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978-0-521-43573-4 - Shakespeare and the Moving Image: The Plays on Film and Television

Edited by Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells

Excerpt

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I

SHAKESPEARE ON FILM AND
TELEVISION: A RETROSPECT

ANTHONY DAVIES

I

When in 1916 Hugo Münsterberg claimed that the photoplay overcomes ‘the forms of the outer world . . . by adjusting events to the forms of the inner world’, he perceived the major shift from the theatre stage to the cinema screen as being psychological rather than technological.¹ Any survey of available criticism in the field of Shakespeare and film tends not only to confirm that perception but to suggest that it persists not merely as an aesthetic issue but as an issue affecting the collective critical mind. While theatre remains the legitimate expressive medium for authentic Shakespeare, kept alive by a scattering of theatrical companies playing to audiences for whom theatre is both accessible and familiar, only comparatively recently has it become respectable to concentrate serious discussion on the media of cinema, radio and more especially television. These media have become the most practical means of making Shakespeare’s plays in performance a world heritage rather than a national one passed on through educational systems.

The widely scattered and often tentative nature of critical writing on Shakespearian film is the result of three distinctly psychological legacies. Firstly, the motives behind the production of all films were seen to be brashly commercial, so that Richard Watts could write in his response to the Reinhardt-Dieterle film of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1936) that ‘almost every film company makes what it calls “prestige” pictures [which are] planned by magnates . . . as proofs that they are artists as well as businessmen’.² Secondly, the historical moment of cinema’s meeting with theatre was especially traumatic. As Nicholas Vardac makes clear, just when the spectacular extravagance of the late nineteenth-century theatre was breaking down, the cinema arrived as a new and effective rival, forcing theatre back upon itself in order to compete commercially in the production of massive visual effects.³

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[More information](#)

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Cinema was seen, therefore, as the betrayer of a movement that would otherwise have redirected theatre towards its original essentials. Finally, cinema was quickly perceived as posing a threat to traditional aesthetic distinctions. Not only did it dissolve the demarcations between the actor and the inanimate spatial detail within the cinema frame, but it also manipulated the relationship of the perceiver with the fictional world of the film.⁴ Furthermore, as Suzanne Langer suggests, cinema's omnivorous capacity 'to assimilate the most diverse materials and turn them into elements of its own' appeared to threaten with extinction what had formerly seemed clearly separate artistic disciplines.⁵

II

The middle 1930s were significant years both for Shakespearian film and for the development of critical writing in the field. Not only were three films (Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Paul Czinner's *As You Like It*) released, but Allardyce Nicoll's perceptive book, *Film and Theatre*, was published. Early in the book, Nicoll argues that the social and economic forces governing the production of films in the 1930s were not so very different from those which promoted the theatrical fare of Shakespeare's day. 'The theatrical managers', he maintains, 'exploited freely whatever came uppermost at the moment, heaping ghosts upon the stage when the going of ghosts was good and mad ladies in white linen when ghosts began to pall.'⁶ Nicoll asserts himself as no enemy to the cinema. Recognizing that literacy had changed the ear's alertness to the complexities of the spoken word since Shakespeare's plays were first produced, he suggests that the expressive potential of cinema 'may merely be supplying something that will bring us nearer to the conditions of the original spectators for whom Shakespeare wrote'. Nicoll further rightly discerns one difficulty in adapting theatrical material for film when he distinguishes the cinematic – as opposed to the theatrical – development of character. While the theatre stage can accommodate and effectively present characters who bear 'the lineaments of universal humanity', the realism of the cinema tends to deal with characters as individuals without exceptional stature.⁷

In 1936, there also emerged a vigorous debate between Harley Granville-Barker and Alfred Hitchcock. Granville-Barker is prompted, in his reactions to the films of Reinhardt and Cukor, to draw attention to the visual images in Shakespeare's dialogue and to castigate Reinhardt and Cukor for unnecessary pictorial indulgence. He reaches the conclusion that cinema and theatre 'are in their nature and their methods . . . radically and fatally opposed'. He does,

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[More information](#)

SHAKESPEARE ON FILM AND TELEVISION

however, see cinema's potential as a narrative art and suggests that cinema should exploit Shakespeare stories 'to suit its pictorial purpose, without respect to him. . . . Shakespeare in the cinema will do – with Shakespeare left out'.⁸ Alfred Hitchcock's vehement reply is at once an attack on what he sees as a purist and pedantic attitude to Shakespeare as well as an assertion of cinema's right to afford Shakespeare's dramatic action realistic locations.⁹

The exchange between Granville-Barker and Hitchcock is chiefly interesting in its revelation that up until the Second World War the most lively debate about Shakespearian film centred upon issues that were in essence extensions of that conflict which had erupted within the realm of theatre some fifty years before.

III

The critical response to Shakespearian film began to take on a more impressive stature as cinematic technology improved and the adaptive endeavour could become more versatile. The year 1944 was a major turning point in both the creation and the public acceptance of Shakespearian film. Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* was released in that year, and for the first time critics and reviewers were faced with a cinematic adaptation which operates on too many levels to be patronizingly dismissed or glibly celebrated. James Agee's ebullient eulogy, while it does not attempt to be analytical, shows an awareness of cinematic complexity when he considers the film 'essentially less visual than musical', and he recurrently refers to the powerful impact throughout the film of Shakespeare's language.¹⁰

Olivier's *Hamlet*, released in 1948, has attracted a greater volume of critical literature than any other Shakespearian film. Bosley Crowther not only wrote a carefully considered review for the *New York Times*, but promoted critical dialogue by inviting comment and discussion in the paper's columns, from readers.¹¹ Simultaneous with the release of the film, a book, '*Hamlet*', *the Film and the Play*, was published. Together with the screenplay dialogue, a foreword by Olivier, and an essay on editing the text by Alan Dent, there is an illuminating essay by Roger Furse, which discusses the relation between the film's set design and its dramatic action. The priorities of the film designer are made unambiguously clear when Furse asserts that 'the essence of the film is that it is *not* still. It is in motion, and . . . the designer's business is to do everything he can to assist the mobility and flow; not to freeze it into a series of orderly compositions.'¹² Not only does this essay suggest some of the spatial intentions within this particular film, but it opens the way to intelligent criticism of other Shakespearian films.

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[More information](#)

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Orson Welles's *Macbeth*, also released in 1948, attracted a different strand of critical response. Whereas Olivier's films had been considered by most reviewers as extensions of theatre, Welles's first Shakespearian film rightly attracted interest as cinema rather than as Shakespeare. The French critics quickly pursued a specifically cinematic line. André Bazin wrote that 'those strange settings trickling with water, shrouded in mists which obscure a sky in which the existence of stars is inconceivable, literally form a prehistoric universe . . . a prehistory of the conscience'.¹³ And Claude Beylie describes the décor as 'veritably "telluric", almost sublunar, a décor that is essentially the pathetic reflection of the conscious, or rather the unconscious, of the hero'.¹⁴

The essay by Furse and the critical reviews by Bazin and Beylie point to spatial strategy as being more important than authenticity of location, and cinematically more crucial than the actor's performance.

IV

With the release of Welles's *Othello* in 1952 there emerged the first complete volume devoted to the making of a Shakespearian film by a single author. The diary account written by Micheál MacLiammóir, who played Iago, covers the shooting of the film from January 1949 until March 1950. Despite the occasionally indulgent subjectivity of the account and its eschewing of technical details, it is an intelligent and essential contribution to the body of writing in this field. The entries are written from the point of view of a stage actor feeling his way before the film director and the camera. 'One's first job', writes MacLiammóir, 'is to forget every single lesson one ever learned on the stage: all projection of the personality, build-up of a speech, and sustaining for more than a few seconds of an emotion are not only unnecessary but superfluous.'¹⁵

In 1968 appeared the first volume to essay a survey of Shakespearian film. Robert Hamilton Ball's *Shakespeare on Silent Film* is at once a meticulously documented and scholarly history of the development of silent cinematic adaptations as well as an amusing and stimulating account with a lively sense of personal interest. It covers the period from 1899 (the year in which the first recorded Shakespearian film, Herbert Beerbohm Tree's *King John* scene, was made) to 1929 when the first synchronized-sound adaptation, Sam Taylor's notorious *The Taming of the Shrew*, was released. Tree, the first established stage actor to be filmed in a Shakespearian role, is quoted as finding film acting something of an adventure. 'One throws oneself into the thing as one goes into a submarine. You take a dive – a plunge as it were – into the unknown, and calmly await the result.' Also quoted at some length is the report of a Chicago

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[More information](#)

SHAKESPEARE ON FILM AND TELEVISION

police lieutenant on the Vitagraph film of *Macbeth* (1908). It is perhaps unfortunate that the report was offered in the interests of censorship because it might otherwise stand unabashed as the first piece of intelligent criticism in the field of Shakespearian film. In selecting for special mention the film's visualizing of Duncan's murder, in which 'you see the dagger enter and come out and see the blood flow and the wound that's left', the censor was reacting as many reputable critics have since reacted to Polanski's film of 1969. Ball's historical survey is interesting, not least for its suggestion that cinema's search for respectability was a major impulse towards the endeavour to adapt Shakespeare's plays for the screen.¹⁶

In 1971 the first survey of sound-film adaptations, Roger Manvell's *Shakespeare and the Film*, was published. It is a most useful volume, which gives interesting background information on some twenty-five films made between 1929 and 1970, when Brook's film of *King Lear* was released. The text is accompanied by well-produced stills, and includes extensive verbatim interviews with Akira Kurosawa on his Japanese adaptation of *Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood* (1957), and with Laurence Olivier who, unlike MacLiammóir, believes 'there is much less difference between film acting and stage acting than people think – much less'.⁹⁷

The complex cinematic achievement of Olivier's *Henry V* was first given just treatment in the slim, compact volume written by Harry Geduld and published in 1973. Among other issues, the analysis of the film contained in the book examines the major spatial transitions, the deliberate mixture of cinematic styles, the relation of the film to its source, its generic affinities, and the nature of Olivier's specific directorial intrusion.¹⁸ This short but penetrating volume stands apart from others devoted to individual films in being an objective analysis by a writer not involved in the making of the film.

In 1977 two very different volumes on Shakespearian film were published, Jack Jorgens's *Shakespeare on Film* and the English translation of Grigori Kozintsev's *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy*. Jorgens attempts, with more academic and analytical emphasis, to do what Manvell had first done in 1971, though he limits his field to seventeen Shakespearian films, each considered in more detail than in Manvell's survey. In his introductory chapter, Jorgens notes a distinction in filming Shakespearian material which John Russell Taylor had emphasized in 1960 when he maintained that it is 'the film-maker's job' either 'to record Shakespeare' or 'to put the requirements for the film medium first'.¹⁹ Jorgens advances the distinction into three essential cinematic modes: the 'theatrical mode', which 'uses film as a transparent medium' to encapsulate theatrical space and performance, the 'realistic mode', which 'shifts the emphasis from the actors to actors-in-a-setting', and the 'filmic mode', which

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ANTHONY DAVIES

'is the mode of the film poet whose works bear the same relationship to the surfaces of reality that poems do to ordinary conversation'.²⁰ Where Manvell's text concentrates on background information on the selected films, Jorgens illuminates, with considerable success, the capturing of each play's essence on film. A surprising omission is any extended discussion of Yutkevich's *Othello* (1955).

The volume of diary entries on the making of his *King Lear* (1970) by Grigori Kozintsev is perhaps the most engaging of all written works in the field of Shakespearian film, revealing, as it so clearly does, the creative mind of its author, his love and reverence for Shakespeare the dramatist, and the intelligence with which he strove to transpose *King Lear* to the medium of cinema. The book's material remains in its rough-hewn diary-note form, and of the twenty-four chapters five have titles which give interesting if cryptic indications of the creative processes of the author's mind. The theatrical influence on Kozintsev comes through very strongly, and his grasp of the theories of Meyerhold and Gordon Craig clearly enables him to relate the dramatic language of the theatre stage to that of the cinema screen. Kozintsev's perception of the devising of a spatial strategy as the essence of cinematic adaptation emerges clearly in his notes on the making of his own *Hamlet* (1964), when he writes that 'the time strata must seem to be laid bare in the visual development of Elsinore . . . like the rings on a huge cross section of a tree' and suggests that the medieval, Renaissance and modern layers in the play, associated respectively with old King Hamlet, the prince and Claudius, should be visually articulated.²¹

As its title suggests, the central chapters in the *King Lear* diary are those which deal with the cinematic dramatization of the Lear universe. 'In choosing the location for a film', writes Kozintsev, 'you have to consider every possibility. You go on fantastic journeys . . . We have begun by fighting the theatrical, trying to find means of showing reality on the screen – not copies of historical ornaments but the everyday life of history – we had cleared the décor, leaving only genuine material . . . This was not a case of overcoming the conventionalities of the studio, but of uncovering nature's hidden significance.'²²

More esoteric, partly because of its somewhat singular approach and partly because of its extended comparisons with particular paintings (reproductions of which are not given with the text), is Dale Silviria's book, *Laurence Olivier and the Art of Film Making*.²³ Though this volume tends to analyse moments in Olivier's Shakespeare films in theatrical terms, it eschews any sustained discussion of the relationship of film to theatre. It is divided into four lengthy chapters, the last three (dealing with the Shakespeare films) being the most rewarding, with close observation of moments like Gertrude's drinking of the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

SHAKESPEARE ON FILM AND TELEVISION

poisoned wine, and detailed comparisons, like that of the Agincourt battle in *Henry V*, with other memorable battles on film.

Perhaps the major disappointment of the book is its attempt to give to Olivier's Shakespeare films a hermeticism incompatible with the forces which have made the films endure as classic adaptations. Neither its style nor its underlying assumptions make it a particularly accessible volume for the reader whose interest in Shakespeare is essentially either theatrical or literary. The attempt to pay tribute to Olivier purely as a film director and to view the films as autonomous works of art is not entirely successful, but it does place the volume in a category different from its forerunners.

v

The growth of interest in Shakespearian film evidenced in the emergence of whole volumes devoted to the subject was matched by an increasing versatility in the critical material which began to appear in a widening variety of journals between the late 1950s and the early 1980s.

In 1965, John Blumenthal argued that Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) 'is the only work, to my knowledge, that has ever completely succeeded in transforming a play of Shakespeare's into a film', and also drew attention to Kurosawa's use of the forest as a visual expression of the Macbeth mind.²⁴ Eight years later, John Gerlach, in a deliberate response to Blumenthal, maintained that in disrupting Shakespeare's balance between action and reflection, and in trapping Washizu (Kurosawa's Macbeth figure) within an ordained prophetic framework, Kurosawa 'betrayed the power of the play'.²⁵ The question of a film's fidelity to the play was taken up again in 1978 when Gorman Beauchamp revealed in convincing detail the extent to which Olivier's *Henry V* is a distortion of the play's view of war. While the play's only direct reflection of the battle is the inglorious encounter between Pistol and M. le Fer, Olivier depicts the battle as 'bloodless, beautiful and in technicolour'.²⁶

For the most part, penetrating critical essays on Shakespearian film remain widely scattered. In 1972 Charles Eckert edited a volume which includes judiciously selected essays on important Shakespearian films made between 1935 and 1966.²⁷ A much more general volume on cinema published in 1974 includes a section on Shakespearian film, and reprints material by Peter Brook, who maintains that so far cinema has not found a language 'so as to reflect the mobility of thought that blank verse demands',²⁸ and by Frank Kermode who, in a reference to Brook's *King Lear* (1970), sees cinema as a medium ensuring that the greatness of the Shakespeare plays can only be retained if their dramatic potential is 'reborn in the imagination of another'.²⁹

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[More information](#)

ANTHONY DAVIES

Two questions remain to be answered. Has the gradual accumulation of writing on Shakespearian film thrown up any clear statement about the difficulties of moving Shakespeare from the stage to the cinema screen? And can methods of enquiry employed in the relatively new specialism of film studies be brought fruitfully to bear upon cinematic adaptations of the plays?

J. L. Styan has written of the theatre audience's special situation, which allows it to make 'simultaneous perceptions' which are 'the basis for interpretation by an audience . . . To relate and synthesise what is perceived from moment to moment is to make drama meaningful.' The camera's selection, he continues, is really the director's controlling of our perception and our thinking. The loss of simultaneity is the loss of 'the very basis of tension felt in the audience'. Styan's essay, illustrated with judicious reference to the 'play' scene in *Hamlet*, is the most lucid identification of an essentially theatrical experience which is inevitably lost in the cinema.³⁰ Paul Acker's 1980 article on Brook's *King Lear* (1970) is the clearest evidence that much can be learned about a director's treatment of a play on the screen simply by examining the use of rudimentary cinematic conventions. Acker maintains that in stretching conventions of dialogue and framing beyond their customary application, Brook deliberately creates a tension which enforces upon the cinema audience a new and disturbing encounter with Shakespeare's tragedy.³¹ But it is perhaps well to remember that Brook's *King Lear* is unique among Shakespearian films in the expressions of disenchantment as well as the profound admiration it has elicited.

VI

Unlike cinema, television adaptations had to await those technological developments which made it possible not only to capture performance but also to broadcast it to a domestic audience.

In December 1932, Filson Young suggested that the BBC prepare to broadcast the entire cycle of Shakespeare plays as an attempt to provide 'the highest kind of entertainment combined with high educative and cultural value'.³² The project was not undertaken on radio, but the now famous BBC television cycle which commenced in 1978 and was completed in 1985 has constituted a dramatic achievement of the greatest significance. While it has been generally agreed that the individual productions in the series vary in their effectiveness, the project has promoted the most intelligent critical debate about the accessibility of classical drama in our time and about the problems inherent in transposing Shakespeare from the theatre to the domestic television screen. The natural dynamic development of such a debate has been given

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

SHAKESPEARE ON FILM AND TELEVISION

added impetus by two other impulses. One is the policy of *The Times Literary Supplement* in approaching academics for reviews of the television productions. The other is the growth of interest, manifested in numerous academic journals, in the study of plays in performance.

Until the mid-1980s the predominant thrust in critical writing about televised Shakespeare was directed at performance, and television's achievement was measured by the extent to which it managed or failed to promote the sense of a *theatrical* experience. It has been during the last six years that there has emerged sustained, probing, and vigorous discussion about such issues as the nature of the television audience, the nature of the television idiom, and the relation of artistic to realistic presentation in that medium.

Film Quarterly gives prominence to 1953 as an important year for televised Shakespeare in the United States and, in drawing conclusions in his review of four television adaptations broadcast during that year, Marvin Rosenberg focuses necessary, though brief, attention to two aesthetic problems which beset the respective directors. He recognizes first the compulsively selective nature of television, suggesting that 'in the close relationship TV establishes, a brilliant clarity can often be given to the music of the verse as well as to its meaning', but complaining that where a character's action requires wide visual context, such as Lear's entrance with the dead Cordelia, the small screen can have the effect of making a moment 'ludicrous'. Secondly he discerns the danger of 'background clutter' as 'poison to complex drama'.³³ He also discusses the vexed problem of trying to contain a play's dramatic substance within a slotted playing time ordained by a television network, though he does not rail against the necessary dramatic truncation in such despondent tones as Flora Rheta Schreiber does.³⁴ Nor does he protest with such vehemence as Frank Wadsworth, who concludes his review of Peter Brook's 'Omnibus' *King Lear* (1953) with an assertion that the director's 'cuts and revision of material' resulted in a production that 'was not only an abridgement of Shakespeare's great tragedy, but a perversion as well'.³⁵

John Russell Taylor gives a useful chronological outline of the major adaptations screened by the BBC from 1938, the year of 'the first full-scale Shakespeare production on television . . . the BBC's modern-dress *Julius Caesar*', until 1963, and he highlights two composite projects which treated groups of plays as 'coherent sequences, with a continuity of theme'. The first, *An Age of Kings* (1960), combined the English history plays; the second was a unified arrangement of 'the classical history plays . . . under the title, *The Spread of the Eagle*' (1963). Concluding that *An Age of Kings* 'probably offers the fairest ground to date for judging television's potential in adapting Shakespeare', he maintains that 'even if the effect of Shakespeare on the television screen is, even

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ANTHONY DAVIES

at its very best, considerably less than in a passable stage performance, television production still has a number of advantages', these being the increased audience size 'and the durability' of a taped production as a record.³⁶

VII

Despite fleeting judgements on television's particular strengths and weaknesses as a medium for Shakespeare in scattered critical response in the 1950s and 1960s, the overall tendency was to write about adaptations as second-division theatre, and to consider the likely viewers as people who, in all probability, would go to see Shakespeare in a theatre if they could. It is only in the early 1980s that there begins to surface a wholly new approach in the critical discussion of television as a potential medium for Shakespeare, not the least significant aspect of which is the fact that the discussion engaged the minds and pens of academics and directors whose opinions had not been prominent in this field before. Apart from the series of volumes published concurrently with the broadcasts by the BBC, which contain introductions by John Wilders and production comments by individual directors, there was published in 1981 an absorbing interview with Jonathan Miller.³⁷ With characteristic precision and insight, Jonathan Miller gave the long awaited answer to those who in the early days of cinema had clashed over the issue of authentic locations. Of the setting for *Antony and Cleopatra* he says, 'What details you do introduce must remind the audience of the sixteenth-century imagination, not of the archaeologically accurate Egypt and Rome to which the play nominally, and only nominally refers.' And, in considering the question of television's realistic idiom, he concedes that 'as soon as you put Shakespeare on that box where . . . people are accustomed to seeing naturalistic events presented, you are more or less obliged to present the thing as naturally as you can'. The limits to realism have to be established, however, because the language of Shakespeare's dialogue 'comes from the past' and 'it doesn't come from the naturalistic past. It comes from the artistic past, with a style and an idiom of its own which can't be violated.'³⁸

Also in 1981 appeared Sheldon Zitner's article, which deals with 'some consequent differences between the situations of the theatre and the television audiences'. In the shift from that 'ceremony, generating expectations, attitudes, behaviour' which Zitner calls 'the stage play ritual', to the relatively casual group before the television set which 'transforms all drama to closet drama, to plays for ones, if not for one', significant factors modify the relationship of the audience to the dramatic presentation. The inevitable 'de-ritualization' which television effects upon the viewing situation must in significant ways alter the nature of a Shakespeare play, though it will not necessarily reduce 'the depth of