100 Years of Shakespeare Films

Reviewed by William Boyle

Shakespeare Films: A Re-evaluation of 100 Years of Adaptations.
By Peter E. S. Babiak. Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland and Company,
2016, 1st Edition, 212 pages (paperback $35.00 US, Kindle $18.99).

Peter Babiak's *Shakespeare Films* is not just another book about filmed adaptations of Shakespeare plays to film. It claims to be a new, fresh look that breaks with the past scholarship on the subject, and sets up new standards in considering how Shakespeare is adapted to the screen and how the public should view such adaptations.

On the back cover it states:

> This study reexamines the recognized "canon" of films based on Shakespeare's plays and argues that is should be broadened by breaking with two unnecessary standards: the characterization of the director as "auteur" of a play's screen adaptation, and the convention of excluding films with contemporary language or modern or alternative settings or which use the plays as a subtext. The emphasis is shifted from the director's contribution to the film's social, cultural and historical contexts.
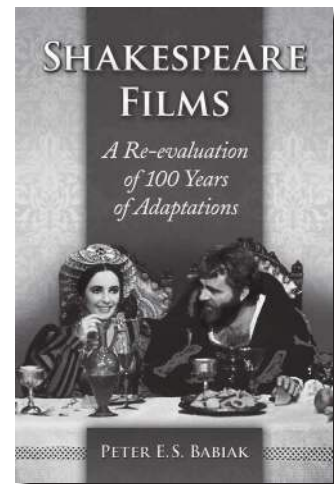
In his introduction Babiak lays out the basics of considering film adaptations by drawing on past discussions among scholars. He cites Jack Jorgens's *Shakespeare on Film* (1977) in laying out the basic choices an adapter faces, which can be reduced to two: 1) how to present the play to the audience (theatrical, realistic, or filmic), and 2) how to deal with the text itself: presentation (i.e., verbatim use of the text), interpretation, adaptation, or deconstruction. In citing Sarah Cardwell's *Adaptation Revisited* (2002) he notes the problems with adaptations as a "cultural process" vs. a resulting "cultural artifact," the problem for any adapters being (now citing from *Political Shakespeare* [1994]) that they then have to cope with Shakespeare as a "contested social icon."

This in turn results in adapters having to "infuse their position with Shakespeare's cultural authority," etc. This latter point appears to open the door to a consideration of the entire authorship problem in understanding what a Shakespeare play is about, and therefore how to "adapt" it, but the authorship problem is nowhere to be found in this book. Yet determining the "social, cultural and historical contexts" surrounding the author who wrote these works 400 years ago is a key factor when considering how the plays have been adapted in films, as well as a factor whereby Babiak's study falls short.

Finally, Babiak turns to Linda Hutcheon's 2006 *A Theory of Adaptation*, whose parameters are presented as the foundation for his own "new basis for study." Hutcheon's views on adaptation go far beyond just reciting the source text; they go into much broader considerations about the time and place (Where/When?) of the adaptation (i.e., which decade/century, which country), the skills and motives of the adapters (Who/Why?), and the medium used to present the adaptation (What?).

Over the final twelve pages of his Introduction Babiak fills in much detail on how all this works, concluding with a section, "Rationale and Chronology of Films," which lists all the films discussed and places them in one of four categories: "Canonical" (which is most of them), "Non-Canonical" (*Forbidden Planet* is one), "Un-Canonical" (mostly pre-WWII, and mostly silent, but with two 1960s films by Kurosawa and Ralph Richardson included), and "Subtextual Representation" (*The Godfather* is the prime example).

It does get complicated. As if to acknowledge just how complicated, Babiak concludes the Introduction with a brief outline of each chapter, covering what will be discussed and how that fits in with his broader thesis. The outline is useful and lays the groundwork for considering each of the chapters, which are laid out in chronological order, beginning with the silent film era and ending with a variety of 21st century adaptations. Some of the observations here seem self-evident, but many of us probably hadn't considered some of them before.

William Boyle *is a retired librarian who graduated from Lake Forest College (BA, English) and SUNY-Albany (MA, Library Science). In the 1990s he founded and managed websites on the authorship question, including the* Shakespeare Oxford Society Home Page *in 1995, and* The Ever Reader *in 1996. He then served as editor of the* Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter *from 1996-2001 and* Shakespeare Matters *from 2001-2005. In 2006 he founded the New England Shakespeare Oxford Library (www.shakespeareoxfordlibrary.org), which manages the Shakespeare Online Authorship Resources (SOAR) catalog-database of Shakespeare authorship materials, and publishes authorship-related books through its Forever Press imprint.*

The silent era is, of course, marked by the necessity to use familiar visual images focusing on just one clear element of a play. The pre-Hollywood era is naturally marked by the use of play adaptations as "star vehicles," with each film featuring famous personalities. Babiak provides several examples, Dieterle and Reinhardt's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935) being the prime example, along with George Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* and its way-too-old cast, including British star Leslie Howard as Romeo, and Paul Czinner's *As You Like It*, with his wife Elizabeth Bergner as an unconvincing Rosalind/ Ganymede (a girl playing a girl in a tunic…where's the boy?).

The post-World War II films take on some of the darkness of the postwar era, especially Olivier and Welles, discussed in more detail below. The 1950s to 1960s range all over the world: Japan (Kurosawa), Russia (Kozintsev), Italy via Hollywood (Zeffirelli), England and Poland (Kott, Brook, Richardson, Polanski), etc. Chapter 6 (Zeffirelli) is particularly interesting as Babiak notes that while Zeffirelli can be compared to Olivier and Welles as an "auteur" (each did three Shakespeare films), Welles and Olivier can also be viewed as purists who also starred in their films (like actor/managers). Yet to Babiak, Zeffirelli is a mere "populizer" who was more focused on entertainment.

All this leads into the 1970s-1980s, where Chapter 8 begins:

> The period from the release of Polanski's *MacBeth* to Branagh's *Henry V* has been described as "the 18 year gap"—during this period no significant films of Shakespeare plays were produced in mainstream cinema and "it looked as if television had displaced cinema as the photographic medium for bringing Shakespeare to the modern audience" (quoting Anthony Davies, xi).

Babiak then goes on to argue that this period was marked by its most iconic Hollywood film, *The Godfather*, which he says is also a prime example of the "Subtextual" Shakespeare adaptations that are part of his new thesis of adaptations. He notes that previous commentary had only loosely made this association (e.g., three sons instead of three daughters, family succession of power, etc.), and then adds his arguments for allusions to *Richard II* and *MacBeth*. It's the most provocative part of his larger thesis. He also discusses here Goddard's aborted *King Lear* project, in which Lear was to be a mob boss, and brings in *Forbidden Planet* and its more obvious—and agreed upon— connections to a Shakespeare play, *The Tempest*.

Chapter 9 is titled "Branagh," the first in a new era of auteurs, beginning with Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* in 1989. Interestingly, Babiak informs us that he was so taken with Branagh's film that the experience of viewing it is what led him, 25 years later, to write this book. He finishes his evaluations in

Chapter 10 ("Millennial Shakespeare") with films featuring much freer adaptations, focusing on Julie Taymor's *Titus* and *The Tempest*, Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, and Ethan Hawke's *Hamlet*, among others.

All this is interesting, but we can start to see problems and contradictions if we return to Babiak's main point about directors as auteurs and considerations of time and place in film adaptations. This is nowhere more apparent than in Chapter 3 ("Olivier and Welles"), where the issue is not just the mechanics and logistics of adapting a play, but the much more elusive concept of which adaptations work.

In Chapter 3 Babiak writes that one previous critic (Stephen Buhler) had failed to appreciate "that the approaches taken to Shakespeare's plays by Olivier and Welles bear striking similarities." He notes that Olivier in his *Richard III* (1955), by depicting whether Richard himself seems to be in control of the camera (his rise) or not (his fall), "demonstrates the influence of 'film noir' in its foreshadowing of Richard's eventual doom." In discussing Welles he notes the uses of elaborate, stark set designs (*MacBeth*), impenetrable mazes (*Othello*), and narrative disparity (*Chimes at Midnight*)—all elements that are uniquely Wellesian.

He also observes that Olivier's adaptations of Shakespeare to the cinema are well financed, while Welles operates on shoestring budgets. Moreover, that Olivier's films look back to the theater while Welles's looks forward to the cinema. This becomes apparent in the former's *Henry V*, where the camera is placed mostly higher up and very far away, as if the actors were delivering their lines to the last row of a very big theater. In short, Olivier was classical in the worst sense of the word, while Welles was a "maverick" and his films *MacBeth*, *Othello* and *Chimes at Midnight* are all intensely physical as you watch them, rather than being remote and theatrical.

In his Conclusion, Babiak returns to Olivier and Welles and sums up the similarities discussed in Chapter 3 by noting that both directors "rejected mainstream cinema's emphasis on realism/illusion," and both used special film techniques, such as zoom lenses to compress an image (Olivier) or lighting (Welles) to cast shadows. In addition, both directors "reflect a theme of entrapment that characterized post-Second World War European cinema." Babiak then returns at this point to another film noir reference, although without using that term. He compares the motifs used by *both* Welles and Olivier as ones evoking Carol Reed's *The Third Man* or Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli*.

For this reviewer, this is where Babiak's thesis (i.e., going beyond the director as auteur, and instead considering context) goes off the rails a bit because anyone viewing all these Olivier and Welles films (as I recently did) would immediately be reminded of *The Third Man* any number of times in the

Welles films—that is, *MacBeth*, and *Othello*, and *Chimes at Midnight*. But do Olivier's *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, or *Richard III* cause a viewer to come even close to thinking of film noir? For *Henry* and *Richard*, clearly not. The black-and-white *Hamlet* has been viewed as "noir-ish" by some but, in comparison to Welles, it too is not that close. The director as auteur makes all the difference, and Welles is clearly the superior film director, all technical similarities aside. Babiak's analysis overlooks such distinctions. In his iconic book *The American Cinema* (1968) Andrew Sarris assessed Welles to be among the "Pantheon Directors", while Olivier was not even mentioned, even among the "Miscellaneous." One director is listed as a genius, the other is not even mentioned, and thereby hangs a tale.

There is an important point that needs to be raised here, vis-à-vis the entire issue of adapting Shakespeare to film, auteurs, and historical context, and that is the Shakespeare authorship question. This is, after all, an Oxfordian review of a mainstream Shakespeare book, written for publication in an Oxfordian journal. Does the authorship debate matter in all these considerations? Well, yes. The Oxfordian view is simply that the author is deeply invested in each of his plays (i.e., his particular point of view and agenda is always a factor) and further, that he is almost always represented by a character in the play (Hamlet being the definitive example), while other characters are modeled on people whom he knows.

So, for example, in all the discussion above of Olivier and Welles there is one other additional point to consider. Welles once clearly stated to theatre critic Kenneth Tynan that, "I think Oxford wrote Shakespeare. If you don't agree, there are some awfully funny coincidences to explain away…." (see Tynan's 1954 book, *Persona Grata*). Even though there is now some debate, it is most likely that he was an Oxfordian, even if he had to be *sub rosa* about it (he did, after all, have battles throughout his life over financing, and it is easy to understand that he knew he had to keep silent about certain things).

Several other major people who figure prominently in Shakespeare-to-film adaptations were also most likely Oxfordians. I am thinking here of both Leslie Howard and Kenneth Branagh. In a May 3, 2009 *Sunday Express* (UK) news article, Branagh was quoted as being sympathetic to the authorship question and the case for Edward de Vere, but the piece was taken down by the publisher within days, accompanied by a statement that Branagh had never meant to say any such thing, and that he was firmly a Stratfordian. This event capped years of rumors that Branagh himself might be an authorship skeptic. His friend and mentor Sir Derek Jacobi and Keanu Reeves (one of the stars in *Much Ado*) are both openly Oxfordian, dating back to the 1990s. So it strikes me as no surprise that *Much Ado* turned out to be one of the most enjoyable adaptations of Shakespeare ever put on film, or that his *Henry V* four years earlier launched a new era of more vivid Shakespeare adaptations.

In 1941 Leslie Howard produced, directed and starred in a film called *Pimpernel Smith*, where the main character baldly states that "Shakespeare really wasn't Shakespeare at all…He was the Earl of Oxford." The same character continued to laud Oxford in another scene: "The Earl of Oxford was a very bright Elizabethan light, but this book will tell you he was a good deal more than that." His next film was, as Charles Boyle has argued, going to be a reimagining of *Hamlet* during the Second World War, but, regrettably, he died in a mysterious plane crash while returning from Spain in 1943.

This view that both Welles and Branagh might have been closet Oxfordians leads me to believe that they would, then, *not* have been coping with the problem Babiak spoke of in his Introduction as a key problem for adapters—"the problem for any adapters being that they have to cope with Shakespeare as a 'contested social icon'…[which] in turn results in these adapters having to 'infuse their position with Shakespeare's cultural authority.' " Welles's and Branagh's lively, more visceral adaptations were, in my view, free of any concerns over Shakespeare's "cultural authority" and were instead in touch with a view of Shakespeare as a real flesh-and-blood person, not an icon. This in turn brought a degree of reality into their adaptations that an Olivier could not conceive of.

There is an interesting passage in Babiak's chapter on Zeffirelli which captures the problem of not being willing or able to discuss the authorship question at all. In analyzing *The Taming of the Shrew*, we encounter this passage citing Harvard professor Marjorie Garber:

> Marjorie Garber has identified the Christopher Sly induction scene as crucial to understanding Shakespeare's play, as it "introduces and mirrors all the major issues that will preoccupy the actors in the main drama to come." Among the issues that Garber identifies are the impersonation of nobles and commoners: Sly is "a tinker wrongly convinced that he is a nobleman," and the lord is "an actor playing the part of a nobleman," and Bartholomew the page masquerades as a "lady" whom Sly wishes to have sex with. Although Zeffirelli omits 70% of Shakespeare's play … the crucial theme of invention is amply demonstrated by Zeffirelli using visual means. (108)

Such a passage can, and does, give an Oxfordian reviewer of a mainstream Shakespeare book pause: to laugh, to cry, or just to sit back a moment and marvel at the irony of it all.

In the final analysis, measured against the claim on the back cover (i.e., "the emphasis is shifted from the director's contribution to the film's social, cultural and historical contexts"), this book is a mixed bag. While it is valuable

in its thorough survey of past studies on the topic, in its detailed and often interesting discussions of some iconic films and directors, and in its bibliography and filmography, it nonetheless suffers from a slow moving, at times too dense academic handling of the subject matter, weighted down further by much repetition.

Despite Babiak's claim of shifting emphasis from the director, much of his discussion does, in the end, consider the director as auteur, resulting in a book that suffers from his own limited imagination in considering just what makes some adaptations work and others fail. He had informed us in his Preface that viewing Branagh's *Henry V* in 1989 had led to his fascination with the subject of adapting Shakespeare to film, and, eventually, to this book. But, in this book, he never does tell us just what exactly that film did that the others did not.