

## D. Shakespeare Goes to the Movies in the 1990s

Wendy Wall, *Avalon Professor of Humanities, Professor, English*  
 Thursdays, 1:00 - 2:30 p.m., Norris University Center

For hundreds of years, Shakespeare has been considered a high-brow literary genius whose plays were widely available in the classroom and on stage. In the 20th century, after Shakespearean silent films flourished, Hollywood studio heads famously denounced his works as “box office poison.” With the exception of a few films by Laurence Olivier and Franco Zeffirelli, movie makers just couldn’t successfully make Stratford meet Hollywood. In 1989, however, Kenneth Branagh defied the odds and created his “hit” *Henry V*, which convinced producers that there was a real market for Shakespearean films. The 1990s then witnessed no less than fifteen separate Shakespearean movies released for a mass audience, along with fifteen additional adaptations. In this class, we will examine the 1990s heyday of Shakespearean movies, with attention to how directors crafted radically different styles to make the bard’s plays speak to issues such as violence, marriage, corporate power, changing gender roles, nationalism, war, and US racial tension. This course will use “the Branagh effect” to think about the fascinating relationships between Shakespeare and popular culture – in his day and our own.

Although we will sample clips from an array of films, I will focus on the following 1990s productions: *Much Ado About Nothing* (Branagh), *Othello* (Parker), *Richard III* (Loncraine), *Romeo + Juliet* (Luhrmann), *Twelfth Night* (Nunn), *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Hoffman), *Hamlet* (Almerayda), and, of course, *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden). Bring your own popcorn and let’s go to the movies with the bard!

### Jan. 9 Shakespeare and Popular Culture

In his own day, Shakespeare was popular culture rather than a staple of the educational curriculum. In this lecture I will explore the 1590s London entertainment industry before fast forwarding to the emergence of Shakespeare movies in the 20th century, from silent films to full sound films. This context paves the way for us to better understand the “Branagh phenomenon,” beginning with the box office success *Henry V* in 1989 and enhanced by the invention of the cineplex. How did Branagh “translate” Shakespeare to film, building on the legacy of Vietnam era films and Olivier’s strategies? How did he make a remote historical story about the ethical quandaries of war entertaining and popular?

**Jan. 16**                    *Much Ado About Nothing*

How do you Hollywoodize Shakespeare? Imagine a lush, sunlit Tuscan countryside estate in which Hollywood celebrities (including Denzel Washington, Keanu Reeves, and Michael Keaton) intermix with established British stage actors (such as Emma Thompson and Kenneth Branagh). You have the recipe for Branagh's 1993 exuberant crowd pleaser, *Much Ado About Nothing*. Shakespeare's comedy famously offers sparring lovers, a feisty female lead, a conniving villain, bumbling comic fools, faked deaths, and confusions of identity. In this lecture, we will explore how Branagh engages with 1990s sexual politics, in part through allusions to Hollywood genres and a "realistic" mode of movie storytelling. We will end by comparing this film to Josh Whedon's small budget 2012 *Much Ado about Nothing* and Kenny Leon's 2019 all-Black stage production set in contemporary Georgia.

**Jan. 23**                    *Othello*

How does *Othello* read differently in the context of the OJ Simpson trial, Clarence Thomas hearings, Gulf wars, and increased attention to US racial injustice? In 1995, Oliver Parker released his big budget film version of this famous tragedy of interracial love, featuring a Hollywood lead, Laurence Fishburne (the first Black actor to star in a film version of the play) and Branagh as the deliciously evil villain Iago. Continuing a "realist" style of line delivery and storytelling, Parker imaginatively cross-cut, edited, and reframed this riveting story of rhetorical manipulation, racial insecurity, traumatic jealousy, and professional envy. This lecture will end by seeing how this representation of black masculinity and threatening sexuality compares to the 2001 modern-language teen adaptation *O*, with the title character as a star basketball player in an elite Southern high school.

**Jan. 30**                    *Richard III*

What would history look like if England had been taken over by Hitler? In 1995, director Richard Loncraine staged this alternative-history by situating Shakespeare's *Richard III* in glamorous 1930s England, complete with crooning singers, glamorous outfits, blasé elites who ignore fascism, and a cynical, disabled villain who kills his way to the top. Loncraine cast Hollywood A-list actors (Annette Bening and Robert Downey Jr.) as American interlopers in a hopelessly broken royal family played by Kristen Scott Thomas, Maggie Smith, Nigel Hawthorne, and Jim Broadbent—with the amazing Ian McKellen in the title role. In this lecture, we'll learn more about Tudor dynastic politics to understand how Shakespeare generated his own version of popular history on stage. Then we'll think about how Loncraine uses McKellen's charisma and a campy over-the-top style to counter the realism of other contemporary Shakespearean movies.

**Feb. 6**            *Romeo and Juliet*

How do you make Shakespeare postmodern? Australian Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo + Juliet* not only reached a large international teenage audience (with its heartthrob leads, Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes) but employed an "in your face," MTV style of jump-cuts and quick edits as well as a raucous soundtrack of pop music. In this lecture, we will explore how Luhrmann interprets the classic story of star-crossed lovers, in part by incorporating a non-realistic aesthetic and in part by grappling with dilemmas of modernity: corporate warfare, media saturation, the commodification of religion, ethnic/racial tension, toxic masculinity, and urban violence. After examining the play's wickedly clever allusions to Shakespeare and to Hollywood, we'll do some comparative analysis with Zeffirelli's 1960s countercultural film version and the influential *West Side Story*. How does the nature of tragedy change when these famous lovers emerge in the movies?

**Feb. 13**            *Twelfth Night*

What would happen if you put a cross-dressed character in the world of *Downton Abbey*? Trevor Nunn's 1996 *Twelfth Night* did exactly this, framing Shakespeare's festive story of separated twins and gender-fluidity as a 19th-century realist period piece, complete with unruly servants and love-struck aristocrats. Featuring distinguished British stage and film actors such as Nigel Hawthorne, Imogen Stubbs, Helena Bonham Carter, and Ben Kingsley, Nunn makes music a tool for exploring the hilarious unpredictability of desire. We'll end our discussion by contrasting Nunn's engagement of 1990s gender and sexuality issues with the National Theater's 2017 production, which added one additional layer of gender twisting through unusual casting.

**Feb. 20**            *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

What happens when fantasy and love come into conflict with socially approved notions of marriage and decorum? In a world of unreality, how do you know who you really are? Directors for centuries have looked to one of Shakespeare's most popular comedies to explore these questions. Michael Hoffman's 1999 film version puts Shakespeare's story of magic and fairy worlds into an 1890s Italian town, where technologies like record players and bicycles are changing ways of life. The ensemble cast is full-on Hollywood, featuring Kevin Kline, Michelle Pfeiffer, Rupert Everett, Stanley Tucci, Calista Flockhart, and Christian Bale. In this lecture, we will think about this film's exploration of gender roles, love, authoritarian rule, marriage, and identity by comparing it with other versions (for instance, by Peter Hall and Julie Taymor). How does the unreality of relationships read differently in the 1990s?

**Feb. 27**            *Hamlet*

Michael Almereyda's 2000 *Hamlet* puts the title character (Ethan Hawke) in a Manhattan Blockbuster video store, where he recites the famed "to be or not to be" soliloquy framed by wistful gazes at movies featuring action heroes. Almereyda uses Shakespeare's most famous tragedy to comment on modern urban life among the sleek but corrupt world of the elite, where corporations rule and everyone grapples with new media technologies. What role can art have in this chaotic space? Starring Kyle MacLachlan, Bill Murray, Julia Stiles, and Sam Shepard, this very contemporary view of how the GenX generation might understand what's rotten in the state of Denmark was the third *Hamlet* movie to appear in the 90s. To appreciate Almereyda's version, we will compare it to Zeffirelli's 1991 "action" version starring Mel Gibson and Glenn Close, as well as Branagh's four-hour, Oscar-nominated (but limited-release) 1996 epic.

**Mar. 6**            **NO CLASS****Mar. 13**            *Shakespeare in Love*

Our grand finale is a tour through John Madden's Oscar-winning witty film, which fictionalized Shakespeare's early career and revealed the supposed "real-life" origins of Romeo and Juliet. This film imagines what Renaissance authorship was like in the brutal commercial world of the London theater industry. Chock full of "in the know" references to contemporary playwrights, 1590s London, and the rigidity of the Renaissance social hierarchy, this film strikingly views Shakespeare's theater through the lens of the Hollywood entertainment industry, complete with egos and crass commercial bargains. This hit included a stellar cast—Joseph Fiennes, Gwyneth Paltrow, Colin Firth, and Judy Dench—with writing credit to Tom Stoppard. As background, this lecture will discuss longstanding debates about who really wrote Shakespeare's plays, which reveals struggles to square reverence for the world's most famous literary icon with sketchy human biographies from the past. We'll see how *Shakespeare In Love* invites audiences to consider the main topic of our course: art's relationship to economic realities, media, and popular culture.