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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

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Towards the end of the 1980s it looked as if television had displaced cinema as the photographic medium for bringing Shakespeare to the modern audience. In recent years there has been a renaissance of Shakespearian cinema, including Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*, Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* and Christine Edzard's *As You Like It*.

In this volume a range of writers study the best known and most entertaining film, television and video versions of Shakespeare's plays. Particular attention is given to the work of Olivier, Zeffirelli and Kurosawa, and to the BBC Television series.

In addition the volume includes a survey of previous scholarship and criticism and an invaluable filmography.

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# SHAKESPEARE AND THE MOVING IMAGE

## THE PLAYS ON FILM AND TELEVISION

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*Edited by*

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## PREFACE

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In 1987, when *Shakespeare Survey 39: Shakespeare on Film and Television* appeared, it looked as if television had displaced cinema as the photographic medium for bringing Shakespeare to the modern audience. The trend seemed logical. Raising money for a television production presents far fewer difficulties than finding financial backing for a film: television could be assumed to reach sectors of the public who were neither cinema nor theatre devotees, but who were nevertheless – it was further assumed – eager to receive performed Shakespeare plays on the small screen in their living rooms. And there was another development which made the argument especially plausible. Cinema had arrived at an artistic self-consciousness. In responding to the rival attractions of domestic television, cinema strove to cultivate or to target more limited audiences, and Shakespearian film was no exception. A comparison of the cinematic and interpretative priorities in the Reinhardt/Dieterle *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935) with those in Derek Jarman's *The Tempest* (1980) will readily illustrate this point.

If these perceived trends and obvious economic arguments were not enough, the BBC Shakespeare series and the memorable *King Lear* made by Granada Television in 1984 with Laurence Olivier as Lear seemed to give a stamp of creative acknowledgement to television.

Not everyone, however, saw this as the new Shakespearian dawn. Some saw the attempt to reach a domestic audience as 'a more urgent contemporary challenge . . . more in line with the social habits and economic thrust of the 1980's'.<sup>1</sup> Jack Jorgens, reviewing the first six BBC productions in *Shakespeare Quarterly* in 1979, was distinctly disillusioned, complaining that

as a culture, we have apparently decided to invest in the convenience and cheapness of TV . . . [and] to settle for mindless zooming and dollying, sloppy editing and compositions, crude music and sound effects.<sup>2</sup>

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## PREFACE

More recently, the cinema has taken us by surprise. We have seen Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989) and *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990), Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991) and Christine Edzard's *As You Like It* (1992), as well as a newly restored version of Orson Welles's *Othello* (1952, 1992). If indeed we are witnessing a renaissance of Shakespearian cinema, then the tilt of emphasis in this volume towards film is justified. Among the essays reprinted from *Shakespeare Survey 39* are two dealing exclusively with televised Shakespeare, and several television versions of the plays are discussed in other essays. But it is difficult not to draw the conclusion, from the available evidence, that the rhetorical and dramatic range within a Shakespeare play can be accommodated with more versatility on the big screen with sharply defined images.

As well as including essays reprinted from *Survey 39*, appropriately updated and revised, we have commissioned important new contributions, and our aim here has been to cover particular areas of the field of screened Shakespeare – individual plays of which several cinema or TV films are currently available, like *Othello* and *Hamlet*, or play categories like the histories, the comedies and the Roman plays, or the work of individual directors like Kurosawa and Zeffirelli – rather than solicit essays exclusively devoted to single films. At the same time, we have encouraged our contributors to select films for more detailed discussion rather than to aim at a fully comprehensive approach. A few films such as Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* are discussed in more than one essay, and we hope the overlaps may be justified by the differing angles of approach.

We are sensitive to the danger of Shakespeare's becoming increasingly confined to academic study rather than being made accessible to wider general response and we have, therefore, striven to provide a range of views and reactions which will be stimulating to both the student of Shakespeare and the general reader whose interests embrace the interplay of theatre, film and television.

*Notes*

- 1 Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 187.
- 2 Jack J. Jorgens, 'The BBC-TV Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 30 (1979) 411–15, p. 415.