Plays into Film

In many ways, the stage play is the literary medium most similar to the motion pictures. Both forms integrate like elements of performance.* Like a movie, a stage play engages actors in dramatic situations who incorporate the directives of written dialogue and body movement into their work. The actors' presence in the play or film raises issues of intertextuality as their performances are often not isolated events, but, instead, exist within the context of past roles they have played, their degree of popularity at the moment, and their real-life situations to which the audience is privy. The actors' past histories cause the current performances to resonate in both obvious ways and in unmappably complex ways in each viewer's response, affecting, to varying degrees, each spectator's reception of the entire play or film.

Like a movie, a play utilizes sets, sound effects, lighting, costumes, directors, and producers all working in cooperative service to create a seamless whole. Both forms invariably rely upon visual composition. However, unlike other visual art forms, painting or sculpture, for example, films and plays are temporal. They move through time; and the construction of each, thus, implements temporal compositional elements, i.e.,

*The practice of reading plays is a modern usage, with its origins, arguably, in the writing of such modern dramatists as Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg, who consciously made even their stage directions (which would never be heard by an audience) more literate and literary, with the awareness that their plays would be read as a thing apart from any performance. The custom of making the stage play concurrently a reader's text is apparent in the writing practices of contemporary playwrights as diverse as Tennessee Williams, David Mamet, and Sam Sheppard.

More recently, a wider, popular interest in reading screenplays has emerged; and in response to the growing interest, many more screenplays are being published and even posted on the Internet (in all stages of completion), with writer/director Kevin Smith often generously making his shooting script available on his web site.

those various transitional devices that move the audience from one scene or sequence to another (please see the discussion of literary and film "transitions" in Chapter I).

Plays and films are constructed from an ever-shifting series of *mise-en-scène*-the arrangement of all the visual components occurring at any given moment on the stage or the screen. The term *mise-en-scène*, frequently used in film discussions, originated in theater where it was employed to describe the specific elements of staging determined for a given play. In plays and in film, the arrangement of the visual elements — the composite of all the objects, people, lighting, and color — is very similar. However, unlike staging, filming can incorporate camera movement, distance, and angles to shape its *mise-en-scène*; and, unlike filming, staging can employ creative ways of utilizing its very real three dimensions, a quality that the two dimensions of film can only simulate.

Movies and plays are performed to an audience of viewers who react both individually and collectively to what they experience, and who sit in a theater in a fixed position in relation to, and at an approximately equal distance from, the screen or the stage. The point of view for the theater audience remains static, delineated by the focal field of the stage. Film, in contrast, has the ability to overcome the confines of the proscenium. It can shift audience perspective and create the illusion that the constancy of distance between performer and spectator is shifting. Both theater and film have their distinct ways of calling the audience's attention, at any given moment, to specific visual detail. Film accomplishes this largely through camera placement. Theater, instead, relies on the actor, aided, perhaps by effects of lighting and sound, to compel the audience to look at chosen elements on stage.

The running time of a feature film approximates the performance time of a standard play, and the movie screen in a theater (with an aspect ration of 1.85 to 1 for standard-wide or 2.35 to 1 for wide-screen) is shaped like a proscenium stage, so much so that for "a long time the medium of the motion picture was regarded as a 'new proscenium'" (Tibbetts, *The American Theatrical Film*, 1).

But, ironically, it is the inherent compatibilities of the two forms that, also, ironically, present the greatest difficulties for the transition of a play to the screen, as the filmmakers must find the means of making the movie something more than simply a filmed stage play. The movie must negotiate specific ways of eliminating the stagy feeling that would seem disruptive and discrepant in a film.

Early movie versions of plays were often simply "filmed theater,"

where a stationary camera was situated to record a performance occurring on a stage. In the earliest years of film production, it was a desirable quality for a movie to replicate the proscenium stage, creating the illusion that the movie-goers were in a legitimate theater, watching a play or attending a popular vaudeville show. By 1920, theoretical disputes arose regarding the nature, value, and function of film and its relationship to theater. The debate is embodied in the divergent views of David Belasco and Hugo Munsterberg.

Theater's much-admired director/producer/playwright David Belasco (1853–1931) maintained that film is an offshoot of theater, and a somewhat inferior art form, at that. David Belasco's stage work falls into three genres: historical spectacle, melodrama, and domestic narratives. No matter the genre, however, the same abiding aesthetic value permeates all his work: a driving insistence that the world being depicted be suffused with accurate, and, at times, spectacular, visual details — costumes, props, sets, and lighting — that recreate, as realistically as possible, the "intimate details of daily life" of the milieu being represented (Vardac, 121). Thus, Belasco's name has become synonymous with the "Drama of Realism."* According to Belasco, a film is strongest when it replicates the aesthetic values of the stage. Whether stage or screen, Belasco would value the creation of a viewing experience that would approximate the real experience of the narrative. In the case of film, the camera should function as a recorder, with the signature (the distinguishing stylistic qualities) of the filmmaker kept unobtrusive.

To the other extreme, the experimental psychologist and theorist Hugo Munsterberg (1863–1916) asserted that film is a self-reliant art form and was to become nothing less than *the* art form of the twentieth century. In 1916, Hugo Munsterberg published *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*. The work, written without any intellectual antecedent on the topic, was the first theoretical treatment of film. *The Photoplay* considers cinema in terms of three distinct topics: first, the history of film (its genesis and technological developments, its initial dependence on the "stage play," and its eventual emancipation from theater); second, the psycho-sociological aspects of film; and third, the aesthetics of film.

Munsterberg's aesthetic theory asserts that art is its own context. Not the conduit for other experiences, art must submit to its own aesthetic criteria. In championing film as an aesthetic medium, Munsterberg cautioned that the function of movies is not to attempt replication of our expe-

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*For a discussion of "Belasco and the Drama of Intimate Realism," see Vardac, pp. 129–135.

riences of the natural or the theatrical world, but to utilize those spatial, temporal, and causal relationships that are unique to filmmaking.

Early filmmakers were divided on this debate between film as an offshoot of theater versus film as an independent art form. D. W. Griffith operated much more in Munsterberg's tradition by exploring, discovering, and exploiting those qualities and effects that are unique to film. In contrast, Cecil B. DeMille operated in accord with Belasco's tradition, working much more in the mainstream of cinematic representation. DeMille endowed his movies with the *theatrical* values established by Belasco: proscenium composition, pageantry, spectacle, pictorial realism, and painstakingly authentic staging details. To this day, play-based films invariably will favor one of these two major, divergent traditions.

☞ *Watch a film by Cecil B. DeMille (examples include* The Cheat *[1915],* Joan the Woman *[1917],* The Ten Commandments *[1923],* King of Kings *[1927], or* Cleopatra *[1934]). Watch the film in terms of Belasco's staging ideas: the look of the mise-en-scène as composed on a proscenium stage and the integration of pageantry, spectacle, pictorial realism, and precise, authentic staging details (props, lighting, set design, and costumes). Under these aesthetic values, the camera and the editing should be unobtrusive, with the camera inconspicuously recording the action and the editing invisibly stitching together the shots. Watch a DeMille film in terms of these camera and editing protocols.*

Watch a film by D. W. Griffith (examples include The Avenging Conscience *[1914],* The Birth of a Nation *[1915],* Intolerance *[1916],* Broken Blossoms *[1919],* Way Down East *[1920] or* Orphans of the Storm *[1921]). Watch the film in terms of Griffith's attempts to break with stage traditions, the very quality that Munsterberg's film aesthetics advocates. Look at the cinematic values in Griffith's film—the things that Griffith shows us a movie can do that the stage cannot; for example, his particular use of close-ups and mid-shots, camera movement, rhythmic editing, and the effects that film can create through lighting. For Munsterberg, film editing is a distinct and defining element of cinema's aesthetics. Editing allows a movie to shift effortlessly in time and in locale, and, in doing so, parallels the workings of the human mind, which shifts effortlessly in these same ways. Notice the particular ways in which the Griffith film that you watch is cut.*

1999 film version of

For issues that are arguably even more involved than those posed by Oscar Wilde's plays, William Shakespeare's plays present a most complex example of the particular challenges encountered in translating into film a play whose most significant trait is its use of words, a quality antithetical to the non-verbal strengths inherent to film. The task of cinematic translation is additionally complicated by Shakespeare's frequent use of blank verse, the cadences of which suffer from editing a Shakespearean play to suit the time constraints of a feature-length film. Any film translation of Shakespeare's work must, thus, negotiate carefully the preeminence of his words with the preeminently non-verbal, visual quality of film. (See Appendix B for a list of Shakespeare plays translated into film.) What is so interesting in the study of Shakespearean texts that have been reconstituted into cinematic texts, beyond the topic itself, is that such a study provides ample and excellent examples of four approaches filmmakers take in bringing the stage to the screen.

The first approach is filmed theater. Filmed theater stays as closely as possible to Shakespeare's word for word text, adhering to the play, as written. The movie's running time approximates the stage's performance time, with film-time literally replicating stage-time. Filmed-stage is the most hospitable approach to providing the complete text of a Shakespeare play on screen, since little cutting of lines from the play is required to serve the time constraints faced by a more cinematic, less stage-bound film, one that might consume screen time with expansive tracking shots of battles, lingering close-ups of characters in thought, or sweeping pans of a magical, mid-summer forest.

John Gielgud's *Hamlet* (1964), Tony Richardson's *Hamlet* (1969), Edwin Sherin's/Joseph Papp's *King Lear* (1977), and Norman Campbell's *Romeo and Juliet* (1993) are examples of filmed-theater. The overall values of filmed-theater abide in the British Broadcasting Company's productions of all thirty-seven of Shakespeare's plays.

In addition to filmed-stage, three distinct tacks have emerged in translating Shakespeare's plays into film. These three approaches are best represented by the work of Laurence Olivier, Akira Kurosawa, and Franco Zeffirelli. Each of these three adheres to significantly different concepts in rendering Shakespeare's plays into film, and each director can stand as representative of a foundational mode of translating Shakespeare to cinema. Zeffirelli employs a populist approach that is sympathetic to the Shakespeare-shy and phobic. Kurosawa engages in a radical approach that, at once, proclaims both the universality of Shakespeare's work and the non-verbal means by which cinema can translate the potency, complexity, and

camera's ability to traverse all enclosures and to reconstitute historical locale is set beside theater's capacity to activate our "imaginary forces" in order to see what lies "within the girdle of these walls."

Olivier's and Branagh's *Henry V* films make statements about the unique strengths and limitations of both theater and cinema, and they do so in a way that insists that we be aware — remain conscious and mindful — of their explorations. This quality is operative in Olivier's film translation of *Hamlet* (1948), a Freudian interpretation of Shakespeare's play and, arguably, a movie that now may seem "mannered and stylistically overdone, far too conscious of its attempt to be 'cinematic'" (Welsh, Tibbetts and Welsh, *Stage Plays into Film*, 364). The volley between theatrical and cinematic qualities also operates in Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*. Running over four hours, Branagh's *Hamlet* is the first full-text film translation of the play and one that is unusually strong in demonstrating the differences between theatrical spectacle and cinematic spectacle.

Olivier's and Branagh's films of *Henry V* and *Hamlet* engage a dialogue between theater and film — at times, a stage/screen fencing match of sorts and, at others, a *pas de deux*. These two directors, both of whom also wrote the screenplays for their films, want their audiences to think about what is occurring on the screen. The dynamic each creates between theater and cinema is presented in a manner that, to varying degrees and at various points, clearly calls attention to itself, and, in doing so, disrupts our escape into the illusion created by cinema.

We cannot be caught up in the illusion of film and be aware of it, as a film, at the same time. In contrast to Olivier's and Branagh's practice of having the film announce itself as film, making the audience mindful, at points, that they are watching a movie, Franco Zeffirelli, operating in a populist mode, aspires to have the audience members lose themselves in the film's reality and be absorbed fully in an empathic relationship with the world of the cinematic present. In his traditional film translations of Shakespeare's plays, Zeffirelli's approach aims to have the viewers be caught up and swept away in the cinematic *reality*— or the illusion of reality — of the Shakespearean worlds that he creates on screen.

The desire to regress into the cinematic illusion is, according to Jean-Louis Baudry, the desire to return to an early stage of development "in which the separation between one's own body and the exterior world is not well defined." It "artificially leads back to an anterior phase of ... development," similar to the dream state (313). With a passion, quiet, but fierce, many film-goers desire — crave — the transcendent experience cinema promises to provide. The craving is dangerous. In order to satisfy it,

we viewers are willing to give ourselves over to the "hallucinatory psychosis of desire," i.e., a state in which the illusion becomes reality (Freud, quoted in Baudry, 309). In our desire to lose ourselves fully in the illusion of cinema, we willingly invite the disappearance, the subsuming, of our own personhood.

Populist cinema, Zeffirelli's included, succeeds to the extent that we are borne away to and swept up in the reality of the movie. We escape into it; we are subsumed by it; and, for the time, the cinematic illusions, on a very deep level actually, become our only functioning reality. When someone rustles a candy wrapper or talks during the film, it ruptures our relationship to the screen, shattering the cinematic reality, and reminding us that we are, after all, really only in a movie theater. We grow annoyed by the disruption in direct proportion to the degree to which we have entered the film's reality. This simple feature, the capacity to be swept up in the cinematic illusions, is the key to the success of populist cinema—not just Zeffirelli's movies, but also Schwarzenegger, samurai, and SWAT films.

While Zeffirelli's films—his films of Shakespeare and of opera (*Pagliacci, Carmen, La Traviata*)—have origins more highly thought of, perhaps, than most action/adventure fare, the cinematic ethos that drives them is the same: the desire to make the movie's subject matter—in Zeffirelli's case, the *art*—more accessible to a popular audience, who will become fully absorbed in the experience of it. A populist film approach uses the prevailing cultural codes of its audience, i.e., those visual and verbal styles that are most readily understood. It creates strong audience identification because, regardless of its setting, the populist approach uses the dominant values, tropes, humor, manners, mannerisms, and codes of masculine and feminine beauty of the expected audience's immediate world. It is particularly appropriate that Shakespeare be translated via a populist approach, as Shakespeare, himself, was a very *à la mode* writer. When Jacobean theater was popular, he wrote *King Lear*, where Gloucester's eyes are gouged out on stage in full view of the audience; and when the masque was popular, Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*.

Zeffirelli directed three feature films of Shakespeare's plays: *The Taming of the Shrew* (1966), *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), and *Hamlet* (1990).* Each of the three films attempts the theatrical realism valued by David Belasco, as all three "present a solid and believable world of dimension and sub-

*Zeffirelli also co-directed with Alan Cooke a U.K. television production of Much Ado About Nothing (1967).

stance" (Vela in Welsh, Vela, Tibbetts, *Shakespeare*, 81). Also in keeping with Belasco's tradition, each of Zeffirelli's Shakespeare films incorporates pageantry, spectacle, pictorial realism, and painstakingly authentic staging details. Consistent with a populist mode of representation, each of the screenplays makes cuts to Shakespeare's text that reduce complications of character and story. Thus, Zeffirelli's *The Taming of the Shrew* fully dispenses with the Christopher Sly "Induction"; *Romeo and Juliet* omits Romeo's crucial scenes with the Apothecary and with Paris at the Capulets' crypt; and *Hamlet* cuts the play's entire first scene and much of the second, omits Hamlet's fourth soliloquy, while, overall, "transposing lines capriciously and removing whole scenes that are necessary for contextualizing the action" (Welsh and Vela, Welsh, Vela, Tibbetts, *Shakespeare*, 23).

Zeffirelli's three Shakespeare films, beautifully photographed and staged, are important in their ability to make Shakespeare accessible, even popular, with a mass audience. Much of the films' popularity had to do with casting decisions. In determining what actors would appear in the feature roles two guiding principles prevailed: current codes of masculine and feminine beauty and box-office draw. Thus, *The Taming of the Shrew* featured Hollywood's most amorous and bawdy married couple, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, as Shakespeare's own amorous and bawdy, real-life married couple. *Romeo and Juliet* cast, as the young star-crossed lovers, actors Olivia Hussey, then sixteen years old, as Juliet, and Leonard Whiting, then seventeen, as Romeo, both of whom were actors closer in age to Shakespeare's characters than any previous movie had dared attempt and who figured on the screen as icons of teenage beauty. *Hamlet* featured action/adventure Aussie superstar Mel Gibson, cast, interestingly against type, as Shakespeare's pendulously tentative Danish prince.

Each of these three Shakespearean plays that Zeffirelli made into a populist film can also be seen in one additional populist film translation: *Hamlet* (2000, dir. Michael Almereyda); *Romeo and Juliet* as *Panic Button* (1964, dir. George Sherman), and *The Taming of the Shrew* as the film *10 Things I Hate about You* (1999, dir. Gil Junger).

A teen-movie variation on *The Taming of the Shrew*, *10 Things I Hate about You* is overlaid with 1990s frankness and 1980s New Wave music. Set at Padua High School, *10 Things* depicts Kat Stafford (Julia Stiles), Shakespeare's fiery Katharina, in terms of an outsider who reads Sylvia Plath, listens to Joan Jett, gets drunk, and vomits on Patrick (Heath Ledger), the Petruchio character, rendered, in this version, as little else than a cool, naughty teenage hunk. The two find love at the senior prom;

Kat articulates what she has learned in a sonnet, written for English class; and, hearing that, we are left craving any part of Shakespeare's verse or human understanding.

Panic Button turns the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* into a comedy as two unemployed and talent-challenged film stars are persuaded by mobsters to make a movie of *Romeo and Juliet*, though, unbeknownst to them, the mobsters expect it to be so badly made as to be a sure flop. (The movie must lose money for income tax purposes.) Instead, their outlandish *Romeo and Juliet* is a huge success, winning the prestigious Venice Film award. The over-the-top performances of Maurice Chevalier as Phillippe Fontaine/Romeo, Jane Mansfield as Louise Harris/Juliet, and Michael Connors as the producer, Frank Pagano, add to the good-natured, if un–Shakespearean, ludicrous charm of the film. *Panic Button* is the forerunner to Mel Brooks's *The Producers*, a work which, rather than moving from stage to screen, moved in reverse: from screen (1968) to Broadway stage (April 2001).

Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* casts Ethan Hawke as Shakespeare's prince in a film that runs only 114 minutes (compared to Olivier's *Hamlet* at 158 minutes and Branagh's full-text *Hamlet* at over four hours). Retaining some, but editing out much of Shakespeare's text, the movie is set in contemporary New York City, with King Claudius as the CEO of "The Denmark Corporation," and Hamlet intoning "To be or not to be" at a Blockbuster video store, where his speech of indecision is recited in the action/adventure section of the store, a gratuitous sight gag that works.

Very different from the populist approach that characterizes Zeffirelli's Shakespeare films and from the stage/screen dialogics that characterizes Olivier's and Branagh's work, Akira Kurosawa engages a radical translation mode in his films of Shakespeare's works. Kurosawa has directed three film versions of Shakespearean plays: *Throne of Blood* (1957) from *Macbeth*, *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960) from *Hamlet*, and *Ran* (1985) from *King Lear*.

Case Study: King Lear *and* Ran

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* can stand, self-sufficiently, as paradigms of their particular forms, with each of the two work, respectively, creating enduringly powerful — complex, beau-