

Weather

Today: Sunny, chilly.

High 42. Low 30.

Friday: Partly sunny, breezy.

High 52. Low 38.

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In Fair Verona, Answers for the Lovelorn

By DANIEL WILLIAMS
Washington Post Foreign Service

VERONA, Italy
This graceful river town in northern Italy where William Shakespeare set "Romeo and Juliet" is awash in the legend of the star-crossed lovers. Not only are hotels named after the pair, but also a perfume, a motorcycle race-course, a campground and a canned fruit company. A bakery makes Romeo and Juliet cakes, and a candy company turns out "Juliet Kisses."

City fathers had the foresight a few decades ago to "identify" the family homes of Romeo and Juliet, along with Juliet's grave. A tomb for Romeo remained somehow undiscovered. He gets short shrift in Verona, even though he paid just as high a price for his love as Juliet. In any case, the sites have become magnets for 2

million tourists a year.

Verona's identity is so bound up in the tragic tale that the post office receives about 5,000 letters a year to Juliet, who has become a kind of universal Miss Lonelyhearts for troubled lovers. The Juliet Club has taken up the task of answering each and every letter, many of which are addressed simply to Juliet, Verona, Italy. But, what ho? That's not a Juliet answering all those letters but ... a Giulio. Giulio Tarnassia, to be exact, president of the Juliet Club. He and others in the club see the chore as a civic duty. "This is a myth. It's bigger than truth," Tarnassia said.

The letters are written earnestly and are usually melancholy tales worthy of Shakespearean treatment: parental meddling in teenage love, battles of lovers against intolerance and mean teachers, the sorrows of misarranged marriages and unarranged di-

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World's Lovelorn Seek Advice from Juliet

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voices, and the inevitable letdown of one-night stands.

"After reading so many letters, you are impressed with the perseverance of people in love. There are so many difficulties, yet they want to go on, to succeed," said Tamassia, who once managed a bakery outside the city. He and a group of friends founded the Juliet Club 30 years ago to promote civic pride, culture and tourism. The club took up the letter-answering chore a decade ago.

The letters come from all over. Recently the Islamic world and Eastern Europe have become burgeoning sources of woeful correspondence. Marinella Fedrigoli, a psychologist on a team of seven multilingual "Juliet secretaries" who sift through the letters, said problems of the heart haven't changed much in the past 10 years.

"People consistently need advice on how to express their love, how to deal with betrayal, how to find their Romeo or Juliet," she said. "However, I have noticed one trend in 10 years. People are more alone. They have less and less chances of expressing themselves to others. Juliet seems to be their last hope."

The secretaries are at a loss as to why Juliet should become a recipient for such pleas. You may recall that in Shakespeare's play, Juliet Capulet was a teenage girl who fell hard for Romeo Montague, a smooth-talking guy she met at a masked ball. Her dysfunctional parents, engaged in a meaningless feud with Romeo's equally hateful family, objected and tried to set her up with an establishment type named Paris. Romeo seemed to engage mainly in street brawls and climbing balconies. It didn't help that he knifed to death one of Juliet's cousins.

Juliet tried to trick everyone by taking drugs and pretending to be dead, to avoid life with Paris. Romeo, being none too swift, actually thought she was dead and took poison, which of course apothecaries of the time willingly sold to distraught teenagers. Juliet, having made a mess of things, stabbed herself with a dagger.

Are these the kind of people you want advice from?

"Our letter writers think Juliet will understand their feelings," said Giovanna Tamassia, Giulio's daughter and another "secretary."

The letters show the amorous misadventures of different nationalities. Americans, for example, frequently write about problems of interracial and interfaith relationships. The current American vernacular is a bit less elegant than Elizabethan English. Americans seem not to have problems, but "issues." They have trouble "relating." They are after practical counsel, as if they were writing to Popular Mechanics. "My girlfriend said she wanted to French kiss. I said okay. What is a French kiss? Just how does it work?" asked one young man.

"We told him he would find out naturally," said Giovanna Tamassia.

It is also not above Americans to offer advice to Juliet and her Romeo, much like people in a Jerry Springer audience. "You two could have worked something out," a high school student counseled. "Other than faking your death, you



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The Verona house billed as Juliet's is a draw for tourists, who call to their Romeos from the balcony.

could have married Paris, sent word to Romeo, run off and 'lived happily ever after.'"

Europeans are more flowery in their letters and more willing to air their mental anguish. A Finn told of how he carried the guilt of a marriage breakup for decades. A working German woman was torn between love of a passionate but noncommittal man, who understood her need to labor and travel, and a stable, marriageable type who was "boring."

Further afield, someone who identified himself as the "Prince of Rwanda" asked how to meet a girl on a trip to Italy (Juliet doesn't do matchmaking). From Algeria, a woman wrote of being driven out of her in-laws' house on suspicion of having an extramarital affair. In Serbia, "the economic crisis goes on. . . . There's no space for love!" In Turkey, a social worker fell in love with a poor female rag-picker at a garbage dump. His parents wouldn't accept the engagement.

A few contemporary twists have started to emerge. Cyber-lovers lament the loss of an e-mail address. Same-sex couples have begun to write in. "My Romeo is a Juliet," wrote an enthusiastic Frenchwoman.

"We answer all letters," Fedrigoli said. "Juliet doesn't judge."

Love Capital of the World is perhaps an unsuitable title for Verona. Its 250,000 inhabitants are not considered particularly passionate by Italian standards. Giulio Tamassia noted that Veronese are noted for their closed nature. "We have a hard time smiling," he said. Veronese are hard-nosed business folks. Indeed, the promotion of the Romeo and Juliet cult was a rather recent event, brought about with an eye

toward commerce.

In the 1930s, Hollywood technicians visited the city to study its architecture in preparation for a Romeo and Juliet film by MGM. The ensuing craze prompted the city's museum director to restore a house that had been purchased by the city early in the century and was reputed to belong to the Capulets. There is no evidence that such a family ever lived in Verona. A supposed Montague house is privately owned.

Juliet's house became a big draw for tourists. A bronze statue of Juliet was placed in the courtyard. Visitors rub her right breast for good luck. Amorous couples scratch and paint hearts and initials on the facade of the compound and the walls beneath an arch. Local businessmen lived up to their dour reputation by campaigning to have the graffiti erased—to them, the marks were an eyesore.

Visitors mount the famed balcony, whose marble was actually put there in the 1930s, and reenact the scene in which Romeo climbs up to Juliet's bedroom. "Jack, Jack, wherefore art you, Jack?" bellowed a British woman the other day to her rather paunchy sidekick below.

Visitors fill guest books with lovey-dovey messages—some are even cheery. "I have found my Juliet—she is my wife, Luz," wrote a Mexican visitor.

Of course, there's always a dissenter in the crowd. "Never kill yourself for a man!" admonished one messenger.

You can bet that a sentiment like that won't be found in the winner of the Most Beautiful Love Letter Award, which the club gives each year on St. Valentine's Day. The prize: a trip to Verona.