

Adapting Shakespeare to the Screen

Reviewed by Charles Boyle

I have been deeply involved with Shakespeare most of my life, active in the authorship movement, and even managed a small theatre company in Boston that produced several of the plays. As a result, I have some strongly held views about reading and performing Shakespeare on stage and film.

First, just what is meant by “adapting” a play to the screen?

Consulting Wikipedia I found there have been more than 400 adaptations over the past century, running the gamut through Hollywood, international cinema, television, and now the Internet and streaming. This includes full-text versions, filmed stage plays, various shifts of time and place, hybrids of Shakespeare and popular culture, cartoons, etc. Then, as an Oxfordian, we can add to this whether knowing something about the author really matters in interpreting and adapting the plays. One can see that there are myriad possibilities in what can be done and has been done.

A Cornucopia of Lists

After perusing the list, I searched for “Top XXX lists.” I found many, even lists of some far-fetched adaptations (Romeo as a zombie), and lists based on user polls—for example, *Romeo and Juliet* finished both first (Zeffirelli’s 1968 version) and second (Luhrmann’s 1996 version) in one poll.

For me, though, a good adaptation should always be aware of the inherent humor in all of Shakespeare’s plays, even the tragedies. Moreover, the acting should be as natural as possible, the lines delivered “trippingly on the

tongue.” Dialogue that is little more than reciting great lines from the great poet kills both the immediacy and the intimacy of the moment.

When I was managing my Ever Theater in the early 1990s, these were the key elements I sought to achieve, along with an awareness of any authorship (i.e., Oxfordian) moments that might be present. The two plays we focused on were *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. Both these popular plays were undoubtedly first written as court comedies, and both are full of interpretive possibilities that are far from Stratford.

So, let’s review some of the screen adaptations that I have seen over the years.

The Films of Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles

The first film is Laurence Olivier’s *Henry V* (1944). It’s an interesting film because it was made during the Second World War and it’s also about the war. Unfortunately, the play has many flaws, the most annoying being the sing-songy nature of the verse. After a while it dominated everything, and thus made everything second rate. Another criticism I have of Olivier is that in all these films he basically is filming the stage play, not being cinematic. Therefore, all the shots are composed too far away from the action, especially in scenes where close-ups are needed.

This was confirmed by his next project, his version of *Hamlet* (1948). The one overwhelming flaw in its production is that there is no humor. Where are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? This from the funniest character in all of Shakespeare—Hamlet. It’s as though Olivier didn’t understand the subtext of the play. He never left Stratford.

The next Shakespeare play he filmed was *Richard III* (1955). This play at least displayed some humor and to that extent became a more interesting production. It was still flawed but for the first time Olivier had some idea that his character was not only evil, but funny as well.

Now contrast this with the three Shakespeare films by Orson Welles. *Macbeth* (1948) is the least interesting of the three. It was shot in 23 days on sets that weren’t his, using borrowed costumes, all compounded by having too little money and too little humor. Still, Welles is Welles and the experience

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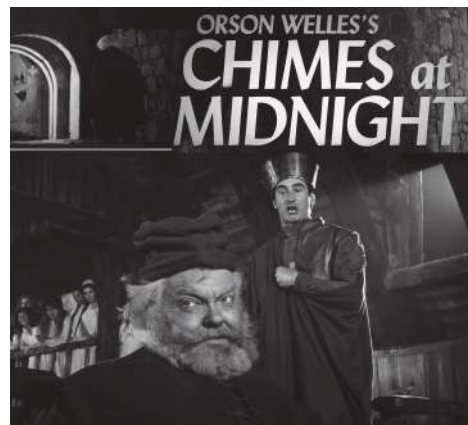
of seeing him play the doomed murdering monarch can be riveting. While the entire film was shot on sets, there are several scenes (the Daggers Scene, and the entire England Scene) that run nearly 10 minutes, all shot in a single take from a crane, made possible by expert blocking and camera movements. These two sequences rival some of Welles' best work, such as *Touch of Evil*.

I should also note here another strange moment in *Macbeth*. The entire scene following Duncan's murder is presented in bright light on a barren set, revealing the studio-bound nature of the film, with Welles wearing the most ridiculous crown I've ever seen, and accompanied by tuba music. It's as though we've been suddenly immersed in a cartoon. Was this meant to be humorous? It reminded me of the notorious Old Vic production in 1980 in which Peter O'Toole plays the role over the top, with the audience often howling with laughter. Critics and purists were both appalled. My thoughts on this are simply that the comedy of it all is ready to be played if one wishes—even in *Macbeth*.

His next film, *Othello* (1951), is one of the best Shakespeare films ever made. Here Welles has transformed the play into a real film. The scenes in the bathhouse are beautiful to watch, as is the amazing traveling shot on the battlements of the castle by the seashore, with Othello and Iago talking, and Iago scheming with every step. In both films Welles' adaptations of the dialogue are more natural than Olivier's and there is a well-balanced mixture of long shots and close-ups.

This brings us to *Chimes at Midnight* (1965), possibly the best movie that Welles ever made. Indeed, Welles said in a 1982 interview in *BBC Arena* that, "If I wanted to get into heaven on the basis of one movie, that's the one I would offer up." As I perused Top Ten Lists in recent months, I noticed that *Chimes* was listed number one in several.

Little known is the fact that Welles had originally started on this version of the Falstaff story in New York City in 1939 with "Five Kings," drawn from several plays, where he himself—at age 24—played Falstaff. By the time he made the movie version of this concept, he fully understood his Falstaff, since he himself had literally grown into the role. When Welles plays Falstaff as an aging, fat man whose best days are long gone, he is in some ways playing himself—and he knows it. Recent critics of the film, which became widely available only in the last five years with the release of a print with decent audio, have all noted this



similarity, which is a key to appreciating the “auteur” nature of what Welles did in the mid-1960s.

Chimes is exhilarating in the interplay between Welles and the rest of the cast, from Justice Shallow to Doll Tearsheet, and of course, with the prince who will soon be king, Harry. The final, memorable scene with Harry (“I know ye not, old man”) rings true in a way that is stunning. The look on Falstaff’s face could well be the look on Welles’ face as he considered what he had become in his own troubled life.

Another amazing feature of this film is the Battle of Shrewsbury sequence, which is composed of hundreds of shots and edits, all with no dialogue. Pauline Kael, reviewing the film in 1967 for the *New Yorker*, called it one of the best battle scenes ever filmed, and compared it favorably with D. W. Griffith, John Ford, Sergei Eisenstein and Akira Kurosawa.

I should also note that Welles at least for a while dallied with the authorship question, and perhaps his approach to adapting the plays may have owed something to that perspective. He is quoted in a 1955 book (Kenneth Tynan’s *Persona Grata*) as stating that, “I think Oxford wrote Shakespeare. If you don’t there are some awfully funny coincidences to explain away.” But decades later, in the 1980s interviews he had with filmmaker Henry Jaglom (published in 2013 as *My Lunches with Orson*), he is quoted several times stating clearly that William Shakspeare is the author. So something had changed in the intervening years.

While there have been many other Shakespeare films over the decades, few directors have tried to specialize in the subject. I have focused on Olivier and Welles, but there is someone else who should be mentioned. Franco Zeffirelli did two Shakespeare films in 1967–1968 (*Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet*), then filmed the Verdi opera *Otello* in 1986, and finally did *Hamlet* with Mel Gibson and Glenn Close in 1990. These are all good, interesting adaptations, but one stands out as a classic.

Romeo and Juliet is significant and belongs on anyone’s list of top Shakespeare film adaptations because 1) the lead characters are actual teenagers (Juliet is 14, after all), 2) great visuals continually set the scene, making up for cutting more



than half the text, 3) a great song and theme music by Nino Rota, 4) humor is present (despite four dead bodies), and 5) the dialogue flows naturally from everyone.

After the 1960s, as television became more widespread, there were more television productions than real films. This culminated in the efforts of the BBC in the late 1970s and 1980s to record productions of all the plays on video and broadcast them on TV. Actual films from major directors were few and far between until 1989, when Kenneth Branagh came out with *Henry V*. It was so successful that it began a new era of Shakespeare adapted to film.

Enter Branagh and a New Era

Just what did Branagh do that caused this? Just compare his *Henry V* with Olivier's. Branagh's film has prose for its dialogue, not recited poetry. His film is cinematic in every sense of the word: one never feels they are watching the filming of a stage play. For example, the entire sequence of Henry walking through the battlefield conveys visually that war is hell. This reflects the two vastly different eras in which they were produced. Olivier's Henry V is a war hero, but Branagh's might just be a war criminal. Yet Branagh still manages to end the film on a humorous note with the scene of Henry courting the French princess into the marriage alliance that will seal the peace.

Branagh's next Shakespeare film (1993) was *Much Ado About Nothing*, which I think is the next best of all his adaptations. First of all, this film, like *Henry V*, is cinematic. And the dialogue flows naturally from the actors' lips. Most of all, it has humor and energy from start to finish. Clearly some of this flows from the fact that Branagh and Emma Thompson were married at the time, and in love. Also, in a 1993 interview Branagh made a telling remark about his casting choices: "I wanted to have American actors in this film because I wanted to take away from Shakespeare the kind of tight-assed British thing. You know, being the only sort of way you can do it" (*Detour Magazine*, May 1993).



Another interesting fact about this breakthrough film is that the Oxfordian view of the Shakespeare authorship may have been discussed during filming. Keanu Reeves (who played Don John) revealed in a 1995 interview (*Attitude*, September 1995) that he was an Oxfordian, remarking that he would love to

do the life story of Edward de Vere and to illuminate Elizabethan life and drama. Around this time he played Hamlet for the Manitoba Theatre Centre. One critic (Roger Lewis) wrote, “He is one of the top three Hamlets I have seen, for a simple reason: he *is* Hamlet.” So I wonder just when did Reeves first realize that the Oxfordian thesis is—in a nutshell—that Hamlet is Shakespeare. And was any of this being talked about on the set of *Much Ado*?

We might ask that about Branagh himself, since his next Shakespeare film was *Hamlet* (1996), and not just any *Hamlet*, but a full text version that runs nearly four hours. And one may ask, how could anyone produce a full text production of *Hamlet* and still think the self-taught grain dealer wrote this for lucre to entertain illiterate groundlings at the Globe? The film has its moments, but it could have had more with a little more editing, and frankly, a little more humor. Let’s acknowledge that *Hamlet* at full text is a marathon, demanding and exhausting. It is, as British theatre director Gordon Craig noted decades ago, no longer a play but a dramatic novel.

One final note: in 1995 Branagh played Iago in Oliver Parker’s *Othello* with Laurence Fishburne in the lead role. I greatly admired this film. It was different from Welles’ *film noir* epic, yet true and clear. And Branagh’s Iago is remarkable, played with a curious mixture of cunning and humor. He often looks right at the audience with a slight smile, playing Iago as an imp who seems very aware of just how absurd his villainy is.

After *Hamlet* Branagh did two more film adaptations: *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (2000) and *As You Like It* (2006). Neither is particularly distinguished. *LLL* is fun because of the Busby Berkeley/show tune (Porter, Gershwin, Berlin) setting, but has little connection with Shakespeare. An *AYLI* set in 19th Century Japan is also problematic, with an overdose of Samurai warrior ambience and suffering, primarily, from a lack of humor, including Touchstone and Jaques. But I will give him credit for retaining almost all of Jaques’ lines (which some productions cut). Jaques is certainly meant as a counterpoint to Touchstone, and both are, in the Oxfordian view, the author Oxford riffing on himself.

I should add that Branagh was not yet through with Shakespeare. In 2009 he was in the news adamantly denying that he had ever said anything in an interview (*Sunday Express*, May 3, 2009, by Sandro Monetti) to suggest that he questioned the Stratford story or gave credence to the Oxfordian claim. Doth the director protest too much? In any event, the paper withdrew the story within a week. And perhaps this bizarre episode in the authorship debate may indicate that Branagh, like Welles a generation earlier, was indeed aware of the debate and the Oxfordian thesis, but—in the public square at least—wanted no part of it.

Then, in 2018 he produced, directed and starred in *All is True*, a so-called biopic about Shakspeare himself. The script was by Ben Elton, who had played Dogberry's partner Verges (the one with the glasses) in the 1993 *Much Ado*. I watched these and was underwhelmed. *All is True* is utterly humorless, and in many ways preposterous. I can only think that he made it to secure some mainstream *bona fides*, which may also be why Elton did *Upstart Crow*, little more than a slapstick rendition of Shakspeare that seems more dedicated to reducing him to nothing than honoring him.

Among the Rest

Just who is out there still making film adaptations? There have been some significant movies, ranging from several more *Hamlets* (Zeffirelli's with Mel Gibson in 1990, Ethan Hawke's in 2000, Adrian Lester's TV movie in 2002) to the excellent 2004 *Merchant of Venice* (starring Al Pacino as Shylock), and to such recent loose adaptations (which are not to my liking) as *Lion King* (derived from *Hamlet*), *O* (*Othello*), *10 Things I Hate About You* (*Taming of the Shrew*), and so on.

For me the two most notable of these recent films were Julie Taymor's *Titus* (2011) and Ralph Fiennes' *Coriolanus* (2013). Neither of these plays had ever been filmed outside of the BBC TV productions in the 1980s. They are both interesting and engaging to watch, featuring what I value most: a cinematic look and feel, and a natural flow to the dialogue. The adjustments in the time and place for *Titus* worked for me, while *Coriolanus*' true setting of ancient Rome also worked fine. Furthermore, I learned a few things about each play in watching them (always a good sign). It is interesting in this new era to see these adaptations, because in my view a case can be made that each also has an authorial (i.e., the true author, Oxford) angle, centered in *Titus* around succession and sacrificing children, or in the case of *Coriolanus*, succession and motherhood (Volumnia).



Much Ado Redux

Finally, mention must be made of a recent adaptation that has received rave reviews from nearly every critic, and has actually been commercially successful, and even compelled some people who would never watch Shakespeare to view this film. I am speaking of Joss Whedon's 2013 *Much Ado About Nothing*.

I don't mind that it was set in a suburban house in a contemporary setting, but if we can't understand the author's original point of view the play becomes meaningless. Given that the plot revolves around Hero's virginity, the updated setting in southern California seems out of place, at the very least, if not plain ludicrous. Even sometime before World War II would have worked, but after the 1960s? No. And the military backstory is lost since everyone is wearing a suit, and all the young men in their suits looked eerily alike. Finally, the hero, Benedick, has no sense of humor. His exchanges with Beatrice all fell flat from beginning to end.

After watching it I checked the reviews to see what I had missed. Some of the reviews were as disappointing as the film. *The New York Times* reviewer A.O. Scott made a point to say how much he loved this film, and went on to compare it, unfavorably, with Branagh's (*NYT*, June 6, 2013). So I watched Branagh's again the very next day, which only reaffirmed what I've said earlier—that Branagh's is the superior version and clearly one of the best of *all* the Shakespeare adaptations in the era of film.

In my view the best adaptations must keep focused, regardless of how much text may be cut, on the comedic point of view that is always present in the plays. Remember that the universal symbol of theatre is the intertwined masks of comedy and tragedy, with comedy on top. That is a fact that should never be forgotten. In my opinion, without humor who cares who Shakespeare was? Humor is the key to his view of himself and of the world, and to his genius.