

What IS a “Shakespeare Film,” Anyway?

James M. Welsh, Ph.D.
Salisbury University, Professor Emeritus

The title of this essay should be self-explanatory, intending to answer a basic question made difficult only by the fussiness and peculiarity of theory. The approach is historic, filmographic, and bibliographic, since the essay surveys early films (some of them clearly adaptations, some of them merely “derivatives”) and reviews the earlier scholarship of Robert Hamilton Ball, Jack J. Jorgens in the United States, and Roger Manvell in Britain. A discussion follows of some of the later scholarship that has proliferated over the past fifty years—in particular those approaches that have expressed special interest in Shakespeare “derivatives” and films that might be considered “almost” Shakespeare.

Well, everybody knows a Shakespeare film ought to be a film intelligently adapted from a Shakespeare play, right? But the process has become pretty loose lately, and would-be popular culture “scholars” have become pretty adept at finding likely candidates far from Renaissance England. Director Ken Hughes, for example, made a movie called *Joe Macbeth*¹ updating Shakespeare’s Scottish play to a twentieth-century gangster setting; but is that close enough? Or how about the movie *A Thousand Acres*,² based upon the novel by Jane Smiley, set in Iowa, but conceived in a fit of feminist frenzy and spun from a ghastly distortion of the plot of *King Lear*? So is either the original novel or the film adapted by Laura Jones and directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse in 1997 anything more than Shakespeare with a Smiley face? Director Delmer Daves made a Western called *Jubal* in 1956,³ marketed as a “western take” on *Othello*. Does the mere claim make it ripe and ready for classroom exploitation? Are we so desperate to make Shakespeare “relevant”? Has the profession forgotten what it should be about? Or are we all sinking helplessly into the muck of a postmodern swamp?

Shakespeare wrote the perfect adolescent play. It’s called *Romeo and Juliet*. It’s not set in Florida or California or Mexico City or

“Verona Beach,” Baz Luhrmann to the contrary, though Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*⁴ did manage, just barely, to hold on to Shakespeare’s poetry, or at least some of it, delivered with varying degrees of competence by youngsters, including that wild *Titanic* boy, Leonardo DiCaprio, a natural heartbreaker. On the other hand, *Othello* is not an adolescent play, but teenagers can no doubt “relate to” the emotion of jealousy.

So how about wrenching *Othello* out of context and plopping the plot and a few “updated” and barely recognizable central characters down in a prep school in South Carolina, updating it to the twentieth century so that the contemporary Moor would shoot hoops instead of Turks? Cool, eh? Director Tim Blake Nelson called it *O*,⁵ suggesting a metallic O—not a Wooden O, but a metallic O that reflects the circularity of a basketball hoop. This foolish thing followed the trend started by *10 Things I Hate about You* (1999),⁶ which also starred Julia Stiles and could have been tagged, “*The Taming of the Shrew* goes to High School.” But *Othello* is surely more problematic: not only is it far more serious, but it is also far more difficult to update and dumb down. As the only black male in an all-white high school, screenwriter Brad Kaaya presumably might have experienced some of the anguish ascribed to his angry adolescent version of Shakespeare’s tragic protagonist, whose new name, Odin James, suggested the initials of yet another sports celebrity who, let’s say, had trouble adjusting to a white-dominated world. Kaaya somehow thought it might be a good idea to turn *Othello* into a backcourt tragedy, without realizing that a basketball star might lack the authority and tragic dimension of the Moor, elevated to a position of military leadership. Shooting hoops instead of Turks is a less than subtle difference. So, is it *Othello*? (Not quite.) Is it Shakespeare? (Not really.) Or is it merely an abortive derivative? Will it help contemporary students somehow to understand *Othello*? Where has the poetry gone? How can this enterprise be justified?

Since the academy has discovered the movies, there has been a veritable land rush to stake out claims to any goofy movie resembling theatre, drama, or Shakespeare. We can either praise (or blame) Kenneth Branagh for the current Shakespeare Boom, which started with his film adaptation of *Henry V* in 1989,⁷ a worthy effort, to be followed by others, some good, some strange, some very long and even monstrous. Branagh’s *Hamlet*,⁸ for example, is lavish, anachronistic, spectacular, often majestic and magnificent, and (at times) unbearably long, humping the Quarto text to the Folio, making the play more timely and, good grief, even

Churchillian (even though Blenheim Palace makes a fine backdrop for Derek Jacobi's sleazy regal Claudius). The phalanx of films led by Branagh's "mirror for all Christian Kings" has been followed by a battalion of books, the best of these probably being Kenneth Rothwell's *History of Shakespeare on Screen*.⁹

Rothwell's *History* was certainly ambitious in the way it combined the earlier research of Robert Hamilton Ball's *Shakespeare on Silent Film* and Jack Jorgens's *Shakespeare on Film*, the first really scholarly books to consider the filmed Shakespeare, though British critic and historian Roger Manvell's *Shakespeare and the Film* also provided a readable and useful survey of the topic and added as well interview material with the incomparable Laurence Olivier.¹⁰ Rothwell then continued his survey to the Bard Boom of the 1990s, including Lurhmann's *Romeo + Juliet* and Branagh's overlong *Hamlet*, but not Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999)¹¹ or Ethan Hawke's *Hamlet*¹² in modern dress or the strange wedding of Shakespeare with Cole Porter in Branagh's *Love's Labours Lost* (2000).¹³ Rothwell's *History* was the culmination of a career that had started with *Shakespeare On Film Newsletter*, a periodical Rothwell founded with Bernice W. Kliman in 1976. By 1986 the "Advisory Board" included Robert H. Ball, Jack Jorgens, Roger Manvell, Maynard Mack, Sam Wanamaker of the Shakespeare Globe Center, and Louis Marder, the founding editor of *The Shakespeare Newsletter*, which incorporated the function of Rothwell's *Shakespeare on Film Newsletter*, after Ken Rothwell retired from the University of Vermont in the 1990s.

Robert F. Willson, Jr., took a far more tidy approach in his book *Shakespeare In Hollywood, 1929-1956*,¹⁴ a little book equally interested in Hollywood as well as Shakespeare. By starting with the Douglas Fairbanks/Mary Pickford *Taming of the Shrew* (1929), Willson avoided the "Strange, Eventful History" covered by R.H. Ball in 1968. Chapters are devoted to the usual suspects, the Warner Bros. *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935), the MGM *Romeo and Juliet* (1936), the Orson Welles *Macbeth* (1948), and the Houseman-Mankiewicz *Julius Caesar* (1953).¹⁵ The kicker comes in Chapter 4, entitled "Selected Off-Shoots," where, with amusing logic, Willson makes cases for not only Joe *Macbeth* and *Forbidden Planet* (1956) as an adaptation of *The Tempest*, but also several Western derivatives: Delmer Daves's *Jubal* (1956), the Western *Othello*, and *Broken Lance* (1954) as a "King Lear on Horseback." Another (off)shoot-'em-up is John Ford's classic *My Darling Clementine* (1946). Well, Victor Mature's Doc Holliday does recite the "To Be or Not to Be" soliloquy in this "classic," but John Ford is no William Shakespeare (Peter Bogdanovich to the contrary) and, besides, Jack Benny did

it better in his wartime satire *To Be or Not To Be* (1942),¹⁶ Shakespeare truly “touched” by Ernst Lubitsch, who used tragedy for comic purposes in this stunning film—and comedy for tragic purposes when he has a Jewish actor in Nazi-occupied Poland recite Shylock’s “Hath not a Jew eyes?” defense.

Just as *Hamlet* is embedded in the Lubitsch film, so *Othello* is embedded in George Cukor’s *A Double Life* (1947),¹⁷ another “Shakespeare influenced” film. Of course, “influence” is not adaptation per se, but despite a certain loopiness, this chapter poses an interesting question: What exactly is a Shakespeare “adaptation,” anyway? Is *Last Action Hero* (1993)¹⁸ a “Shakespeare-influenced” movie because of its three-minute spoof of Olivier’s *Hamlet* in a classroom presided over by Olivier’s widow? In *A Thousand Acres* (1997) Jane Smiley exploits *King Lear*, taking Shakespeare’s concept for high drama but reducing it into a cornfed soap opera; a woman’s film about a drunken and cantankerous father is the result. Can a film that utterly ignores the language of *Lear* be considered a worthy adaptation by any stretch? Robert Willson does not pose this question, but he should have.

No one should object to yet another book dealing with the filmed Shakespeare, so long as it is well informed and readable. Sarah Hatchuel’s *Shakespeare, From Stage to Screen*¹⁹ passes that test, even though it leans rather too heavily on French theory (but maybe since she teaches in Paris, she can’t help it?). Hatchuel begins with a useful discussion of Shakespeare on stage, from the Globe to the Restoration to Drury Lane and nineteenth-century realism and then, inevitably, to cinema. When she poses the question “What is a ‘Shakespeare Film?’” (obviously not for the first time)—well, that is a definition devoutly to be wished for and one deserving a thoughtful answer. Hatchuel cautiously defines the genre so as to avoid the supposed Shakespeare derivatives that so titillated Richard Burt (1998) and so fascinated Robert F. Willson, Jr. in his book *Shakespeare in Hollywood* (2000).²⁰ So, how much caution is required here. How seriously should one explore the paths and thickets of Intertextuality? Is Kurosawa’s *Ran*²¹ really *King Lear*? Is Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* close enough to *Lear*? How close is “close enough”? What, exactly, is one to make of a film adapted from a novel that is a feminist transformation of a male-centered Renaissance play? Does Jason Robards have enough dignity and gravitas to play a mean-spirited, cornfed Lear who runs like a Deer? Sod that!

The problem of adapting Shakespeare falls under the larger umbrella of adaptation study or adaptation theory as defined most

recently by Robert Stam and his NYU graduate student Alessandria Raengo in three books clearly intended to colonize and ultimately conquer the whole field, though the focus appears to be on novels rather than drama or Shakespeare. The first book suggests a method: Robert Stam's solo enterprise, *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*,²² fortified by *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*²³ and then a 460-page *Companion to Literature and Film*,²⁴ incorporating the work of Dudley Andrew and Charles Musser (both from Yale), Richard Allen (from New York University), Tom Gunning (University of Chicago), the darlings of the Ivy League and the cognoscenti of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, determined to show that cinema is just as valid as literature or drama ever claimed to be. By and large the superstars are saved for volume three. So 2005 was a publication date to remember, one that might prove as important over time as 1623, not merely a single Folio but *three* theoretical books!

Looking over this project, the first book seems reasonable enough. It's a commonplace that because any adaptation of a novel or play requires an interpretation, that it might be useful to teach literature through film. What drives the cognoscenti crazy is the usual assumption that "the book was better" and that cinema somehow does a disservice to literature, as is sometimes the case and more and more frequently the case when it comes to Shakespeare. They are offended, moreover, by the jargon of the usual discourse, which seems to imply a moral judgment unfavorable to cinema: infidelity, betrayal, violation, bastardization, desecration, and vulgarization. Such terms will ring familiar to those who have followed the reception of a film adaptation of Shakespeare, whose diction is, after all, elevated and poetic, even "sacred" to true devotees. Stam is horrified by the way, as he so cleverly puts it, "adaptation discourse subtly reinscribes the axiomatic superiority of literature to film."²⁵ Notions of "*anteriority and seniority*" assume that "older arts are necessarily better" ones. Stam lists other sources of hostility: *dichotomous thinking* presumes a bitter rivalry between film and literature; *iconophobia* recalls the Second Commandment's injunction against graven images; *logophilia*, or "the valorization of the verbal" supposes that the "text" is somehow sacred, as to some Shakespeareans it may well seem; *anti-corporeality* presumes that the "seen" will somehow be regarded as "obscene," since cinema "offends through its inescapable materiality" (a relatively silly assumption, seems to me); *the myth of facility*, which wrongly assumes that films are "easy to make and

suspectly pleasurable to watch”; more on-target, perhaps, is the *class-based dichotomy* that assumes that cinema vulgarizes and dumbs-down literature (which is surely to belabor the obvious); and, finally, the “*charge of parasitism*,” that adaptations are parasites that suck out the vitality of their literary hosts, a truly goofy notion, but one that Stam claims is endemic.²⁶ Small wonder, then, that cinema scholars might feel slighted and inferior, but it’s too bad that they should see the problem as an either/or equation.

But perhaps I have strayed too far from Shakespeare. Which brings me to another new book, this one edited by James R. Keller and a colleague at the Mississippi University for Women, entitled *Almost Shakespeare: Reinventing His Works for Cinema and Television*.²⁷ My response to this is that “almost” is not good enough, and that “reinvented” Shakespeare is generally little more than *pretend* Shakespeare. Why should anyone bother with something that is “almost” Shakespeare when one could just as easily have the genuine item?

After conjuring up a production of *The Murder of Gonzago* to bait his “mousetrap,” when Hamlet announces to the Court that “we’ll *hear* a play tonight,” one supposes that Shakespeare himself might favor Hamlet’s priority. The point I am attempting to make here is that if the language cannot be *heard* as Shakespeare wrote it, the play cannot be understood. So what if the language is not English? The Russian dramaturg Grigori Kozintsev directed a magnificent *King Lear* derived from the Russian translation of Boris Pasternak.²⁸ The original poetry will have been lost, but the plot and characters are respectfully retained, and the translation was, after all, written by a highly respected national poet. Those who know Shakespeare and have internalized his lines will have no problems following the action of the Kozintsev adaptation, whether or not they understand the Russian language. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Akira Kurosawa’s *Ran*, a film set in feudal Japan, and loosely based on *King Lear*, since not only is the poetry lost, but the plot has been essentially and substantially reinvented. It is said to be “almost” Shakespeare, but I’m not sure I’m convinced. On the other hand, lacking any evidence of Shakespeare’s poetry, Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood*,²⁹ though wildly divergent from its source in rather too many places, is much closer to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* than *Ran* is to *Lear*.

Kozintsev’s film is one step removed from Shakespeare. Kurosawa’s film is two steps removed, so *is it* Shakespeare? What about the adaptation of *Othello* entitled *Souli*, released in 2004, written and directed by Alexander Abela, and described by *Variety*

as "a shimmering, full-palette Madagascar-set update of *Othello*," but "transposed to a primitive, isolated fishing village."³⁰ Should one quibble over intertextuality, or simply accept the gushing praise of *Variety* reviewer Ronnie Scheib, predicting that "stunning imagery, sweeping primal emotions, handsomely gifted thespians and a clever recasting of the Bard in post-colonial idiom should wow arthouse auds."³¹ The dialogue, by the way, is in Malagasy and French. But for *Othello* we don't have to seek out such an exotic example. A far more ordinary domestic corruption of *Othello* can be found in your neighborhood video store under the title "O."

Such films, although no doubt *inspired* by Shakespeare, cannot be considered interchangeable. The language is changed and the poetry is simply gone, lost, sacrificed. That is not the case, however, with Peter Greenaway's profoundly odd, disrespectful spectacle of Renaissance iconography, *Prospero's Books*,³² which contains the text of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, though that text is not exactly dramatized. It is recited by the most gifted Shakespearean actor still working at the time Greenaway made his film. Visually it is a bizarre feast for the eyes, a triumph of art direction (if not, exactly, of taste), but verbally it *is* Shakespeare. Of course that doesn't make it any more appealing to student viewers, who might rather be in *Scotland, PA*.

Although I may disagree with the rationale behind the *Almost Shakespeare* collection, I appreciate José Ramón Díaz Fernández's Bibliography of "Shakespeare Film and Television Derivatives" and Dan DeWeese's essay entitled "Prospero's Pharmacy: Peter Greenaway and the Critics Play Shakespeare's Mimetic Game."³³ From Jacques Derrida's essay "Plato's Pharmacy," DeWeese characterizes Prospero as a *pharmakos*, which identifies Shakespeare's character as a wizard, magician, and prisoner. Hence in Greenaway's elegantly overloaded film, John Gielgud represents Prospero as actor, writer, playwright, wizard, magician, prisoner, puppetmaster, and, ultimately, Shakespeare himself, at the end of his dramatic career, just as Gielgud approaches the end of his stage career. Greenaway himself has explained that he sees the play as "Shakespeare's farewell to the theatre—and this might well be Gielgud's last grand performance. So this may represent his farewell to magic, farewell to theatre, farewell to illusion. So using that as a central idea, there was my wish to find a way of unifying the figures of Prospero and Gielgud and Shakespeare."³⁴ But to expect typical students to see beyond the superficial spectacle of eccentric nudity into this unifying and cohesive elegance is to invite disappointment. Is the film too clever for a popular audience?

So what, finally, are the ground rules? Could any responsible scholar settle for diluted Shakespeare, reduced Shakespeare, stunted Shakespeare? A film that presumes to adapt poetic drama should at the very least be “poetic” in style and substance. Shakespeare’s prime achievement was his poetry. He should not be valued for his borrowed plots. What a Shakespeare film looks like is of secondary importance; what it *sounds* like is of primary importance. If it doesn’t sound right, then it probably was not worth doing. Let’s *hear* it for Shakespeare! Surely, there is a line to be drawn between criticism and pop cultural folly. Surely, clever, imaginative young filmmakers need to be poetically challenged? Don’t we have a right to demand something better than glib chatter?

Notes

1. *Joe Macbeth*, directed by Ken Hughes (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1955), film.
2. *A Thousand Acres*, DVD, directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse (1997; Burbank, CA: Touchstone Home Video, 1998).
3. *Jubal*, DVD, directed by Delmer Daves (1956; Culver City, CA: Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment, 2005).
4. *Romeo + Juliet*, DVD, directed by Baz Luhrman (1996; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1999).
5. *O*, DVD, directed by Tim Blake Nelson (2001; Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment, 2001).
6. *10 Things I Hate About You*, DVD, directed by Gil Junger (1999; Burbank, CA: Touchstone Home Video, 2000).
7. *Henry V*, DVD, directed by Kenneth Branagh (1989; Los Angeles: MGM Home Entertainment, 2000).
8. *Hamlet*, VHS, directed by Kenneth Branagh (1996; West Hollywood, CA: Sony Home Video, 1998).
9. Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
10. For the earliest academic books treating film adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, see Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: A Strange Eventful History* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1968); and Jack J. Jorgens, *Shakespeare On Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977). For a more popular and readable early treatment of the field, see Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film* (New York: Praeger, 1971).
11. *Titus*, DVD, directed by Julie Taymor (1999; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000).
12. *Hamlet*, DVD, directed by Michael Almercyda (2000; Hollywood, CA: Miramax Home Entertainment, 2005).
13. *Love’s Labours Lost*, DVD, directed by Kenneth Branagh (2000; Hollywood, CA: Miramax Home Entertainment, 2000).
14. Robert F. Willson, Jr. *Shakespeare In Hollywood, 1929-1956* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/Associated University Presses, 2000).
15. *The Taming of the Shrew*, VHS, directed by Sam Taylor (1929; Hollywood:

Hollywood Classics, 1997); *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, VHS, directed by William Dieterle and Max Reinhardt (1935; Los Angeles: MGM/UA Home Entertainment, 1993); *Romeo and Juliet*, VHS, directed by George Cukor (1936; Los Angeles, MGM/UA Home Entertainment, 2000); *Macbeth*, VHS, directed by Orson Welles (1948; Culver City, CA: Republic Pictures Home Video, 1998); *Julius Caesar*, VHS, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (1953; Los Angeles: MGM/UA Home Entertainment, 1989).

16. *Forbidden Planet*, VHS, directed by Fred M. Wilcox (1956; Los Angeles: MGM/UA Home Video, Inc., 1988); *Broken Lance*, DVD, directed by Edward Dmytryk (1954; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2005); *My Darling Clementine*, DVD, directed by John Ford (1946; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2004); *To Be or Not To Be*, DVD, directed by Ernst Lubitsch (1942; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005).

17. *A Double Life*, DVD, directed by George Cukor (1947; Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment, 2003).

18. *Last Action Hero*, DVD directed by John McTiernan (1993; Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1997).

19. Sarah Hatchuel, *Shakespeare, from Stage to Screen* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

20. Richard Burt, *Unspeakable Shaxxxspxs: Queer Theory and American Kiddie Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

21. *Ran*, DVD, directed by Akira Kurosawa (1985; New York: Wellspring Media Home Video, 2003).

22. Robert Stam, *Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

23. Robert Stam, *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

24. Robert Stam, *Companion to Literature and Film* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

25. Stam, *Literature and Film*, 4.

26. *Ibid.*, 4-7. *Dichotomous thinking* is also discussed on page 4. Additional terms are defined over three following pages: "Iconophobia" (5), "logophobia" and "anti-corporality" (6), "parasitism" (7), etc.

27. James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner, eds. *Almost Shakespeare: Reinventing His Works for Cinema and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004).

28. Kozintsev brilliantly staged and filmed both of Shakespeare's most demanding tragedies. See Grigori Kozintsev, "'Hamlet' and 'King Lear': Stage and Film," in *Shakespeare 1971: Proceedings of the World Shakespeare Congress, Vancouver, August, 1971*, ed. Clifford Leech and J.M. R. Margeson (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 190-199. See also Grigori Kozintsev, *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience*, trans. Joyce Vining (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), and *King Lear—The Space of Tragedy: The Diary of a Film Director*, trans. Mary Mackintosh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). For an intelligent survey in English of the Russian film director and dramaturg's career, see Barbara Leaming's *Grigori Kozintsev* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980).

29. *Throne of Blood*, DVD, directed by Akira Kurosawa (1957; New York: Criterion Collection, 2003).

30. *Souli*, directed by Alexander Abela (Paris, France: Blue Eyes Films, 2004), film.

31. Ronnie Scheib, review of "*Souli* (France-U.K.-Madagascar)," *Variety* (September 6-12, 2004), 34-35.

32. *Prospero's Books*, VHS, directed by Peter Greenaway (1991; Troy, Michigan: Video Treasures, 1993).

33. José Ramón Díaz Fernández, "Bibliography of Shakespeare Film and Television Derivatives," 169-89; and Dan DeWeese, "Prospero's Pharmacy: Peter Greenaway and the Critics Play Shakespeare's Mimetic Game," 155-68; both in *Almost Shakespeare: Reinventing His Works for Cinema and Television*, ed. James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004).

34. Quoted in DeWeese, "Prospero's Pharmacy," 160.