A HISTORY OF SHAKESPEARE ON SCREEN

A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television chronicles how film-makers have re-imagined Shakespeare’s plays from the earliest exhibitions in music halls and nickelodeons to today’s multi-million dollar productions shown in megaplexes. Topics include the silent era, Hollywood in the Golden Age, the films of Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles, the television scene to include the BBC plays, the avant-garde cinema of Jarman and Greenaway, and non-Anglophone contributions from Japan and elsewhere. This second edition updates the chronology to the year 2003 and includes a new chapter on such recent films as John Madden’s Shakespeare in Love, Kenneth Branagh’s Love’s Labour’s Lost, Michael Almereyda’s Hamlet, and Billy Morissette’s Scotland, Pa. An up-to-date filmography, bibliography, and index of names make it invaluable as a one-volume reference work for specialists, while the accessible style will ensure that it also appeals to a wider audience of Shakespeareans and cinephiles.

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For my grandchildren,
Rosalind Springs Rothwell
Sara Mei-Ping Davis
James Waddell Rothwell
Charlotte Zhong-Xue Rothwell Davis
Phoebe Ming-Ming Davis
- CONTENTS -

List of illustrations  ix
Preface and acknowledgments to second edition  xi
Preface to first edition  xiii
Acknowledgments  xv
List of abbreviations  xvi

1  Shakespeare in silence: from stage to screen  1
2  Hollywood’s four seasons of Shakespeare  27
3  Laurence Olivier directs Shakespeare  47
4  Orson Welles: Shakespeare for the art houses  69
5  Electronic Shakespeare: from television to the web  91
6  Spectacle and song in Castellani and Zeffirelli  119
7  Shakespeare movies in the age of angst  136
8  Other Shakespeares: translation and expropriation  160
9  Shakespeare in the cinema of transgression, and beyond  192
10  The renaissance of Shakespeare in moving images  219
11  Shakespeare in love, in love with Shakespeare: the adoration after the millennium  248

Notes  275
Bibliography  299
Chronological list of films  318
Filmography and title index  328
Name index  367
- ILLUSTRATIONS -

1 King John (UK 1899), Courtesy of Nederlands Filmmuseum. page 2

2 The Life and Death of King Richard III (USA 1912). Courtesy of The American Film Institute. 18

3 Hamlet: The Drama of Vengeance (Germany 1920). Courtesy of Det Danske Filminstitut and Mr. Allan O. Hagedorff. 24

4 The Taming of the Shrew (USA 1929). Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive. 31

5 A Midsummer Night's Dream (USA 1935). Courtesy of Photofest. 36

6 Romeo and Juliet (USA 1936). Courtesy of Photofest. 41

7 Hamlet (UK 1948). Courtesy of CTE (Carlton) Ltd. 56

8 King Richard III (UK 1955). Courtesy of Carlton International Media, Ltd. 63

9 Macbeth (USA 1948). Courtesy of Hamilton Projects, Inc. 72

10 Chimes at Midnight [Falstaff] (Spain/Switzerland 1966). Internacionale Films Espanola (Madrid). 83

11 Othello (UK 1950). © BBC Picture Archives. 93

12 Hamlet (UK/USA 1970). Courtesy of Hallmark Hall of Fame Productions. 100


14 Romeo and Juliet (Italy/UK 1954). Courtesy of Carlton International Media Limited. 121

15 Romeo and Juliet (USA 1916). Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive. 131
List of illustrations

17 King Lear (UK 1971). Courtesy of Photofest. 158
18 Othello (USSR 1955). Courtesy of Photofest. 171
19 Hamlet (USSR 1964). Courtesy of Photofest. 177
20 King Lear (USSR 1969). Courtesy of Photofest. 181
21 The Tempest (UK 1979). Courtesy of Eurolondon Films Limited, and Mr. John Henderson. 198
22 A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Spain/UK 1984). Courtesy of Celestino Coronado and David Meyer, Cabochon Film Productions. 212
23 King Henry V (UK 1989). Courtesy of Kenneth Branagh and © 1989 Orion Pictures Corporation. All rights reserved. 221
24 Richard III at the National Theatre. Photo: John Haynes. 233
25 “Twelfth Night” Copyright 1996. © Fine Line Features, Inc. All rights reserved. Photo by Alex Bailey appears courtesy of New Line Productions, Inc. (USA); and Renaissance Films Ltd. [inc. Twelfth Night Productions Ltd.] (UK). 243
26 William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream (USA 1999). Twentieth Century Fox. Photo: Mario Tursi. Courtesy of Photofest. 252
28 Scotland PA (USA 2001) © Lot 47 Films. By permission. 262

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The need for a second edition of *A History of Shakespeare on Screen* goes beyond the obvious requirement of updating the chronology. As thousands of classroom teachers through readily available VHS and DVD recordings have refocused student attention from text to performance, a minor revolution has occurred in academic attitudes toward Shakespeare on screen. Once universally scorned as “dumbing down,” Shakespeare films are now often credited with both preserving and redefining a cultural heritage. The latest pedagogy has been accompanied by theoretical contributions from new wave academics, whose enthusiasm for both Shakespeare and mass culture has persuaded them to expand the limits of the Shakespeare movie from text to “paratext.” In the beginning filmmakers deferred to Shakespeareans; nowadays Shakespeareans defer to filmmakers. Subservience has yielded to subversion.

This shift in the center of gravity has toppled the sovereignty of text over performance to the point that the term, “transgressive,” which I used in the first edition of this book as a label for bizarre adaptations, has become meaningless. Post-modernism collapses the distinctions between high and low culture so that Will Shakespeare becomes just another working screen writer subject to “the spurns That patient merit of th’ unworthy takes.” The ancient cry of protest “But is it Shakespeare?” is heard now only from diehard Luddites, who have in the sweep of events ironically themselves been made over into the counter-revolutionary transgressors. This volume’s cover illustration from Billy Morrissette’s *Scotland, PA* illustrates how Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* has been reincarnated in the context of that most American of mass cultural institutions, the MacDonald’s hamburger.

Actually there is nothing new about any of this tug of war between text and performance. The grudge in Jacobean times between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones over whether in the court masque the text (*Lexis*) or the scenery (*Opsis*) should be given priority has been displaced forward into the struggle between author and *auteur*. This “dismemberment” of Shakespeare, as explicated by theorists like Richard Burt, Linda Charnes, Barbara Hodgdon, Douglas Lanier, Courtney Lehmann, Laurie Osborne, Lisa S. Starks, W. B. Worthen, and others, has not yet destroyed the powerful force of Shakespeare’s work as a theogony,
Preface and acknowledgments to second edition

a kind of creation epic for western civilization. It has instead infused the parts like a sacramental wafer into the body and blood of the masses who partake of the feast. The old fashioned textual scholar remains on the high altar guarding the holy relics of folio and quarto. Never mind that only a faithful few still attend Mass.

In the newly drafted chapter 11, I have more or less erased the sharp distinction between film and video in order to solve a difficult organizational problem as well as to acknowledge the way that technology has increasingly blurred the distinction between them. I have also corrected and amended errors and misjudgments in the first edition. For their detailed and exhaustive criticism, I am especially grateful to José Ramón Díaz Fernández, Thomas A. Pendleton, Stanley Wells, and my editor Sarah Stanton. I would also like to thank Peter Balderstone, Peter Donaldson, Juana Green, Nicholas Jones, and Elsie Walker, for allowing me to draw on their unpublished papers, all but Walker’s having been presented to the “Shakespeare and the Movies” seminar at the 2003 Shakespeare Association meeting in Victoria, BC. I am indebted to the staffs of the Butler/Howe Library at the University of Vermont, the Library of Performing Arts of the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, and the Museum of Modern Art Film Library. Gary Crowduz has allowed me to draw on my reviews of Elizabeth and Much Ado about Something in Cineaste; Jim Welsh authorized me to echo things I have already said in his journal, Literature/Film Quarterly; the editors of Shakespeare Bulletin have not objected to my incorporating traces of work published in its pages; Lot 47 Films granted permission to use the cover photo from Scotland, PA; for some production data about recent film releases I have used by permission http://pro.imdb.com, © 1990–2001 Internet Movie Database Limited. Individual Web sites for specific films have occasionally been drawn on as well. “Photofest” has been indispensable in locating stills.

Throughout all these perturbations, my faithful wife, Lyn, has never hesitated to take time out to help me, even in the midst of her own heroic struggle to bring a single payer universal health system to Vermont and the United States.

K.S.R.
September 2, 2003
Burlington, Vermont

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Not least, I am grateful to my faithful and loving wife, Lyn, who put up with my becoming a grouchy recluse for two years.


ABBREVIATIONS

BBC  British Broadcasting Company
BFI  British Film Institute
BUFVC  British Universities Film & Video Council
CD  Comparative Drama
CSM  Christian Science Monitor
ETJ  Educational Theatre Journal
FM  Film Music
FQ  Film Quarterly
FR  Films in Review
LFQ  Literature/Film Quarterly
MFB  Monthly Film Bulletin
MG  Manchester Guardian
MPW  Moving Picture World and View Photographer
NFTVA  National Film and Television Archive
NYHT  New York Herald Tribune
NYO  The New York Observer
NYRB  New York Review of Books
NYT  The New York Times
PMLA  Publications of the Modern Language Association
QFRT  The Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television
RSC  Royal Shakespeare Company
SB  Shakespeare Bulletin
SFNL  Shakespeare on Film Newsletter
SN  Shakespeare Newsletter
SQ  Shakespeare Quarterly
SS  Shakespeare Survey
S&S  Sight and Sound
TA  Theatre Arts (previously Theatre Arts Monthly)
TN  The Nation
TNY  The New Yorker
Abbreviations

TRS  The Riverside Shakespeare
TS   Theatre Survey
VV   Village Voice
WAC  BBC Written Archives Centre
WP   Washington Post