

## DONNING THE DOUBLET AND HOSE: THE SHAKESPEARE COSTUME FILM

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To begin with, a word or two of explanation or correction. This final talk today is billed somewhat excitingly in the NFT booklet as 'a session on costume in the Shakespearean film'. For those hoping for a hands-on workshop on designing your very own yellow stockings with cross-gartering, I have to disappoint you. You will get me talking, a few film clips, and some very badly photographed slides. I also must point out that the subtitle of this talk differs slightly but significantly from that billed: not *Costume and the Shakespearean Film*, but the *Shakespeare Costume Film*. I am not qualified to discuss the finer points of costume design; but I hope to say something on how Shakespeare films parade themselves before their public. Lastly, for reasons of continuous argument, I have decided to keep to English language productions, as the notable films of Kozinstev in the Soviet Union and Kurosawa in Japan seemed to belong to a rather different argument.

And so a proposition, and a question: the intention of filmed costume drama is to lead us into a believable and desirable past. But is this the intention of the Shakespeare film?

### [ROMEO AND JULIET (1954) - TRAILER]

What this trailer has so signally failed to sell to us is just such a believable and desirable past. People don't look like that, talk like that, act like that or dress like that, and no-one could seriously lose themselves in the world that it offers. What it offers is empty, and rather ludicrous posturing. The filmmakers may have wanted to give us the 'greatest love story of all time', but their idea of what Shakespeare is stops with tights and cod pieces.

I have chosen a rather unfair example with which to open, the 1954 Anglo-Italian production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Renato Castellani, a film which is now seldom seen or cited and which is probably most kindly described as a dry run for Franco Zeffirelli's more successful film of the same play in 1968. (Those who saw *Film 97* last Monday will have seen an extremely muddy looking clip from this film; if nothing else the restored Technicolor is marvellous to behold). It is not a good film, but it does exemplify a certain kind of prestige Shakespeare production, which both wants to persuade a reluctant public that what they are being offered has all the virtues and more of the usual cinema fare, yet it is also something above such common fare, simply by virtue of its bearing the name of Shakespeare.

There have now been almost 100 years of Shakespeare films, and they have undoubtedly come a long way. We would appear to be in the middle of a golden age of the genre, with a wide range of efforts on release this year alone some of which manage to combine filmic imagination with faithfulness to the poetry in a way that I would argue makes for the desirable

and justified Shakespeare film. I want to cover all of those 100 years, obviously in very general terms, but we must avoid a simple chronological plod, so I have divided Shakespearean films into four broad areas, which come roughly one after the other historically, though with much overlap. First come the myriad of short silent films made in the pre-First World War period; secondly, the products of major studios serving a wide, heterogeneous audience during the heyday of cinema-going; thirdly, television, which though it lies outside of the brief for this event must be given some mention; and fourthly the work of independent filmmakers, working either within or outside the system. The overall subject is Shakespearean films as they have tried to combine being credible historical costume dramas with the poetry; in short how much should we be allowed to look, how much do we have to listen?

Graham Greene for instance said, in reviewing the 1936 *Romeo and Juliet*:

I am less than ever convinced that there is an aesthetic justification for filming Shakespeare at all. The effect of even the best scenes is to distract, much in the same way as the old Tree productions distracted: we cannot look and listen with equal vigilance.

The reference to Herbert Beerbohm Tree is most appropriate, as he was one of the leading producers of the late-Victorian style of elaborate stagings of Shakespeare, with picture-book costumes and ornate sets that all but drowned out the word - and his 1899 production of *King John* became the first Shakespeare film.

**[KING JOHN SLIDES]**

**[1. King John (Tree) encouraging Hubert (Franklin McLeay) to murder Arthur (Charles Sefton)]**

**[2. The French King's tent with Constance (Julia Neilson) bewailing Arthur's imprisonment; with her are the Dauphin (Gerald Lawrence), the French King (William Mollison) and Cardinal Panulph (Louis Calvert)]**

**[3. Tree, Dora Senior (Prince Henry), James Fisher (Pembroke), F.M. Paget (Robert Bigot)]**

**[4. Tree, Paget, Senior, Fisher and S.A. Cookson (Salisbury)]**

These slides show scenes from Tree's original stage production of *King John* at the Her Majesty's Theatre London. They show how the Victorian popular imagination saw history as a romantic pageant and Shakespeare as the epitome of this vision. The ironies and questioning that existed in the poetry were bludgeoned out; everything was externalised. Thus, writing of Victorian Shakespeare spectacle, the film and theatre historian A. Nicholas Vardac could write:

The words of Shakespeare had lost their necessity. Everything had been done visually with pictorial settings, descriptive business and mass tableaux. The realistic-romantic phase of theatrical expression had ... come so far that, having climbed to the

very doorstep of the motion picture, further progress seemed impossible without the motion-picture camera.

Vardac's thesis, that early motion pictures were a natural extension of this visually-emphatic theatre is a contentious one, certainly an over-simplification, but undoubtedly the popular spectacle of such stage productions influenced film producers considerably once films had got beyond their infancy, and notably the filming of Shakespeare. Indeed it could be quite reasonably be argued that all producers of Shakespeare films remained in thrall to a romantic, Victorian idea of presenting Shakespeare that was not challenged until 1944 and Laurence Olivier's ground-breaking film of *Henry V*.

There were numerous films of Shakespeare plays made during the silent era of the cinema, absurd as the idea of silent Shakespeare may seem, with their settings, costumes and acting styles mostly inherited from the run-of-the-mill stock companies that frequently supplied the actors. Actor managers such as William V. Ranous at Vitagraph and Edwin Thanhouser at the Thanhouser Film Company, two American film companies that specialised in Shakespeare in the pre-World War One era, brought with them from the stock theatre a tradition of Shakespeare stripped to the bare essentials that made one-reel versions of the plays not only feasible but logical. The early cinema had quickly gained for itself a lowly reputation from its predominately working class audience, and to fight off both censorship of its activities and to attract a wealthier, middle class clientele, producers turned frequently to the classics, as proof of the cinema's worthier intentions. Central to this strategy was Shakespeare and central to the presentation of the many one-reel versions of the plays that were made, was how they looked. They were costumed and staged (or located), so far as humble budgets would allow, to suggest class, and beyond imitating theatre stagings such as Tree's, they frequently turned to paintings as their source of inspiration and artistic justification.

**[SELECTION OF SLIDES OF VICTORIAN PAINTINGS]**

**[5. Holman Hunt, Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*)]**

**[6. James Clark Hook, The Defeat of Shylock]**

**[7. Sir Joseph Noel Paton, The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania]**

**[8. William Bromley, Catherine of Aragon]**

**[9. Gerome's Death of Caesar with Vitagraph 1908 film]**

The Victorian picture of Shakespeare, of nobler beings from an idealised past either suffering or enjoying life on some remote plane, continued in the popular imagination of the twentieth century, and if no-one continued to produce paintings such as these, they nevertheless made films in their image.

**[SLIDES FROM 1930s FILMS AND PAINTINGS]**

**[10. Arthur Hughes, centre panel of Scenes From As You Like It]**

**[11. Elisabeth Bergner in *As You Like It* (1936)]**

**[12. Frank Dicksee, *Romeo and Juliet*]**

**[13. Norman Shearer and Leslie Howard in *Romeo and Juliet* (1936)]**

The short silent Shakespeare films did not present audiences with Shakespeare the poet at all; at best they could give a few well-known lines in the intertitles, and reveal the bare mechanics of his usually borrowed plots. Instead they presented Shakespeare as he could be read in pictures. They communicated to audiences in the most direct way what the producers wanted to show: that here was the cinema offering the best that it could do, borrowing from the theatre, from literature, from history. It was truly Shakespeare because it looked like Shakespeare was expected to look. The romantic stereotypes of Victorian painting and staging triggered the correct responses. To put Shakespeare on film you had only to be wearing the right clothes.

This attitude carried over into the period of sound films, and the involvement of major studios in the production of Shakespeare films. (There were a few maverick silent feature Shakespeare films, by the way, which I have chosen to overlook). Before we examine these, a brief glimpse at what the mainstream theatre was doing at this period. If the first Shakespeare films can be accused of looking back to an obsolete theatrical past, it is worth remembering that the production of Shakespeare on the stage itself was at this time developing only very slowly. The revolution in Shakespearean staging that came with Olivier and Gielgud in the 30s and 40s found the cinema not so far behind, because the same talents made the crossover. Meanwhile, film of actual stage performance in the 1920s is a rare thing, so here's is a brief but entertaining glimpse of John Gielgud as Romeo in 1924. It comes originally from a cinemazine entitled *Eve's Film Review*, but the clip I had to hand comes from a 1988 television interview programme on Gielgud:

**[JOHN GIELGUD - AN ACTOR'S LIFE: 1. EARLY STAGES]**

There is probably only one great Shakespeare film made by a Hollywood studio, MGM's *Julius Caesar* of 1953 with Marlon Brando as Mark Antony. The remainder have mostly shown the impossibility of blending the rigid formulae of classical studio productions with the demands of sixteenth century blank verse drama, and coming up with a box office hit in the process. It was an insane proposition, to blend classical cinema with Shakespeare, and yet certain producers still yearned to do it. Orson Welles once observed that film producers are not out to make money; they are out to be seen to be making the kind of films that they want to be seen making. *Then* they want to make money.

The optimum example is the 1936 *Romeo and Juliet*, which was producer Irving Thalberg's great dream, the supposed climax of his golden career, and a story which the MGM publicity department unashamedly promoted as 'Boy Meets Girl - 1436'. The publicity brochure for the film goes to say tell us how they were inspired to design the costumes:

To the great painters of the day goes the credit for credit of originating the ideas for the costumes for *Romeo and Juliet*. [Oliver] Messel and Adrian together studied the paintings of Bellini, Carpaccio, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Pietro della Francesca. They took one great painting, Gozzoli's 'Procession of the Magi', and from it fashioned all of the costumes for the entrance of the Prince of Verona and his followers. Miss Shearer's head-dress, for example, was taken exactly from that used by Fra Angelico in his painting, 'The Annunciation'. The costume in which she is married in Friar Laurence's cell is practically copied from that in a painting, 'The Betrothal', by Michel de Verona.

In actual fact the costumes (designed by Adrian, MGM's chief costume designer) were a mixture of painterly realism and conventional Hollywood flourish, and the overall effect spoke less of Renaissance Italy and rather more of a wildly over-opulent set of the kind Cedric Gibbons would commonly design for an MGM musical. As Graham Greene once again observed, Friar Laurence's cell had the appearance of a modern luxury flat, and the balcony was so high "Juliet should really have conversed with Romeo in shouts like a sailor from the crow's-nest sighting land". From its overage but bankable stars (Norma Shearer was 31, Leslie Howard 49), to its 'only big is beautiful' attitude, MGM's *Romeo and Juliet* tries is damnedest to make the alien familiar to the conventional cinema audience. Shakespeare was to be judged by how he looked, not how he sounded. And to some degree, they must have succeeded. One notable indication of the lasting popularity of the film was its effect on fashion. Norma Shearer's headpiece, as designed by Fra Angelico, became a fashion hit, popular especially with brides at least into the 1950s, and known as the 'Juliet cap'.

#### **[14. Slide of Norma Shearer]**

The other major Hollywood production of the 1930s was Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, made in 1935 for Warner Bros., an extraordinarily elaborate folly based on Reinhardt's original stage production in Hollywood, and extreme in its devotion to romantic 19th century staging and Mendelssohn's music. But while Reinhardt was extending the fantasies of the previous century, other stage producers, probably beginning with Harvey Granville-Barker's 1912 season at the Savoy in London, were leading Shakespearean performance back towards simplicity. Bare boards, symbolic spare settings, simple emblematic costumes, and an increased emphasis on the verse mixed with the influence of fresh scholarly work on the plays led to a glorious revival in the production of Shakespeare on the stage that reached full flood in the 1930s and 40s, which is where Laurence Olivier comes into the picture.

#### **[15. Slide of Laurence Olivier]**

Fashions in Olivier come and go, but the three Shakespeare films that he directed, *Henry V*, *Hamlet* and *Richard III* are surely astonishing achievements, blending theatre and cinema in a new and still unsurpassed manner. It has been argued that they are reactionary, Victorian even, in how they preserve a certain kind of theatrical swagger and a cosy picture of Shakespeare as a Great British product. But this is simply to be blind and deaf to the thrill of innovatory cinematic experience that they offer. How they worked so successfully, blending revolution with tradition, may be shown through the designs and costumes, since we are

discussing them. Olivier used the same two people for the design work on all three films: Carmen Dillon and Roger Furse.

Carmen Dillon was regular set designer for Two Cities films, producers of *Henry V* and *Hamlet*; Roger Furse worked with Olivier at the Old Vic and was principally responsible for the costumes on all three films. His words on dressing *Richard III* indicate the careful thought that went into dressing and colour-coding the film from someone with a principally stage point of view:

My first aim in designing the clothes for a Shakespearean subject ... is to adapt the authentic fashions of the period to the needs and actions not only of Shakespeare's theatre. I must use sufficient licence to make them appear acceptable to the modern eye because otherwise the costumes would defeat their whole purpose by distracting the attention of the audience from the drama and the acting.

So immediately we have the very opposite attitude to that adopted by the silent filmmakers and the Hollywood studios. Furse continues:

The real pleasure of designing both the settings and the costumes lies in the fact that, from the start, you can think of the two in relation to each other accenting the dramatic quality of the scenes and the characters, while at the same time creating a good composition of shape and colour. When you are designing clothes for any film you have to keep in mind that nothing remains static as in a painting. It is a fluid design owing to the fact that people are constantly on the move and at all time they must bear a proper relation to the colour and form of the backgrounds.

All you may feel, that Shakespeare films lacked previously, was a true artist or two at work. More from the excellent Mr Furse:

Also one has to remember that the everyday range of vision is very wide - whereas on the screen you have an intense concentration in the form of light, surrounded by pitch blackness, which accentuates and exaggerates every colour you bring into play. You therefore have to exercise a severe restraint on your palette, using a few strong colours, set off by the more sombre tones. In the case of a medieval subject like *Richard III* one has the advantage of the extreme simplicity of the interior decoration - the starkness of stone walls and floors and the bare essentials of plain wooden furnishings which helps accentuate the costumes of the actors. Here again one has to temper realism with an effect which is acceptable to present-day conceptions of medieval times by giving an impression of antiquity to things which were new at the time, but are ancient to the modern eye. The same thing applies to clothes. They have to appear worn, without being old, as otherwise the characters look as if they are going to a fancy dress ball instead of fitting naturally into their 15th-century surroundings.

One senses that MGM's Cedric Gibbons would not have been happy designing sets for *Richard III*. This is a scholar's approach, from one steeped in the back-to-basics revival in the staging of Shakespeare. Furse was worried that those knowledgeable in the period would find fault with his painstaking designs, a concern which may seem excessive since the intention of the film should not have been merely to give us a lesson in medieval fashions. Fortunately, as he points out, he knew that his costumes were not to distract but to work within the overall design. He goes on to say that he had to simplify and moderate the men's fashions, in particular, as in the taste of very long pointed shoes in the 15th century, which would have

looked absurd and would have had actors tripping up all over the place. But there is just enough there to make the film enjoyable as a trip back in history, even if no-one could really want to imagine themselves transported to such a world and time. It is a world at a distance, from a director who best knew the spaces of the stage and how to play to the gallery.

#### **[16. *Hamlet* designs for Claudius and Gertrude]**

#### **[17. *Hamlet* designs for Osric]**

Given the importance of colour design in *Richard III* it is a tragedy that there is not a single decent 35mm print apparently in existence that I can show you. The video that is available has colour so drained that it makes a mockery of Furse and Dillon's artistry. So instead, it being time that we had another film clip, I want to show a lengthy-ish extract from Laurence Olivier's earlier film *Hamlet*, made in 1948 with Roger Furse designing the costumes, and again using the contrast between sets stark to the point of symbolism and rich clothing making a theatrical world alive in cinematic terms. Here we are in black and white instead of colour, though interestingly Olivier first thought of using colour - in his words 'subdued colours - blacks, grey and sepias' - before problems with the Technicolor company and the advantages of deep focus cinematography led him, rightly back to black and white. The scene is the play within a play, wherein Hamlet catches the conscience of the King:

#### **[HAMLET (1948)]**

Perhaps we need to get back to this conception of the intention of filmed costume drama being to lead us into a believable and desirable past. If you look up the words 'costume films' on the British Film Institute's database it refers you instead to 'historical films'. Costume is what we don't wear now. The escapist attractions of costume films tend not to apply so rigidly when one considers the Shakespeare film. There have been quite a number of Shakespeare films which have tried to present themselves as more or less conventional historical fantasies, with added iambic pentameters and cultural kudos. Into this category fall most of the silent films, the MGM *Romeo and Juliet*, Franco Zeffirelli's productions of *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, Charlton Heston's productions of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar*, right up to Kenneth Branagh's recent productions, for which Branagh places so heavy an emphasis on their having all of the qualities looked for by the modern multiplex audience.

With a few exceptions (and we'll come back to Branagh later) such films have been artistic failures. Not always commercial failures; the 1936 *Romeo and Juliet* just about got by on star power and romance and Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* sold itself on its youthfulness and, a new thing for 60s audiences, some Shakespeare scenes with no costumes at all. But to stage a Shakespeare play as just another historical drama, to open it out as an epic or whatever, is cowardly and self-defeating. Olivier's films work so well because they remember the scale and logic of the theatre, while opening our eyes to the possibilities of the camera within that staging. When Olivier opened out the drama to include a recreation of Agincourt in *Henry V* he succeeded, of course; but the would-be realistic battle of Bosworth that concludes his *Richard III* is a misjudgement and a disappointment.

### [18. Slide of Orson Welles]

So far I have made little mention of Orson Welles, perhaps the premier creator of Shakespeare films. Discounting unfinished work, Welles made *Macbeth* in 1948, *Othello* in 1952, and *Chimes at Midnight* (based on the Falstaff plays) in 1966. Olivier stood at a distance from Shakespeare; he described his 1948 film as 'an essay in *Hamlet*'. Welles was the opposite - he wanted to *be* Shakespeare, at times probably thought that he *was* Shakespeare. He had a background in innovative theatre to rival Olivier's, but he actively sought to rewrite Shakespeare for the camera, making the plays into his interpretations. He reordered the plays, to the extent in *Chimes at Midnight* of creating a whole new play out of Shakespeare's raw material, and made the poetry subservient to the camera angle - the plays became very much as seen by Orson Welles, who certainly viewed himself as Shakespeare's equal collaborator. Costume, however, was not of any great concern to Welles, at least as we may judge from the results on the screen. The clothes tend to look like they have come straight out of a rep property box, and in *Macbeth* they are so miserly as to be almost laughable. Welles made Shakespeare films that distributors and exhibitors could not sell to audiences as historical treats - they offered nothing to escape to. Welles recounted that when he was making *Chimes at Midnight* he had to keep assuring his worried producer that he was really making something akin to *Treasure Island*, jolly Falstaff as Long John Silver.

Yet not all Shakespeare films have been set or dressed in the past. One of the most notable trends in modern theatrical staging of Shakespeare has been modern dress, probably first experimented with by Barry Jackson in the 1920s, and increasingly welcomed by producers either on a tight budget or wishing to stress Shakespeare's 'relevance' or timelessness. Cinema audiences traditionally have been considered to be behind the times, expecting the Bard to be dressed in the past or it isn't the Bard at all, and still many theatregoers shy away from such productions (you can spot them at Stratford, anxiously checking the photographs of the productions before choosing which play to see), fearful that they have been cheated of a luxury. But there have been Shakespeare films in modern dress of a kind, because there have been several attempts to modernise the language and settings and to present basically the bare plots as modern dramas.

The 50s British film *Joe Macbeth* quaintly updated the story to a modern gangster setting (interestingly, when Bertholt Brecht first went to Hollywood one of the first projects he worked on was a proposed gangster version of *Macbeth*); another British film, from 1960, *An Honourable Murder* placed *Julius Caesar* as a modern boardroom struggle. *All Night Long* was a bizarre British musical set in a jazz club, and of course *West Side Story* put *Romeo and Juliet* onto the New York streets. More recently we have had *Men of Respect*, another *Macbeth* gangster film, *The Punk and the Princess*, based on *Romeo and Juliet*, and Aki Kaurismaki's *Hamlet Goes Business*, which happily updated *Hamlet* to the present-day Swedish rubber duck industry. Amusing as they are to list, most are ponderous and misguided, taking the bare shell of Shakespeare and hoping somehow to come up with art. We need the poetry, or we should not be filming Shakespeare at all.

This conference and this presentation are dedicated to film only, but there must be a short mention of television, because TV, and especially in this country the mammoth *BBC Television Shakespeare* series, has had such a marked influence in determining for a large audience how Shakespeare should look. Televised Shakespeare has seldom been ambitious, and reached some sort of awful peak, or trough rather, in the mundane aesthetic of the BBC series, which ran from 1978 to 1985, covering all of the plays as a duty. The opening play in the series was *Romeo and Juliet*, which timidly tried to imitate the Zeffirelli version while remaining bound within the plain confines of the studio. Clive James in *The Observer* surveyed the scene:

Verona seemed to have been built on a very level ground, like the floor of a television studio. The fact that this artificiality was half accepted and half denied told you that you were not in Verona at all but in that semi-abstract, semi-concrete, wholly uninteresting city which is known to students as Messina.

Cedric Messina it was, as founding producer of the series, who ruled that audiences would not accept experimentation, and despite some relaxation of his rules as the series progressed, notably by Jonathan Miller (who interestingly and not always advisedly referred to paintings in determining the look of his productions), the flat semi-realistic style prevailed. In part this was commercial good sense, since American TV which had invested in the series wanted uncontroversial stagings in the 'Masterpiece Theatre' manner, and every school throughout this land bought copies of the tapes, condemning a generation of schoolchildren to Shakespeare without visual interest at all. Critic John Collick makes the surprising and intriguing suggestion that the BBC series was 'remarkably similar in form, spirit and function' to the early silent versions of the plays, and details how commercial concerns and a belief in a standard and 'correct' was of staging the plays prevailed:

[The] emphasis on universalism manifested itself in rigid demands for a standardised product from the American backers, who drew up a set of guidelines for the producers. From even a cursory glance at these it's obvious that what is being recreated is the Victorian ideal of a high-class, historically 'accurate', character-centered (and by implication, narrative-based) Shakespeare. Each video was to have a famous actor or actress in a leading role and the action was to be set in the period and location of the play: ancient Rome for Julius Caesar, Renaissance Verona for Romeo and Juliet. The costumes had to be authentic, modern dress was out of the question. There were to be no provincial or strange accents.

Away from such reactionary stuff, there have been some imaginative versions of the plays on television, most notably the Royal Shakespeare Company productions directed by Trevor Nunn of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Macbeth* especially (with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench) where staging is minimal, costumes either bare cloth as in *Macbeth* or all the decoration that there is in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and faces and figures loom strikingly out of the dark as in Olivier's *Hamlet*. But these are exceptions, and owe their imaginative presentation to the original stage productions. Costumed TV Shakespeare only distracts; the camera hangs on every word and offers nothing to the exposition of the play. So much for televised Shakespeare.

Now I must apologise for not having a film clip available (for divers reasons) of a key film in the filmed Shakespeare canon and one which radicalised the costuming of such films namely

Derek Jarman's *The Tempest*, released in 1979. Set on the Scottish coast with exteriors in eerie blue tints and interiors by candlelight, it is a romantic yet otherworldly interpretation with an eye to the punk movement in its ragbag, deliberately confrontational costuming. Prospero is dressed like a Byronic hero, Miranda in a sweeping, fading wedding dress, Ariel in a boiler suit, and Caliban as a butler. It jolted audiences, and generated almost rabid hatred in the USA. Vincent Canby's famously vicious review in the *New York Times* said:

Derek Jarman's screen version of *The Tempest* would be funny if it weren't nearly unbearable. It's a fingernail scratched along a blackboard, sand in spinach, a 33 r.p.m. recording of 'Don Giovanni' played at 78 r.p.m. Watching it is like driving a car whose windshield has shattered but not broken. You can barely see through the production to Shakespeare, so you must rely on memory. There are no poetry, no ideas, no characterization, no narrative, no fun.

It is probably no coincidence that the BBC series, with its conformist view of Shakespeare, was then running on PBS in the United States, with the oh-so traditional BBC *Tempest* (with the inevitable Michael Hordern as Prospero) having been seen there just a couple of months earlier. Canby's reactionary outburst stemmed from the common belief that Shakespeare was sacrosanct heritage and could not be tampered with, certainly not by the upstart cinema. Had he only peered through his windscreen a little more closely, he would have seen a production with a perfect, if allusive grasp of narrative, a reverence for the poetry (which an accomplished cast spoke beautifully), an acute sense of design and costume that was meant to open eyes, not close them, and a romantic yearning that just might have stirred his traditionalist heart. There have been other experimental Shakespeare films, naturally, and Jarman's film was close to the decidedly unorthodox efforts of Celestine Coronado, *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, made around the same time. But Jarman's film, because it was ultimately so obedient to Shakespeare, was all the more worrying and truly radical.

We can perhaps now come up with a definition of what makes a good Shakespeare film. Corporately-produced identikit = bad; individual vision = good. We are now in the middle of a period in which we have a profusion of Shakespeare films, strikingly different in style, which for the most part bear the stamp of individual film makers able to present Shakespeare beyond out-dated formulae. A Shakespeare film comes onto the screen, and now we hardly know what to expect.

Why is this so, and how much is it so? The simple answer to the first question, as suggested in the blurb for the NFT season of recent Shakespeare films next month is the success of Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, released in 1989. Branagh's film was a modest hit in the USA, and came appositely at a time when cinema attendances were rising, multiplexes could offer a wider range of films and Branagh himself was in the ascendant and comparisons could be made with Olivier. *Henry V* also benefited from recent radical stage productions of the play which emphasised the brutality and the darker side of Henry's victories that Olivier was at pains to leave out. It appealed to the traditionalist view, yet encouraged the cautious to look at Shakespeare anew. However one must also remember the most commercially successful Shakespeare yet made, Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 version of *Hamlet*, with Mel Gibson turning the Dane into an action hero that the popcorn masses could understand. As Gibson himself told children in the promotional video *Mel Gibson Goes Back to School*:

Look, why don't I just tell you the story of "Hamlet". It's a great story. There's something like eight violent deaths; there's murder, there's a mad woman, poisoning, revenge, sword fights...

Beyond giving us Hamlet as vigilante, Zeffirelli's approach is less than revolutionary, but the film thrilled its target audience and has come as a huge relief to children studying the play who would otherwise be faced with the BBC version, and Derek Jacobi.

These two films together created an appetite and a market for Shakespeare films that spoke in the cinematic language of today. Now this year alone we have an Al Pacino documentary on producing *Richard III*, stage-derived productions of *Twelfth Night* and soon *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, four hours of Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*, and Baz Luhrmann's eagerly-awaited bang up-to-date modern *Romeo and Juliet* which has been such a hit in the USA. Only recently Branagh has given us the bucolic romp of *Much Ado About Nothing* and a chamber piece on producing *Hamlet*, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, while appearing as Iago in Oliver Parker's conventional but competent *Othello*, and Ian McKellen supplied a radical *Richard III*.

#### [19. NFT booklet]

The key is variety, as one can see from the NFT booklet. Who is to say now what a Shakespeare film should look like? I will concentrate on and conclude with two examples, *Richard III* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Ian McKellen's film, which was such a struggle to finance and had such a convoluted pre-production history, is based on the National Theatre production of the play which re-imagined it as set in a Fascist 1930s Britain. McKellen's initial idea seems to have been to follow the theatre staging and full text as much as possible, which no doubt explains the difficulty in raising finance, but somewhere in between gaining and losing Alex Cox as a director, something with wit, pace and vigour was produced. Placing Shakespeare in particular time periods is nothing new to the theatre; once again we see the cinema borrowing the innovations of the older medium, and alongside the use of familiar London locations the costuming adds to the sense of fun and surprise. This is not what we expected Shakespeare to look like (not if we don't attend the National Theatre, that is). In truth, the interpretation is a little one-note, and we might not welcome too many films striving to dress Shakespeare in the 20th (or 21st) century as though he was the perfect chronicler of our time, but for the time being the approach makes us see the play afresh - and recent British history and politics as well.

#### [20. Slide of Kenneth Branagh]

And then you have Branagh. I am not a fan, and don't much understand why others are, but the man's confidence, enthusiasm for Shakespeare, and desire to communicate to today's audience are wholly admirable. *Henry V* is deadly dull, to my biased mind, indeed barely competent, and there hasn't been time enough in the day to see his *Hamlet* as yet, richly costumed as it is in a fantasy 19th century *Prisoner of Zenda*-style setting, which like his earlier film seems to find much of its inspiration in doing the very opposite of what Olivier did. But *Much Ado About Nothing* is a very good film, albeit one with a few very bad things in it.

It is a good film primarily on account of the surpassing confidence with which it is made, and its delight in pleasing its audience. The beauty of the Tuscan settings and the immaculate costumes that look so dashing on the likes of Keanu Reeves and Denzel Washington serve both to delight our eyes and to make the passing darkness into which this problem play descends all the more disturbing. It is dressed to suggest some time past which you won't find in a history book but which suits the names and passions of the players perfectly. It is dressed, simply enough, to make everyone look gorgeous. There are two exceptional and defining scenes in the film in particular: the opening shots where the soldiers come riding lustily through the Tuscan countryside, and the women run down the hill half-unbuttoned to greet them, announcing the film's most obvious and successful message; and the bravura final Steadicam shot which covers a dance by the whole cast through the house and gardens until finally the camera swoops up into the air. I'm a sucker for bravura single-take shots, and you get to see just about every costume designed for the film, and designed for the happy freedom of movement which this sequence signifies, so as my final clip here it is.

### **[MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING (1993)]**

So, what to say about Shakespeare costume films in conclusion? How much do they, or should they, offer us that believable and desirable past?

Shakespeare films are a remarkable and distinctive genre. It is extraordinary that films should be made of the plays of an Elizabethan dramatist whose language is difficult if not alien to the majority, whose contemporaries one would consider too difficult for filming - there have been precious few Christopher Marlowe or Ben Jonson films - and yet the films going on being made and not simply for the kudos. They work as films, often as not. Consider any film genre - Westerns, horror, science fiction, costume drama - and the number of duds far outweighs the lasting successes. But at a rough guess 50% of all Shakespeare films are either very good or at least very interesting. The worst are truly dreadful, as anyone who has sat through Charlton Heston's *Antony and Cleopatra* will sadly acknowledge, but the ratio of palpable hits is a high one. It makes no sense, but Shakespeare wrote good film scenarios - if only good people are in charge to make the best of them.

But they are not in any proper sense costume drama. You may have noted in the NFT season of costume films that accompanies this event that no Shakespeare film has been included. Every other talk today has a film there that fits the bill; poor Shakespeare has none. And that, I think, is because the instinctive thought is that he simply doesn't fit. Read any account of British or American film genres, certainly of costume dramas, and the Shakespeare film, though it might ostensibly seem to belong, is ignored or shunted to one side, not quite one of us; not really what the movies are about. In researching this paper I was at first surprised to find almost no writing on Shakespeare films and costume, beyond the plain accounts of their work by costume designers such as Roger Furse. And I think this is because it is an irrelevance. Certainly costume has played a key part in the filming of Shakespeare, in the selling of it and just occasionally in the attraction of it. Costume has been central to those productions, from early silents to the *BBC Television Shakespeare* series, which seek conformity or middle-class approval. Costume has found a happy halfway point between academia and overall filmic design in the works of Laurence Olivier; was radicalised by Derek

Jarman; and is the clearest indication of the variety and imagination of the most recent efforts. There are Shakespeare films which cross over into the costume drama world, so Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* shares much with the Merchant-Ivory school. But this is not their prime purpose. That purpose has to do with poetry and character and truthfulness to the human condition, and how you dress it ultimately doesn't matter, so long as you serve the playwright first. It helps, but it's not what it's all about. Which would be the Orson Welles point of view. At which point, having more or less confessed that I shouldn't be here, I must end.