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978-0-521-39913-5 - Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Peter Brook and Akira Kurosawa

Anthony Davies

Excerpt

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Introduction

The plays of Shakespeare have become undisputed literary classics. They have been encountered by vast numbers of students as words on the page, and only by a small fraction of that great number as staged performances. The texts have undergone exhaustive interpretative and bibliographic explication so that in addition to their own literary canonization, they have generated an immense volume of centrifugal literature.

Only since the beginning of this century has there been a move to apply an academic discipline to the study of Shakespeare in performance, and so to reaffirm the stature of the original corporate encounter of the plays as staged presentations. The thrust towards the study of the plays in performance has come about partly as a result of influential writing on this subject by authors of stature like John Russell Brown, J.L. Styan, Raymond Williams, Richard David and Stanley Wells. Between 1966 and 1981 John Russell Brown produced six books which stress the importance of the theatrical study of Shakespearean drama, the most controversial of which is his *Free Shakespeare* (1974). Stanley Well's *Literature and Drama* (1970), J.L. Styan's *The Shakespeare Revolution* (1977), Richard David's *Shakespeare in the Theatre* (1978) and the collection of essays, *Players of Shakespeare*, edited by Philip Brockbank (1985), have given wider dimensions to this consideration. On a more immediate level, the study of Shakespeare in performance has been promoted through the greater collaboration of the university and the theatre, both through their joint participation in projects and through the movement of university-trained actors and directors into the professional theatre.

One result of the awareness that textual study and theatrical presentation are parts of the same overall endeavour has been a return on the Shakespearean stage to the primacy of the dialogue. Scenic spectacle has been reduced and the central importance of the actor in the open space advanced. So powerful has this shift been, that in some recent productions at Stratford-upon-Avon the tendency has been to reinforce the self-consciousness of theatre by placing within the illuminated area of

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the stage distinctly theatrical objects which have no function as locational setting – a miscellaneous collection of properties, wigs and costumes standing in readiness, together with back-stage containers – and which give to rehearsed performance the calculated illusion of performed rehearsal.

The displacement of spectacle and the consequent investiture of the actor with the pre-eminent degree of dramatic responsibility from the start of the play has revealed anew the truism that the theatre is predominantly a medium of spoken language. What is equally true – as the years of silent cinema proved – is that the medium of film is *not* based on spoken language. The modern Shakespearean stage can justly claim the projection of the spoken word to be its essence, but the pith of cinematic expression even in Shakespearean adaptation is the moving image.

Yet theatre and cinema, like music, are temporal arts and they share with music a common means of generating dramatic energy. All three derive their dramatic capabilities primarily from the inherent opposition of arrested movement to the context of a dynamic structure; of still point within continuous movement. Within the dramatic structures of Shakespeare's dialogue, there emerge complex images which arrest the mind of the perceptive listener at points in the overall poetic and dramatic development, in the same way that intense moments in musical flow lay hold on involved response. So, too, the energy of the dramatic film arises from the suspension of the memorable visual image within a shifting but synthetic context of juxtaposed and discontinuous space.

The major difference between cinematic and theatrical presentation lies in the relationships of components rather than in essence: the relationship of action to time, and, more especially in the case of Shakespearean drama, the relation of the aural to the visual. While theatre can, and frequently does, incorporate spectacle of location as an organic dimension of its expression, so cinema has come to incorporate dialogue. Since the dramatic space of the theatre stage is relatively fixed and visually static, the dialogue can undergo subtle and complex manipulation. The opposite, however, holds true for the cinema. Its spatial disjunctions and the consequent demand for visual re-orientation necessarily inhibit sophisticated complexity of dialogue.

In adapting Shakespeare's dramatic material for the cinema screen, the film maker must, therefore, compensate for the changed relationship between what is spoken and what is shown, in accord with what is intrinsic to his medium. He must develop a cinematic language which is articulate on the visual level, a language which is essentially based on the manipulation of space – space between different entities in the rectangular frame which encloses the image, space between the camera and its subject, space which contracts or expands as the camera moves towards or away from, or around that subject. Will a particular dramatic situation be best served by sudden spatial disjunctions and discontinuities like those we find in Welles's *OTHELLO*? Or by a fluidity in space which the moving camera gives, for instance, to Olivier's *HAMLET*? What dramatic qualities will be given to a particular moment in the action by angle-shooting, the camera either being placed on a low level, 'looking

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up' at its subject, or being elevated above the action and so giving the viewer the sense of looking down upon it? What associations will the camera make, either simultaneously in the frame or in sequence? Photography will only capture the reflection of light from surfaces. In coming to terms with these questions, the film maker will not merely be affording the viewer different pictures of the action. He will be trying to penetrate dramatic substance. To focus the camera on what might be a fairly trivial family argument and then to punctuate this with a shot of gathering storm clouds, as Kurosawa does in *RAN*, is to present dramatic action and then to give that action a colouration and a magnitude not carried by the dialogue.

The cinematic resources used in a film should emerge as a coherent pattern which will give to the film an essential unity. Such a pattern can conveniently be thought of as a spatial strategy. By devising a spatial strategy which establishes and develops correspondences, oppositions and aesthetic progressions, the film maker must endeavour to invest his cinematic adaptation, on its predominant visual level, with a complexity and structural force which the medium of film does not naturally project in its dialogue.

Since the natural priorities of the cinema are not immediately compatible with the theatrical priorities of Shakespearean drama, the question that must arise is one of the legitimacy of the film maker's work. How far can the film maker be a creator? To what extent is he obliged to confine himself to being an interpreter? Lurking behind these questions is the assumption of some sort of authority bent upon ensuring that Shakespeare is not profaned, though such an authority almost certainly arises from the pre-eminent status which a literary study of Shakespeare's plays has asserted. Theatre is, by its nature, ephemeral and there would be something very wrong with it if productions of the same play over the years did not shift their emphasis in reflecting the hopes, fears, anger and current concerns of the societies from which these productions spring. The Royal Shakespeare Company's 1986 production of *Romeo and Juliet* was Shakespeare's play, but it deliberately set out to make its comment upon Mrs Thatcher's Britain of the 1980s and upon what was seen to be the displacement of philanthropic and humanitarian values by those associated with market forces and a monetarist morality. There is nothing essentially new in this. The play called 'The Murder of Gonzago' (which Hamlet later calls 'The Mousetrap') is not only staged with an emphasis designed to comment upon the current regime, but it incorporates specially added lines penned by its director, and a very effective dramatic piece it is.

But with regard to film, of course, the issue is different. This is partly because film is a fixture, establishing itself as another kind of text, and partly because, like theatre, it embodies impulses and emphases relevant to the time of its production; but unlike theatre, it cannot shed them. The film maker may be seen, therefore, as having a greater responsibility than the theatrical director. Not only will his work reach a wider audience, and probably an audience which is less able to set a particular presentation of a play in context, but the nature of the cinematic medium will give the

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presentation an authority which is alien to the theatre. Once again, however, the question of an assumed definitiveness arises, a supremely approved actualization of a Shakespeare text to which the film maker must strive to be faithful. It is clearly not helpful to suggest that the film maker has an obligation to be faithful to Shakespeare's intention. Who is to decide what that is, or was? It would therefore seem sensible to argue that a film maker will make the most effective film adaptation of a Shakespeare play if he is faithful to his own vision of what may be called the play's life force. It would seem more important to ensure that Shakespeare is not relegated to a museum for classic texts than to protect the plays from experimental presentation.

Charles Marowitz, whose productions of *Hamlet* and *The Taming of the Shrew* aroused such immense controversy, has maintained that the life force of a Shakespeare play is not embedded in the text, but results from an interaction between the imaginative mind and the text. The result will not be a presentation of the text as it stands, but will be irrefutable evidence that Shakespearean drama is vibrantly alive. 'You cannot make an omelette without breaking the eggs!' Marowitz was, of course, talking essentially about theatre. But Frank Kermode has said much the same thing about the filming of Shakespeare's plays. In an article entitled 'Shakespeare in the Movies' he has this to say,

Certain plays . . . are commonly regarded as very great works. But common consent is not only not enough, it is in this situation a danger. The new maker has got to feel that the true nature of their greatness has eluded *him*, at any rate; that the testimony of others is mostly irrelevant; and that what he does with it must show what he found in it – not everything, but something – that confirmed his intuition that it was worth doing, and so at once justifies his authority and establishes that of the play . . . The point is simple; these texts, if we are to hold on to their greatness (and who says we can afford to lose it?), have to be reborn in the imagination of another.²

Kermode uses the word 'maker', and such an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of Shakespearean film as a creative endeavour is especially fitting, for scholars of Shakespeare as literature seem rarely to venture into the domain of Shakespearean film criticism. This is puzzling insofar as both the published text and the film exist – unlike the staged performance – as objects, and it is likely that over the years more people will form an idea of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet* from the respective films of Zeffirelli and Olivier than will do so from any encounter with the printed text.

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1 Cinematic and theatrical space

The temptation and the tendency to judge Shakespearean film in terms of some sort of theatrical achievement stems partly from that critical tendency to impose old criteria on new artistic fields, partly from the appearance on the screen of established stage actors in Shakespearean roles and partly from a persistent belief – which intelligent criticism has done little to shift – that cinema is really ‘canned’ and transportable theatre. The uncertainty about just what Shakespearean film ought to strive to accomplish will no doubt continue unless there is an attempt to discern clearly the subtle and significant differences which distinguish the two media in their presentation of dramatic material. They are differences which do not merely concern the mode of the work’s presentation, but they crucially modify the relationship between the audience and the presented work. It is in the complex field of spatial relationships that the essential distinctions lie.

In his major essays on theatre and cinema, André Bazin writes helpfully and with profound insight on the complex relationship between these two arts, and points with precision to the distinguishing dramatic essence of film. The resonance of Bazin’s observations continues to make them seminal in any discussion of the different kinds of space which the stage and screen constitute and his formulations will therefore play a major part in this chapter.

The nature of the audience relationship with stage space is both psychologically and architecturally determined. The action on the theatre stage is encapsulated within an ‘aesthetic microcosm’, the main purpose of which is to make a spatial distinction between art and nature.¹ We are conditioned to accept the staged dramatic activity in the same way that we accept the picture in its frame, the statue on its pedestal and characters who speak in verse so that they cannot possibly be connected with the intercourse of the day.² Even where the décor and the set aim to bring spatial illusions close to reality the stage can never strive for verisimilitude on its own because we, the theatre audience, know too much about it. We know that around the artificially illuminated space of the staged dramatic action there are actors waiting in the wings, there are battens of blazing lights and there are dusty men in paint-stained dungarees waiting to move the scenery.

The disparity between what the spectator in the theatre audience sees and what he knows is given particular emphasis on the conventional stage by theatrical frontality, and this disparity ensures that theatrical experience amounts to a reciprocal action

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between the presenters (not just the performers) of a dramatic work and the audience. The theatre audience is 'playing the game of theatre', which is in the first place a spatial game, for the spectator has to invest a specific and defined area with special significance. Bazin has written of the décor of the theatre as 'an area materially enclosed, limited, circumscribed, the only discoveries of which are those of our collusive imagination'.³ Our entering into complicity with the stage director and the actors is a crucial element. Our willing suspension of disbelief has no threshold while it is skilfully manipulated by the presentation in all its aspects, yet it could nonetheless be said to be the framework within which dramatic action in the theatre remains authentic.

This element of collusion undergoes an important change in the response of the cinema audience. It does not cease to play its part but it is at once less conscious on the part of the spectator and less expected by the film director. Unlike the stage, the cinema frame does not encapsulate action within a microcosm. It isolates a central element in the action, but the full extent of that action – and of the spatial and social contexts of that action – must be credible beyond the constraints of the frame. The selected action we see must assume centrality for cinema's aesthetic purposes, but it must in no way (except for special effect) give the impression of being a staged composition. Bazin makes the distinction clear when he points out that 'the screen is not a frame like that of a picture, but a mask which allows only part of the action to be seen'. We accept that a character moving off screen is out of sight, but he 'continues to exist in his own capacity at some other place in the décor which is hidden from us'.⁴

The essential difference in the element of collusion in the cinema is that instead of actively 'playing the game', the cinema audience is conditioned to disregard technical anomalies. The collusion is with the cinematic medium, not with the director, the actors and stage designers who present the dramatic work. Rudolph Arnheim cites a telling example of this when he writes of film's monochromatic reduction of colour.

The reduction of all colors to black and white, which does not leave even their brightness values untouched . . . very considerably modifies the picture of the real world. Yet everyone who goes to see a film accepts the screen world as being true to nature . . . The spectator experiences no shock at finding a world in which the sky is the same color as the human face; he accepts shades of grey as the red, white and blue of the flag; black lips as red, white hair as blond. The leaves on a tree are as dark as a woman's mouth. In other words, not only has a multicolored world been transmuted into a black-and-white world, but in the process all color values have changed their relations to one another: similarities present themselves which do not exist in the natural world; things have the same color which in reality stand either in no direct color connection at all with each other or in quite a different one.⁵

A second example of unconscious collusion in the cinematic presentation of spatial realism arises in the transformation of the three-dimensional reality to the two-dimensional illusion. As Hugo Münsterberg observed in his perceptive study of the silent film written in 1916, our stereoscopic visual perception of the real world enables us to distinguish between a flat surface and a series of objects in depth. Yet the screen presents what we accept as depth on a flat surface. 'In motionless pictures',

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says Münsterberg, 'this is less disturbing; in moving pictures every new movement to or from the background must remind us of the apparent distortion.' Our psychological adjustment is in fact more complex, for not only does the lack of stereoscopic resolution register the flatness of the image, but there is a conflict of visual perception arising from the fact that the screen itself is 'an object of our perception and demands an adaptation of the eye and an independent localization'.⁶ . The cinema aims at spatial realism. Nonetheless our collusion with the medium is such that we will tolerate – we shall even accept – photographic tricks so long as they are wholly convincing; so long as we are given at the visual level what appears to be spatially real, and so long as we can believe in a spatial reality beyond the boundaries of the frame.

Effective theatre design is essentially an architectural manifestation of the psychological dynamics which operate in the total experience of theatre. While different relationships between the staged action and the audience can be established in theatres built with thrust stages, open stages, arena stages or traverse stages, any theatre for dramatic presentation consists of three elements which are spatial; in John Russell Brown's words, 'a place for the audience, a place in which the actors perform and, optionally a setting for the dramatic action'.⁷ The audience is generally seated so as to afford it maximum visual concentration upon the demarcated space within which the actors manipulate the pace, progress and impact of the dramatic work. The spatial separation of the actors from the audience which the architecture incorporates is the extension of those distinctions between art and nature and between the artwork and the percipient. Yet those distinctions become dependent upon their material and spatial manifestation. 'There can,' as Bazin insists, 'be no theatre without architecture . . . Whether as a performance or a celebration, theatre of its very essence must not be confused with nature under the penalty of being absorbed by her and ceasing to be.'⁸

The architecture of the cinema is almost identical with that of nineteenth-century conventional theatre with its proscenium arch; and the indulgence in spectacle which typified the melodrama of the 1880s and the 1890s prepared the ground most appropriately for cinema. Eminently suited to the same kind of seating arrangements, cinema naturally appeared to be merely an extension of the theatre of spectacle. Nicholas Vardac, in his important and engaging book on the relationship between theatre and film, observes that 'when . . . realism and romanticism had, toward the end of the century, attained real leaves, bees and ships the stage could go no further. But the need for pictorial realism on an even greater scale remained. Only the motion picture with its reproduction of reality could carry on the cycle.'⁹ However, the architectural similarity of the cinema with the theatre concealed the profound changes in the psychology of audience response. While the spatial divisions remain, the psychological effect of the modern camera's spatial versatility is to break down the constant of distance between the viewer and the detail in the framed image. Not only is the image itself in sustained movement, but so also is the view-point, for the

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camera's function is one of exploration rather than presentation; one of making the spectator conscious of the dynamics of space in breadth as well as depth. By zooming (adjusting the lens in a smooth movement to give the appearance of approaching or moving away from the subject), tracking (literally moving the whole camera unit along tracks to hold a moving object in the frame), tilting and being moved on a crane boom, the camera gives the spectator the illusion of horizontal and vertical mobility. In divorcing psychological space from architectural space, the camera can, and to some extent always does, induce a passivity in the spectator. This is part of what we have come to expect of the cinematic manipulation of space. We are no longer 'playing the game of theatre', and our involvement in the dramatic action of the film, our awareness of the rest of the audience and of ourselves as individuals are affected in ways which are distinct from theatrical experience.

When André Bazin describes the pleasure of the cinema experience as 'self-satisfaction, a concession to solitude, a sort of betrayal of action by the refusal of social responsibility', he is identifying with particular emphasis the spatial manipulation of the camera and its consequent authority over the audience.¹⁰ Because the movement of the camera is an artistic dimension of the film's structure, and because the movement of the camera becomes in its psychological effects the movement of the spectator, the normal frontiers between the spectator and the work of art are broken down. The spectator is invaded by, and participates in the laws of the artistic structure.

This is of fundamental importance in distinguishing film art from theatre art. For just as frontiers are dissolved between the viewer and the art object in film, so too are frontiers dissolved within the viewer; the frontiers between the subjective participant and the objective critic. Béla Balázs, writing in the early 1950s, recognized both the dangers and the artistic potential of this shift of balance towards subjectivity.

The constantly changing set-ups give the spectator the feeling that he himself is moving, just as one has the illusion of moving when a train on the next platform starts to leave the station. The true task of film art is to deepen into artistic effects the new psychological effects made possible by the technique of cinematography.¹¹

A further distinction – of which it is more difficult to be conscious – lies in the relationship between the actor and the spatial context in which he is seen to act. In the theatre, as a play proceeds, the focus of interest becomes increasingly vested in the actor. The play in fact becomes a process during which the stage décor becomes less important and the actor takes over, to an increasing extent, the dramatic responsibility. One very obvious reason for this is that structured change between and within characters on the stage takes place within a set representation of locality. It is as though theatre is reducing the variables to a minimum in order to insist that the human actor is the paramount focus for interest because he exercises choices and manipulates dramatic material amid the décor. 'In the theatre,' says Bazin, 'the drama proceeds from the actor; in the cinema it goes from the décor to the man. This reversal of dramatic flow is of decisive importance.'¹²

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At one level this simply means that in watching a play in the theatre, we the audience are involved at one end of the circuit while the action on the cinema screen is a closed circuit independent of audience response. Béla Balázs captures more completely the nature of the dramatic flow between actor and décor in film, in a quotation from Goethe. 'The things surrounding men do not merely act upon them – men react on their surroundings too, and while they allow things to change them, they in return change things,' and he discerns the cause for the reduced status of the actor on the screen when he deals with what he terms the 'physiognomy of surroundings and backgrounds':

The eternal and insoluble contradiction between the living actor [on the stage] and the dead scenery, the flesh-and-blood figure and the painted perspective of the background anyway places the background outside the play; it relegates the background to the background as it were. Not so in the film. There man and background are of the same stuff, both are mere pictures and hence there is no difference in the reality of man and object.

Like painting, film can give the spatial detail which surrounds characters an anthropomorphic dimension and 'as in Van Gogh's late pictures, an even more intense physiognomy so that the violent expressive power of the objects makes that of the human characters pale into insignificance'.¹³ The dramatic function of the natural environment, first considered and written about in relation to film by Urban Gad in 1918, has consistently been recognized as an important but sometimes intractable cinematic resource in the adaptation of stage plays. The characterization of nature became a major preoccupation for Kozintsev in making his *KING LEAR* film in 1971. 'I am trying to find a visual *Lear*. Nature in this context would have to become something like the chorus of Greek Tragedy.'¹⁴

The distinctions between film and theatre have so far been discussed very much from the point of view of the theorist. It would certainly be facile to suggest that certain rules for film adaptation are implicit within them. There remain, broadly speaking, two spatial strategies available to the film director who adapts a theatre play for the screen. He can decide to treat dramatic action with the object of preserving its theatrical essence as far as possible, by simply photographing the staged performance on stage space. Implicit in this strategy is the contention that a play produced on the theatre stage is artistically complete, and that cinema is simply a medium for its transmission and preservation. It implies, too, that the spatial properties of cinema can be disregarded in order to preserve theatrical frontality as well as the actor's centripetality. The second strategy is that in which the cinema brings its own spatial potential to bear on the material to effect an entire visual transformation by moving the action from the confines of the theatrical enclosure and creating new relationships between the actor and the décor, between space and time and between the dramatic presentation and the audience.

A classic example of the attempt to film a stage performance on stage space is Stuart Burge's *OTHELLO* (1965) which purports simply to shift the performance of the play (directed by John Dexter for the Old Vic in 1964, with Olivier in the title

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role) from the stage to the cinema screen. While Burge makes no pretence to be doing other than filming a stage presentation, the film is, in many ways, profoundly disappointing. A consideration of just why this is so will, I believe, throw interesting light upon the adaptation of Shakespeare for the screen.

The film is most robustly defended on the grounds of Olivier's characterization with its strong contemporary social relevance, and because of the value of the film as a record of Olivier's theatrical power in the role. Several critics draw attention to the contemporary relevance of a black man in a white society and the consequent precariousness of Othello's self-image. It is this which prompts James Fisher, in an article written in 1973, and Jack Jorgens in his well-known book to apply – in an unusual sense for film – the epithet 'realistic' to the Othello portrayed in this film.¹⁵ Jorgens especially defends the film on the basis of this 'realism' which arises from 'the meticulous naturalistic details of the performance'.¹⁶ There is an irony in justifying a film on its immediate contemporary relevance. The inherent ephemerality matches such an interpretation more appropriately with theatre than with film. At the same time, critics who champion the film on this basis do have time on their side, for they will be vindicated when the film ultimately achieves its stature as a historical document of dramatic interpretation.

The second line of defence, founded on the assertion that the film intends nothing more than to record a magnificent stage performance, is essentially unconvincing because it fails to take into account the inherent aesthetic clash between the very different dynamics of stage space on the one hand and screen space on the other. The actor on the stage is an autonomous manipulator of theatre space, but on the screen he is part of the manipulated space within the frame. Roger Manvell, in his very useful book, quotes Anthony Havelock-Allan as claiming the intention of the producers to be to 'preserve and enhance this OTHELLO and more or less present it as one might have seen it at the National Theatre . . . the whole object was to capture the absolute magic of the theatre'.¹⁷ To assume that a stage performance would not be radically altered in its impact when transmitted through another medium appears to have been an error which blighted the film at its conception.

In the first place, the film fails to communicate an original theatricality because the camera focuses too often on only one character at moments when its exclusion of peripheral response leaves the central action bare. A clear example of this is Othello's relation of his winning of Desdemona's love to the senators. On the stage, the response of every person in the Senate chamber defines Othello's particular magic as a teller of tales and as a leader of men, yet the film merely presents in isolation the response of the Duke. The Senate chamber is ideally a theatre for both Othello and Brabantio. The entrance of each is internally dramatic in its own way. Yet in isolating individual characters from the theatrical totality, the camera destroys dramatic perspective so that the entrance of one character is very much like the entrance of another. There is no sense – as there surely should be – of Brabantio's coming into a new dramatic environment, with new and reciprocal expectations of behaviour. Both