *Love is Blind* (2020) and *Too Hot to Handle* (2020) which were filmed and programmed well before the COVID-19 outbreak. After being released on February 13, 2020, strategically just in time for Valentine’s Day, independent measurement and data agency Nielsen reported that the first five episodes of *Love is Blind* ranked the second highest in Netflix Originals viewership in the week of March 2, while episodes six through nine placed third.<sup>2</sup> A “blind love experiment” hosted by

Hollywood lovebirds Vanessa and Nick Lachey, the show invites contestants to participate in a series of speed dates in individual pods without the luxury of being able to see the other person. “Is love truly blind?” the show enquires as they observe the participants “fall in love” and get engaged to one another all within a span of ten days, sight unseen. It is a compelling concept given the current state of physical and emotional isolation and the uncertainty of a post-pandemic world. While the show illuminates the importance of emotional connection, the ten-day timeframe seems unrealistic, simply advantageous to the production budget and entertainment value. It is, however, conscious of how masks eventually come off in a relationship after the initial honeymoon phase; and this is why the later episodes that portray the couples’ return to ‘reality’ from a retreat in Mexico are uncomfortably satisfying.

In theory, the premise of *Too Hot to Handle* is also based on learning to value one’s inner qualities over the physical. Its format and execution, however, eclipse most other shows in this genre with its licentious content and controversial contestants – the prosaic title does not disappoint. In this show, attractive social-media influencers who boast of their sexual prowess are invited to what appears to be a carefree “hedonistic holiday,” as the show’s narrator Desiree Burch jestingly expounds. Little do they know their *Love Island*-like exclusive party is a self-improvement “retreat” where they must abstain from sexual practices for the entirety of their stay at the resort. Monitored by the watchful eyes of an AI named Lana, the attractive, impassioned models who are used to “meaningless flings” are encouraged to get to know one another – and themselves – on a deeper level. The “Big Sister” Lana surveils the participants through cameras installed across the villa, including their shared bedroom and shower. The show begins a \$100,000 award, but as Lana explains to her guests, “money will be deducted from the prize for any sexual activity” to which the now devastated singles agonize over the moral dilemma of personal desires against the communal goal. One of the more enlightened contestants, Matthew, shares, “...what is better for the overall group should outweigh your personal needs every single time,” but not everyone is on board with this idea of self-sacrifice.

Even though every rule-break comes at a price, Harry and Francesca lose \$3,000 for kissing, then another \$20,000 for having sex, while Rhonda and Sharron squander \$16,000 in the private suite.

These actions can be ascribed to their lack of self-control or quest for notoriety, but they denote the kind of entitlement and egocentrism that are also witnessed in our own neighborhoods away from the lavish reality-television sets. In Toronto, a stranger recently interrupted a CTV news interview for a “spontaneous kiss” when the interviewee whom he had just met in the park was commenting on the irrelevance of masks.<sup>3</sup> This Romeo did not consider the risk of kissing a stranger during a pandemic, probably just thought of his on-camera gesture as bold and charming. Just a few days later, 10,000 young people congregated in the same park to celebrate the arrival of summer, disregarding the physical distancing rules. Parks such as Trinity Bellwoods have become a watering hole for Torontonians singles, especially during the lockdown; photos and videos of the reckless weekend portray people enjoying each other’s company in too close of a proximity. Is “selfish and dangerous” or “clueless and blind” the new motto for singles in search of love? Social infrastructure has significantly shifted due to COVID-19, but inner longings for serendipitous and passionate love that defies death – even logic – remain. In an era where physical proximity poses danger not just to the individual, but an entire community, will this sense of interconnectedness prove to be too much to handle for lonely hearts craving affection?

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*. Minneapolis: First Avenue Editions 2014, 31.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Schneider, “‘The Office,’ ‘Schitt’s Creek’ Still Dominate Nielsen’s Latest Netflix Acquired Series Ratings (EXCLUSIVE).” *Variety*. March 20, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/netflix-ratings-amazon-prime-the-office-schitts-creek-1203536945>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/toronto-park-kiss-interview-205849623.html>. May 21, 2020.

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