The story which you are about to hear has been told before.
A lot.
And now we are going to tell it again.
But different.
Unfortunately, before we begin, there is a long, boring Prologue, which I will read to you now.

The history of Shakespeare on screen in the United Kingdom is a long and complex one, stretching from the earliest known Shakespeare film – Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s 1899 King John – to the spectacular, cinematically literate 2011 Coriolanus by Ralph Fiennes. British cinema has kick-started major movements in Shakespeare’s screen treatment, from the Technicolor epics of Laurence Olivier in the 1940s-1950s to Kenneth Branagh’s instigation of the 1990s “New Wave” (in Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe’s term), both phases beginning with that most overtly patriotic of plays, Henry V. The only Shakespeare film to take away the Best Picture Academy Award to date remains Olivier’s 1948 Hamlet, and Shakespeare films produced in Europe and the United States regularly still utilise British creative talent in key roles. Lynda Boose and Richard Burt note that “Shakespeare and the English literary tradition have long been a rallying point of national superiority” in British cultural life and that Shakespeare continues to act as “a signifier for British cultural superiority” at the expense of America’s hallmarks of a “colonized consciousness” (Boose and Burt 1997: 12, 13). So why, then, does UK Shakespeare film itself seem so anxious?

In 2011, Kelly Asbury’s irreverent Gnomeo and Juliet, the first feature-length Shakespeare-based animation to be produced in the UK, posed a series of questions about the medium’s negotiation with Shakespeare that are revealing of broader and more serious concerns within UK Shakespeare film. The film begins with the image of a traditional proscenium arch stage, complete with footlights and red curtain, with the sound of an audience murmuring and an orchestra tuning in the background. When a po-faced garden gnome wearing an Elizabethan ruff emerges onto the
stage and barks the opening words that form this chapter’s epigraph, the film addresses comically a serious set of anxieties over (1) the over-familiarity of a narrative; (2) the pressure to find a new spin on source material; and (3) the pressure to be faithful to a text that even filmmakers may find “boring”. Asbury projects the effect of these anxieties onto an audience who are heard shushing one another vigorously, preparing for the collaborative performance of appreciating Shakespeare’s text, and the film’s original cinematic presentation in 3-D extends the shot implicitly to include the cinema audience in this activity. Yet as the gnome begins to recite the Prologue to Romeo and Juliet from an impossibly long scroll, there appears that most theatrical of interlopers, the stage hook. The hook repeatedly approaches the gnome, only to retreat when confronted by the intended victim’s hard stare. Having aligned the cinema audience with the overheard spectators, shushing each other in order to behave as they know they should, the audience is now encouraged to identify with the Rabelaisian stage hook that promises tantalisingly to end the tedium of the recited monologue. The gnome is finally defeated, unexpectedly, by the sudden opening of the stage trapdoor and the disappearance of both narrator and scroll from sight, at which point the camera zooms through the proscenium arch and into a colourful outdoor setting with the recognisably altered title Gnomeo and Juliet plastered across the sky and Elton John’s Crocodile Rock replacing the orchestral fanfare.

Gnomeo and Juliet may not be mainstream Shakespeare, but its introductory moments intervene explicitly in a conflict that saturates UK Shakespeare film: the anxiety over fidelity, characterised by a grand theatrical tradition, versus adaptation, the cinematic literacy exemplified by the conventions of Hollywood. The British tradition of filmed Shakespeare is torn between a desire to capture the perceived authenticity of the British stage and the simultaneous desire to entertain a broader audience, leading to the blurring of Jack Jorgens’s categories of “theatrical,” “realist” and “filmic” modes (Jorgens 1977: 7). While Jorgens’s influential typology offers broad categories, it is my contention here that the trend in UK Shakespeare film has consistently been to engage with the theatrical, whether through the selection of plays filmed and talent recruited, or through cinematic techniques such as tracking shots, direct address and disruption of mainstream cinematic realism.
that attempt to evoke the “liveness” associated with the theatrical event in a way that Philip Auslander argues prompts “resistance to the market and the media, the dominant culture they represent, and the regime of cultural production that supports them” (Auslander 1999: 7). That is to say, UK Shakespeare film often carries with it a fundamental anxiety about its own medium in relation to the perceived value of the live performance. Yet as the following survey of UK Shakespeare film shows, this anxiety is frequently productive and challenging rather than restrictive, making explicit the negotiation of medium and content.

The Stage Tradition on Film

In *King John* (1899) Herbert Beerbohm Tree, in the title role, sits centre-stage in a large throne and appears to reach out imploringly to the camera. The camera is positioned as if in the centre stalls at Her Majesty’s Theatre, meaning that the first Victorian viewers of a Shakespeare film are asked to imagine themselves as remote theatrical spectators in the best seat in the house, enjoying a simulated live relationship with the greatest stage actor of the day. The cinema’s dependence on the theatre for authenticity at this point is understandable but, as Judith Buchanan argues, this dependence was an explicit part of the film’s strategy.

The film was far too short to have been intended as a presentation whose meaning was autonomously self-contained: its purpose was not so much to tell a story as to allude to one and thus advertise where it was being told. (Buchanan 2009: 68)

The 1899 *King John* comprised three scenes, though only one (the death scene) is extant. This early film makes no concession towards the “realist” or “filmic,” instead reproducing extracts of Tree’s own stage production with minimal intervention, as celebrated in the title used for American distribution: “Beerbohm Tree, the Great English Actor taken with all the scenery and effects of the original production.” Through this title, Buchanan argues,
The film was thus marketed as being able to offer all that the stage production had done. In feting Tree, the film’s title also claimed some of the accumulated theatrical glory of the actor and production for itself. (Buchanan 2009: 69)

The extracts chosen, as with Frank Benson’s 1911 Richard III, are more appropriately considered illustrative than fragmentary. Benson’s film, shot in the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, incorporates a range of scenes including two extracts drawn from Henry VI Part 3 and highlights from the remainder of his stage production, including the lavish sets and large casts that fill out the public scene of Anne’s wooing, Richard’s own coronation and the battle on Bosworth Field (cut short in the extant footage). Benson’s film exemplifies the thinking behind the preservation of these stage productions, providing what Samuel Taylor Coleridge described, in relation to the acting of Edmund Kean, as “flashes of lightning” which illustrate speeded-up moments of the actor-manager’s energy and, crucially, depend on the audience’s prior knowledge of the play to make sense of what is visualised (Nagler 1952: 453).

While these productions may jar with contemporary expectations of what cinema can offer, their core principles align with those of the live broadcasts of theatrical productions that currently dominate UK Shakespeare cinema. As with Tree and Benson’s productions, broadcasting projects such as NT Live and Live From Stratford-upon-Avon prioritise mainstream UK theatrical institutions (the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company) and star actors (Tom Hiddleston, Kenneth Branagh, David Tennant) and, most significantly, ensure that “cameras are carefully positioned throughout the auditorium to ensure that cinema audiences get the ‘best seat in the house’ view of each production” (NT Live). The premise is of course false as, in these projects, the use of multiple cameras, overhead angles, on-stage viewpoints and extreme close-up as part of their cinematic vocabulary means that very few shots represent the perspective from any seat, whereas Tree and Benson’s productions indeed approximate a single, expensive seat. Yet even the silent films legitimise their mixed-media product with the implication that the cinematic spectator is privileged.
as well as disadvantaged by distance. Tree’s production speeds through the action, while Benson goes further in shaping a unique experience for cinema viewers. A new scene is inserted for the film version featuring the immediate aftermath of the murder of the princes, and the ghosts who appear to Richard before the final battle cross-fade into one another, creating a ghostly spectacle unavailable in the theatre. These films are not typical of all UK Shakespeare films in the period, with others such as Percy Stow’s 1908 film of The Tempest, which had no origin in stage production, going much further with their playful special effects: jump cuts allowing a child-like Ariel to appear and disappear at will; a character turned into a monkey; a storm superimposed onto a viewpoint from Prospero’s cave). Yet even this film pays tribute to Victorian stage spectacles, bringing on the bow of a ship from behind clearly two-dimensional theatrical wings for the final scene. It is of great interest that, as cinematic Shakespeare in the twenty-first century begins to draw overwhelmingly on live theatrical productions, it is returning to the synthetic idea pioneered at the dawn of Shakespearean cinema of mediating access to an authentic, theatrical event while adding cinematic value.

Stephen Purcell argues that contemporary live broadcasts involve the theatre “position[ing] its home theatre as an international centre of high culture, inviting its spectators to ‘be there’ culturally while emphasising their physical and geographical distance” (Purcell 2014: 215), a strategy that similarly articulates the role of the early silent British films. The dependence of British Shakespeare film on theatrical authority may be most transparent at the extreme ends of the period, but persists in the figures who stand for British Shakespeare film in between. For much of the early twentieth century cinematic Shakespeare was dominated by American star vehicles, from Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford (The Taming of the Shrew, 1929), to Orson Welles’s independent films, to lavish Hollywood productions such as Julius Caesar (1953) and The Taming of the Shrew (1967). By contrast, the Shakespeare films produced in the UK during this period were centred overwhelmingly on one figure – Laurence Olivier. Olivier’s quick succession of Shakespeare films – Henry V (1944), Hamlet (1948) and Richard III (1955) – developed a new and distinctive vocabulary for UK Shakespeare film rooted in Olivier’s own theatrical prestige.
Henry V wears its claims to authenticity brazenly in its actual title, *The Chronicle History of King Henry the Fift with His Battell Fought at Agincourt in France*, taken from the 1600 quarto and depicted on screen as a playbill that shares typeface and colouring with the film’s own titlecard “A Laurence Olivier Production.” The camera then pans across a model of late sixteenth-century London, a choir singing to a swelling orchestral score as the camera draws close to the Globe. The following twenty-five minutes of the film dramatise an afternoon at the theatre. Olivier’s recreation is full of lively variety, capturing the performance and its audience from a range of angles, including shots within the tiring house of Olivier (playing Burbage playing Henry) and his fellow players dressing for the scene, suggesting that this is a backstage drama about putting on *Henry V*. Key to Olivier’s project here is the compliment paid to the theatrical audience, taking in all strata of society. The film prioritises their reactions and transfers their making of meaning to the film spectator. This strategy is most clear when the Archbishop of Canterbury notes that: “Sir John Falstaff and all his company along with him be banished on pain of death not to come near his person by ten miles,” creating new lines adapted from Henry’s own rejection speech in *2 Henry IV*. The Globe audience roar with approval at Falstaff’s name and boo at the news of his rejection, showing their prior familiarity with Shakespeare’s plays and beginning a period of heckling that continues through Act 1 Scene 2. The ephemerality of the theatrical moment is emphasised not only through the audience’s responses but through the bumbling of the actor playing Ely, who forgets props and loses his hat; the onset of rain; and such small details as Olivier/Burbage taking a moment to clear his throat and compose himself before assuming the role of Henry. Throughout, the theatre audience’s reactions are privileged as part of Olivier’s mise-en-scène; the play is being performed for the theatre audience, who in turn demonstrate appropriate reaction to the cinema audience. While Suzanne Greenhalgh notes of the NT Live screenings that “[t]he magnified effect of the theater audience’s responses and other ambient noise, broadcast in Dolby surround sound, can be too insistent” (Greenhalgh 2014: 259), here Olivier exploits that ambient noise to condition the (implicitly) less capable cinema audience.
As Olivier’s film progresses, Olivier gradually seems to consider the cinematic audience sufficiently inducted. An early acknowledgment of the film audience comes as Leslie Banks’s Chorus steps towards the camera during the prologue and addresses “On your imaginary forces work” (18) directly to the camera, offering a challenge to the cinematic audience. Following 2.1 the film shifts to a partially realised representation of the docks at Southampton, after which, during a cross-fade to the fully realised Boar’s Head Tavern for 2.3, the Chorus (now in voiceover) intones “Still be kind/And eke out our performance with your mind” (3.0.34-5). The film enacts an induction of the cinema audience into Shakespeare via the theatre, only making the transition to a fully cinematic register once the Chorus appears deems the audience is ready. This theatrical direct engagement between film character and cinema audience is much more thoroughly explored in UK Shakespeare film than in its American equivalents, in which actors tend rather to project soliloquy inwards rather than disrupting the fictional frame. Olivier’s role in establishing the direct-to-camera address as a feature of UK Shakespeare film should not be underestimated, characterising as it does his own Richard III. While Richard III was first broadcast on American television before being released in cinemas, it is both the most spectacular and the most intimate of his Shakespeare films. From its introduction to Richard, the camera positioned behind his head while Edward’s crown appears to descend onto him, the film utilises the frame in a distinctly cinematic way. Yet Richard immediately turns and confronts the camera directly, choosing to prioritise direct connection with the cinema audience.

Richard III’s cinematic history is distinctively British, with no major successful films of the play being produced elsewhere. In addition to the films by Benson, Olivier and Richard Loncraine (1995), the play has been influential through its appropriation by Andrew Davies in the television series House of Cards (1990-1995) which places the Richard figure (Francis Urquhart) at the heart of the contemporary British political establishment. It is, I suggest, Richard III’s overt theatricality that appeals to the UK Shakespeare film industry, disrupting the conventions of realist cinema via the theatrical motif of direct address and collusion with spectators in “a personal address to the camera
[that] was perceived by film reviewers at the time as a brilliant revival of a technique long considered *declassé*" (Freedman 2000: 59). In Olivier’s film, Roger Furse’s labyrinthine set positions Richard at the centre of an interconnecting network of corridors, antechambers, prospects and peepholes. The camera tracks with Richard as he paces around the single palace set, emerging briefly onto the street to give a sense of the scale of the set before returning inside as Richard shuts the doors and proceeds to establish his dominance of the space. Olivier’s direction ensures a minimum of cuts, reinforcing the continuous nature of the set and allowing his own performance to develop uninterrupted before an unblinking and apparently complicit camera. The closeness of the set creates claustrophobia; Anne can be seen passing the window with the funeral procession and the camera accompanies Richard as he takes a short cut to intercept it. As with *Henry V*, Olivier uses the theatricality of early scenes to induct cinema audiences into an experiential mode before opening out the film, culminating in the battle scenes which, while small-scale by modern standards, achieve their impact through contrast with the artificial theatrical set of the opening. As Saskia Kossak argues, “Olivier clearly seeks to adapt the medium to his stage-bound acting style . . . Keeping a comparatively long distance to the camera allows Olivier to act more broadly than you usually would on film” (Kossak 2005: 254). Olivier, in establishing a new language for the transmission of Shakespeare on screen, uses the combination of direct address and tracking shots to preserve a theatrical performance reimagined for the screen. His presence, particularly as Richard III, has cast a long shadow.

**Arthouse against the Institution**

In ostensibly offering to try to commit to screen for the first time a major American film of *Richard III*, movie star Al Pacino articulates explicitly in *Looking for Richard* (1996) an anxiety over UK theatrical dominance. The rehearsal extracts he chooses are shot cinematically, prioritising the close-up of the celebrity actor. Yet within the film, Pacino’s collaborators repeatedly articulate their
work in response to a range of anxieties cast as theatrical/cinematic, scholarly/artistic and, implicitly, British/American. The film’s most consciously comic moment comes as Pacino’s friend Frederic Kimball rails against Pacino’s suggestion that they ask a scholar to explain Anne’s motivation to the camera, arguing that actors are “possessors of a tradition, the proud inheritors of the understanding of Shakespeare” and that Pacino “know[s] more about Richard III than any fucking scholar.” Pacino jokingly calms Kimball, forcing him to admit that a scholar has just as much of a right to an opinion, but Kimball reiterates his complaint about the scholar’s right to a direct-to-camera address, which he sees as privileging the position. The film cuts then to the hapless (in this context) Emrys Jones, a stereotypically English, elderly, white, middle-class, Oxbridge professor sitting in his study, who muses “I don’t really know why” while Kimball glowers.

This mockery of fusty English academia as opposed to the spontaneous, emotional and dynamic performance of the American film actor is a comic opposition, and the film regularly stages moments that appear to praise the spontaneous. As Thomas Cartelli argues, the use of an anonymous panhandler’s elicited comment “If we felt what we said, we’d say less and mean more” suggests that “the antidote to this dissociation of sensibility is waiting in the humble confines of the American street where passion may still be said to speak,” which Pacino translates into “an esthetic that shows off the power of American acting’s preference for gesture over word, the body over the head, and of film’s capacity to deliver, in howsoever stylized a way, the pressure and fullness of experience” (Cartelli 2003: 191, 193). Yet Pacino’s account of American ownership of the text is undercut throughout by his desire for British approval. Pacino visits both Shakespeare’s Globe and Shakespeare’s Birthplace and, although both encounters are gently belittled, the felt need of Pacino to connect physically to the British tradition is telling. Interviews with Peter Brook, Derek Jacobi, Vanessa Redgrave, Kenneth Branagh and John Gielgud speak to his desire to establish the legitimacy of his project in the eyes of actors and directors who epitomise the greatest theatrical practice yet can reassure him that natural American cadences suit iambic pentameter.
Gielgud is particularly privileged in Pacino’s framing of his interview, and Gielgud perhaps comes to embody the cultural capital of British/theatrical/institutional legacy. Between Olivier’s *Richard III* and Branagh’s 1989 *Henry V*, the key Shakespeare films produced in the UK were generally aligned with an arthouse ideology that prioritised the technology of filmmaking, deprioritised the role of the star actor (while still employing said stars) and established a counter-Hollywood ethos. For Peter Greenaway, coming towards the end of this period of more experimental Shakespearean film, the countercultural ethos is manifest in the recruitment of Gielgud for a project that appropriated his theatrical weight for a very different project. *Prospero’s Books* (1991) echoes the nightmarish visions of mindless consumption that characterise its companion film *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1989). As Pascale Aebischer shows, Greenaway juxtaposes the “appreciation of art and culture” with “the consumption of food and books” (Aebischer 2013: 73). *The Cook…* dwelling on Michael Gambon’s oafish Thief cackling while shovelling fine cuisine into his mouth, embodying Greenaway’s pleas for the value of art against the Hollywood conveyer belt of mass entertainment. *Prospero’s Books* follows *The Cook…* by replicating its distinctive combination of complex mise-en-scène with camera panning seamlessly through long horizontal spaces, and situates Gielgud’s Prospero in an Aladdin’s Cave museum of fine art. Classical statues, Renaissance paintings and manuals, agile dancers and a seemingly endless cast of naked attendants overwhelm the camera. The excesses of Prospero’s “island” echo the Thief’s mindless consumption, Prospero surrounding himself with such a quantity of fine things that no single one can be appreciated. Prospero’s hubristic excess is further emphasised by him speaking all the lines of the play until he dons his Milanese robes.

Greenaway’s project here is invites many interpretations, but I see him articulating the same anxieties over the theatrical that characterise UK Shakespeare film. Greenaway shares scepticism over the easiness of reproducing cultural objects which he extends to the reproduction of the human subject:
There is a way in which we have increased the banality in proportion to the accuracy with which man actually finds a picture of himself. Because after all, a photocopy is supposedly an exact reproduction of the original that you put into a machine. But all these things fail, all these attempts to continue man in sort of an artistic sense or a search for immortality, and the film ends with the cry of a child. (Rodgers and Greenaway 1991-2: 18)

Greenaway searches for the unique human subject amid the proliferation of mechanical reproductions, matching his own stance as an auteur opposed to the Hollywood mainstream. Hollywood offered comment on this on its own terms in John McTiernan’s underrated Last Action Hero (1993), which showed an American teenager bored by Olivier’s Hamlet fantasise his own version in which Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Prince lobs grenades, smokes cigars, clears out Claudius’s guards with a machine gun and finally blows up Elsinore itself in a parody of the blockbusterisation of Shakespeare for mass consumption. Greenaway, by contrast, builds a world rooted around a single set that, like Olivier’s Richard III, relies heavily on tracking shots to join together a space that functions theatrically and allows actors to develop their performance at length. The complex mise-en-scène invites the culturally educated spectator to identify the unique books, artworks, musical allusions and visual quotations that permeate the film, engaging the viewer in Anne Ubersfeld’s pleasure of “bricolage,” “the specifically theatrical pleasure of doing ‘his own thing’ with the elements offered to him” (Ubersfeld 1982: 131). That Ubersfeld identifies this pleasure as specifically theatrical is telling; Greenaway’s project invites a theatrical mode of reception. Shakespeare’s text, delivered by a Shakespearean theatrical legend, is celebrated in this context as a piece of high art itself, the First Folio fetishised as the last of Prospero’s books. And yet, the text is also buried under the film’s conspicuous consumption. Gielgud’s own status is contested within the film: Prospero is exposed (even literally, although not explicitly) and flattened by the film’s framing of him as a component in a wider mise-en-scène, suggesting that he is as much of an exhibit in this curated collection as any of his curios. Prospero is often flanked by theatrical curtains, and his study is set up as a portable, self-contained stage within a large exhibition hall. His most theatrical moment occurs...
following the betrothal masque: Prospero walks towards the camera and allows a curtain to close behind him, cutting him off from everyone else as he tells the camera “These are all shadows.” Greenaway’s film is aligned with Prospero’s theatre, and the distinctively British direct address indicates where authenticity truly lies.

*Prospero’s Books* makes explicit the challenging of the theatrical that emerges more obliquely in earlier films. The first major UK Shakespeare film following Olivier to retain Shakespeare’s text was Peter Brook’s *King Lear* (1971), which saw Brook reunite with Paul Schofield and other actors from his 1962 RSC production. Yet the theatrical provenance of the production belies the fact that it is, as Yvonne Griggs argues, an arthouse, “counter-cinematic” film, again highlighting the British filmmaker’s use of direct-to-camera address “not as a means of giving us insight into the minds of characters . . . but as a way of breaking the narrative surface to remind us that what we are watching is a construction of reality” (Griggs 2009: 50). The film foregrounds a tension between Schofield’s towering performance and the film’s framing of that performance. Schofield appears out of focus, lit by flashes of light, wobbling out of a frame that will not rest on him. He embodies theatrical authority, yet Brook’s camera (unlike Olivier’s) is reluctant to look directly at that authority. Such actorly moments as Lear’s evocation of the storm relegate Lear to a distant figure seen through a foggy long shot or place him prostrate on the floor, intercut with the Fool’s face and flashes of lightning. Brook’s editing fragments the performance; Lear’s railing against the storm is deliberately discontinuous, the actor changing position in each shot to suggest the speech has been jumbled up and resequenced for the film rather than emerging organically from the environment.

The burying of theatrical performance under fragmentary editing to disrupt cinematic realism is repeated elsewhere. Basil Dearden’s *All Night Long* (1962), an appropriation of *Othello*, takes place over a single night in a London jazz club where drummer Johnny Cousins, the Iago figure (Patrick McGoohan), casts doubt in the mind of Paul Harris’s trumpeter Aurelius Rex about the
faithfulness of his wife. While the film is conceived primarily as a vehicle for some of the finest
British jazz musicians of the day, Dearden combines “dizzying crane and tracking shots and a strong
jazz score from John Dankworth, Dave Brubeck and others who appear as themselves,
‘authenticating’ Shakespeare” (Howard 2000: 304). Authenticity is drawn, in Tony Howard’s view,
from the presence of real jazz musicians, but the jazz is extended into the frenetic camerawork and
editing that, in one key sequence, superimposes the faces of Aurelius and Marti Stevens’s Delia over
the insidious, inescapable drumming of Cousins. Similarly appropriative of live performance energies
within a filmic mode is Derek Jarman’s *The Tempest* (1979), which queers Shakespeare’s play
through its flamboyant camp and overt sexuality. Sycorax (Claire Davenport) is viewed in flashback
leading Ariel about by a chain and breastfeeding her adult son, and her make-up aligns her with the
contemporary drag queen Divine who also inspired the Sycorax figure Ursula in Disney’s 1989 *The
Little Mermaid*. Caliban is played by Jack Birkett, “The Incredible Orlando,” a blind dancer, mime and
drag artist who would later play Thersites in drag in the BBC’s *Troilus and Cressida* (1981). The film’s
amalgamation of performance art, camp and musical theatre, including Elisabeth Welch’s
performance of “Stormy Weather” as the masque, attacks Shakespeare’s cultural iconicity alongside
mainstream sexual politics in what Aebischer describes as a “celebration of historical and cultural
diversity” (Aebischer 2013: 26). The heterosexual union of Miranda and Ferdinand is destabilised by
the camp parody of the masque and the concurrent antipathy towards Heathcote Williams’s
“frighteningly out of control Prospero” (Hopkins 2008: 93) suggests that this film, like *Prospero’s
Books*, uses its visible theatrical artifice to undermine and expose dominant power structures.

**The Cinematic Tradition and New Wave**

It was not until the end of the twentieth century that UK Shakespeare film began systematically to
engage with a more conventionally “realist” mode of presentation; and even then, the films of the
New Wave often had their roots in theatrical productions. Kenneth Branagh’s 1989 *Henry V* followed
his appearance in the role only five years earlier in Adrian Noble’s RSC production; Richard Loncraine’s 1995 *Richard III* was based on Richard Eyre’s 1990-1992 National Theatre production; and Ralph Fiennes’s 2011 *Coriolanus* revisited a role he had played in 2000. The lines between film and theatre are further confused by increasingly sophisticated television adaptations of major RSC and National Theatre productions and, as discussed earlier, the new trend for global live broadcasts of British theatrical productions. Yet even the more mainstream cinematic tradition inaugurated by Branagh’s *Henry V* continues to negotiate the theatrical in its choices of film, casting and continued exploitation of theatrical conventions.

Branagh’s *Henry V* begins with a tribute to Olivier’s 1944 film, evoking the theatricality of Olivier’s opening by introducing Derek Jacobi’s Chorus moving through an empty soundstage through the lights, props and costumes of a major film set while speaking directly to the camera. The direct address so exploited within UK Shakespearean film here allows Jacobi to play to his strengths as a stage actor while enabling the transition to the realist environment that follows. Branagh’s *Henry V* is a more obviously cinematic film in its use of special effects and explosions, its evocative score by Patrick Doyle, its large-scale battle sequence and its frequent use of close-up, but it also draws on the theatrical, as when a tracking shot follows Branagh carrying the body of Christian Bale’s Boy through the devastating aftermath of Agincourt. The liveness of the durational shot within a cinematic milieu references Olivier’s work, particularly *Richard III*, and serves to announce the New Wave as a more sophisticated marrying of theatrical authority and cinematic loquacity, with emphasis on the latter.

Olivier’s second film was *Hamlet* (1948), discussion of which I have deferred to here because of its distinctiveness from Olivier’s other films. *Hamlet*’s Freudian roots lead to a more overtly cinematic strategy, particularly in the deployment of voice-over for soliloquies and the prioritisation of close-ups. As Samuel Crowl puts it, “Olivier effectively mels a theatrical convention (the soliloquy) with a film convention (the voice-over) to provide a novel touch of psychological realism
to Hamlet’s emotional turmoil” (Crowl 2014: 46), and the marrying of psychological to filmic realism pre-empts the work of the New Wave. The film, set within an authentically coastal Elsinore, sees its title character in naturalistic terms, not as a creature of the theatre but as a product of his multiple environments, the Freudian influence of his parents reflected in the Darwinian pressure of his surroundings as Elsinore’s steep stairwells and claustrophobic hallways frame an introspective, tortured hero who the camera probes in careful, intrusive close-up. It is apposite that this film, the one that most effectively breaks with theatrical logic, remains the only Shakespeare adaptation to win a Best Picture Academy Award. Branagh’s response to Olivier was to strive for a different kind of authenticity by producing his “uncut” Hamlet (1996). Ignoring the new textual theories of the 1980s and 1990s that preferred to see variant texts as discrete plays, Branagh’s conflated Hamlet was in fact both heavily cut and heavily adulterated. The resultant four-hour film hearkened back to an earlier period of epic cinema while also implying theatrical heritage with the inclusion of an intermission, cinema’s equivalent of the interval. Branagh sustained audience interest (and, presumably, assuaged financiers’ anxieties) through the employment of an all-star cast of British theatrical legends, American film stars and idiosyncratic inclusions such as Ken Dodd as Yorick in flashbacks (flashbacks being another uniquely un-Shakespearean feature of many New Wave films, though one shared by UK and US cinema). Yet the crushing failure at the box office of the film ($5 million gross against a budget of $18 million) points to a lack of cohesion with contemporary box office practices; this film, of course, was released in the same year as Baz Lurhmann’s snappily edited, Hollywood-friendly and pop culture-referencing William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet.

It is notable that Branagh’s most significant critical failure is the film that paid explicit tribute to American cinema, his Love’s Labour’s Lost (2000) which drew on Busby Berkeley and MGM musicals to create a loving homage to musical cinema. This is also the most explicitly theatrical of Branagh’s films, concluding with a full-scale song and dance sequence and filled throughout with sequences that break the realist conventions of cinema, though failing to maintain a balance and, crucially, leaving his actors stranded in an empty space without an adequate on-screen audience to
respond. However, Branagh's *As You Like It* (2006) brings his Shakespeare film output to date full circle. While the film itself adheres strictly to conventions of realist cinema with its setting in nineteenth-century Japan and its use of lush external settings, Rosalind (Bryce Dallas Howard) delivers an epilogue that recalls Jacobi's prologue to *Henry V*. The actor/character moves out of the forest scene and into the trailer park of a location shoot, tracked by a handheld camera as she moves past film equipment and relaxing actors until she arrives at her trailer. This tracking shot, again breaking out of the cinematic frame and drawing attention to the artifice of the cinematic construction, bookends Branagh's Shakespeare film output with explicit references to the theatrical and the artificial that continue to negotiate the anxiety over the filmic realisation of the theatrical Shakespeare.

Richard Loncraine's 1995 *Richard III* takes the metacinematic device further, exploiting it throughout a film in which, as in Olivier's version, Richard builds sustained rapport with the camera. Here, influenced by *House of Cards*, the camera is less explicitly implicated in events. Whereas Olivier beckons the camera to follow him around the space, McKellen rather nods to it, as when he first notices it lurking in the corner of a bathroom while he urinates, or casts it sideways glances while telling transparent lies to characters within the fictional world. The theatricality of McKellen's direct address allows the film to switch genres entirely. As Richard walks away from the morgue in which he has just wooed Anne, the camera follows and Richard begins laughing, shouting and congratulating himself to a jaunty jazz score, even clicking his heels in time to the music. Richard slips in and out of the film's diegesis; he acknowledges and interacts with the injured soldiers and civilians in the hospital corridors, who remain unaware of his dialogue with the cinema audience. This theatrical disruption of diegesis allows the film to adopt, as Douglas Lanier argues, a primarily parodic tone which is seemingly bequeathed to Dominic West's Richmond who, following the plummet of Richard towards his death at the film's climax, turns and smiles at the camera, seemingly taking over Richard's theatrical privilege (Lanier 2006: 184-5).
Loncraine's *Richard III* dramatises a peculiarly British milieu, drawing on 1930s wartime propaganda in general but also making specific references to Wallis Simpson in the antipathy towards the King’s new American wife and Oswald Mosely in the rise of Richard’s black-shirted fascism. Even a rainy seaside getaway outside Brighton Pavilion for King Edward’s final moments suggests what James Loehlin identifies as “a parody of a heritage costume drama” (Loehlin 2003: 177). Until this point UK Shakespearean cinema had been almost entirely period-set; from Benson to Olivier to Brook (with the notable exception of Jarman), the mise-en-scène of the film had evoked a sense of history, finding authenticity in the creation of a historical setting. With the 1990s came a freer approach to setting. Loncraine's choice of a parallel World War II setting was preceded by Christine Edzard's low-budget 1992 resituation of *As You Like It* in an anonymous urban wasteland, doubling Orlando and Olivier (a uniquely filmic privilege) and critiquing British social policy, a tack followed in Penny Woolcock's 1997 made-for-television *Macbeth on the Estate* and more obliquely in Don Boyd's 2000 riff on *King Lear, My Kingdom*. Trevor Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* (1996) also adopted an anachronistic British setting, set in a confused combination of “an *Upstairs, Downstairs-*like 1890s” and “uniforms derive[ing] from somewhere around the 1840s . . . leav[ing] us unsure about the future of British colonial ascendancy” (Eggert 2003: 85). Katherine Eggert reads the film’s presentation of Ben Kingsley’s Feste as an imposition of colonial, theatrical minstrelsy on an upper-class, colonial idea of the empire, but raises questions about British colonialism pertinent to other films of this period. Branagh’s popular *Much Ado About Nothing* has a lush Sicilian setting but an outdoor romantic aesthetic reminiscent of an Austen novel, while his *As You Like It* imagined the moment of English traders “creating private mini-empires” in Japan in the late nineteenth century. His *Hamlet*, like Loncraine's *Richard III*, made use of iconic British landmarks in dislocated settings – Blenheim Palace as Elsinore, where Loncraine used Battersea Power Station, the Tate Modern, Senate House and more to represent various other London buildings – to ensure that even in the updated setting, spectators still encountered and reinterpreted visual symbols of Britishness in their engagement with the text. This movement was concurrent in the UK and US, but indicative in the
British context of an increased confidence. What was normal stage practice – updating a setting to provide fresh insight on the Shakespearean text – was now being integrated with cinematic convention to create a unique product, a film that wore its theatrical heritage on its sleeve but participated in the mainstream vocabulary of popular cinema. It also instigated an important shift from literalism of setting and period for which, perhaps unfairly, Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* has taken most of the praise/blame. *Richard III*, released the year before Luhrmann’s film, is packed with cinematic references, from the knife that emerges from Rivers’s stomach in a shot borrowed from *Alien* to the viewed-from-above final plummet of Richard to a fiery grave that calls to mind the fall of Hans Gruber at the end of *Die Hard*. British film from the mid-1990s was keen to show that it could participate in, and parody, a Hollywood filmic vocabulary.

This participation in contemporary cinematic language has been seen most recently in Ralph Fiennes’s film of *Coriolanus*. One of the very few Shakespeare plays with almost no soliloquies, the choice of film breaks with the preference for plays such as *Henry V, Hamlet* and *Richard III* that allow for theatrical address of the camera. Instead, Fiennes’s film is set in “a place calling itself Rome” and uses hand-held shaky cam, mixed media filming (with broadcasting devices from mobile phones to television cameras repeatedly seen within the mise-en-scène) and fast editing that aligns it more closely with contemporary war films and thrillers such as *The Hurt Locker* and *The Bourne Identity*. Yet, like *Richard III*, it retains a knowing humour in many of its choices: the casting of acclaimed Channel 4 news anchor Jon Snow as “TV Anchorman,” turning Shakespeare’s lines into Snow’s familiar grilling of experts, is typical. From the rebels of the opening scene watching events unfold on television before moving to the streets, to the performance of Sicinius and Brutus for the cameras of a television debate, to Snow’s framing of the action as contemporary rolling media, this film attends to the multiple modes of mediation that surround the theatre of war. While Fiennes may go further than most UK Shakespeare film directors in establishing a cinematic mode aligned with the dominant Hollywood paradigm, there remains a self-consciousness about the mode of production and the genre within which Shakespeare is being newly presented.
Negotiating (with) the Audience

I have tried to argue in this essay that Shakespeare film produced in the UK demonstrates an anxiety around questions of authenticity that roots ideas of authority in the country’s theatrical history and prestige while showing a wariness of cinema, resulting in films that overstate their theatrical influence or embrace the cinematic with a self-consciousness that leads to parody. This diagnosis, of course, is only one narrative that might be told, but it is a narrative that becomes more explicit in the two major Shakespeare biopics of recent times. Despite being an American film, John Madden’s *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) negotiates openly with British theatrical heritage throughout. The early modern London theatre becomes a metaphor for American cinema, drawing in star actors (Edward Alleyn/Ben Affleck), ribbing the power of the money man (Hugh Fennyman) and deprivitising the playwright/hack screenwriter (Shakespeare’s name does not appear on the poster for his *Romeo and Juliet*). The film both celebrates and parodies the culture of the multiplex, its celebrities and its need to please crowds (“love and a bit with a dog, that’s all they want”).

Roland Emmerich’s *Anonymous* (2011) is a companion piece of sorts to *Shakespeare in Love*, another Shakespeare biopic that largely takes place within the London theatre, which understands plays as manifestations of an author’s offstage life, and which treats the theatre itself as a source of power and influence. However, where *Shakespeare in Love* values the theatrical audience as an intelligent, responsive audience, *Anonymous* treats its audience with scorn as it advances the claim that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, wrote Shakespeare’s plays. As Douglas Lanier argues,

*Anonymous* conceives of Oxford as an aristocratic puppet-master, manipulating the (heart)strings of the commons with populist sentiments so that he can use “the mob” for his own interests, all while maintaining the pretence that the plays issue from a man of the people... *Anonymous* depict[s] the playwright approvingly as an aristocratic puppeteer and his mass audience as enthusiastic if unwitting pawns. (Lanier 2013: 222)
Emmerich depicts an audience that agrees uncritically with whatever it sees and behaves in entirely predictable ways, led finally into an ambush on London Bridge as it flocks to the support of the Earl of Essex. Yet this is not the only audience Emmerich depicts. The framing device of the film features Derek Jacobi – presumably playing himself though credited as “Prologue” – addressing a theatre audience attending a Broadway play also called Anonymous. At the end of the film, as I have pointed out elsewhere, the screen audience – which implicitly has just watched a theatrical version of the same story – begins filing out of the theatre in near silence, neither applauding nor disagreeing, lost in thoughtful reverie as it mulls the arguments, delivered by Jacobi’s confident theatrical authority (Kirwan 2014: 24). The question here is whether the two audiences seen leaving theatres – one rushing to assist a coup, the other questioning Shakespeare’s identity – are the same gullible, easily led mob, or if the latter audience is understood as beginning to exercise a critical independence in its failure to applaud.

UK Shakespeare film repeatedly engages in the debate over the intelligence and independence of the audience. From Olivier’s careful induction of the audience into his Henry V to Peter Greenaway’s expectation that the audience of Prospero’s Books will perform its own interpretive work, there has been anxiety around how audiences will receive these films. In the UK, one worry among the professional Shakespeare community was that audiences would flock to Anonymous and believe its conspiracy theory, prompting the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust to launch a campaign to black out Shakespeare’s name from signs around Warwickshire to show the effect the film could have on local livelihoods. Boycotts were called for the film, all based on the premise that cinema audiences are too uncritical, too literally minded or simply too ill-educated to understand the film as a fiction. Although Anonymous implied that theatre/cinema audiences are malleable and easy to manipulate, the Shakespeare establishment appeared to share this view. The cultural authority of the theatre, and of depictions of the theatre, carries with it an authenticity that is understood, both within and around these films, to pose a legitimate threat.
I return to *Gnomeo and Juliet*, the film which offers perhaps the most productive way forward for UK Shakespeare film. Almost exactly an hour into the film, after Gnomeo flees from his home garden following the lawnmower race between “Reds” and “Blues” during which Tybalt is smashed, the camera finds Gnomeo chatting to a familiar figure. The camera pans up from a brass plaque to take in Stratford-upon-Avon’s iconic statue of Shakespeare. As Gnomeo recounts his fortunes, the statue comes to life. Speaking in the voice of Patrick Stewart (another voice carrying Shakespearean authority), the film introduces Shakespeare as timeless and unchanging, cast in bronze. Shakespeare is reminded of another story – his own – which has “remarkable similarities” to Gnomeo’s story, and becomes animated as he recounts the skill of his own play, anachronistically imagining his audience giving a standing ovation and calling for the “Author!” Shakespeare’s presence reminds the cinema audience that there are different versions of the story and positions Shakespeare’s own version as a vehicle for praise of the author. Shakespeare’s care is for his own legacy rather than his characters, which is made doubly clear as Gnomeo himself is thrown from the audience’s head as the statue gets carried away, implying that *Romeo and Juliet* is an exercise in Shakespeare’s own narcissism, the story as fixed as the statue itself.

Gnomeo thus finds himself dangling at the end of Shakespeare’s quill, whipped about at the whim of an absent-minded author. Shakespeare becomes a lecturer, explaining patiently to Gnomeo (in a tone that would no doubt infuriate Frederic Kimball) that the story is a tragedy and implying that the form trumps any commitment to the characters. Gnomeo, aligning with the film’s target audience, opposes him with the school pupil’s retort that Shakespeare’s version is “rubbish.” As Shakespeare muses on whether an alternative end is possible, he drops Gnomeo once more. But Gnomeo is rescued by an extra-Shakespearean character, Featherstone the pink flamingo, who breaks Gnomeo’s fall with his polystyrene body, and in doing so, demonstrates the film’s ability to resist its authors activities. And the reason he is saved, as Featherstone argues, is “one word.” [he blows and reinflates himself] “Plastics!” The recognisable quotation from the American film *The Graduate* (1967) articulates the film’s challenge to Shakespearean authenticity. The film finds
humour and individualism in its contemporary cultural references, in this instance allowing a moment of film literacy to rescue the Shakespearean character from his predetermined theatrical death. The film’s agenda of resistance to the fixed authority of the Shakespeare canon is designed to entertain a young audience but also to present the privilege of rewriting as an ethical, pedagogic and cultural necessity that can be wielded by anyone with a command of cinematic language as well as those associated with cultural heritage.

_Gnomeo and Juliet_’s staging of a negotiation between the cinematic interloper and the statuesque tradition of Shakespeare offers a pleasing synecdoche of the history of UK Shakespeare film, and its centrality suggests the metacritical and performative potential of what continues to be a significant debate. As I have argued in this chapter, the tension between the cinematic and the theatrical is far from debilitating, and has occasioned some of the richest engagements with Shakespearean performance, audience expectation and ideological interpretation that have emerged over the last century. With the British film industry increasingly producing films on a global scale that compete with Hollywood it would not be surprising, as Fiennes’s _Coriolanus_ indicates, that a globalised cinema industry will begin eliding some of the distinctively British features of those films produced here, or that the growth of live theatrical broadcasting will necessitate British Shakespeare film embracing its realist cinematic nature in order to distinguish itself more clearly from these overtly theatrical events. But questions about cinema’s relationship to the theatre, about the suitability of the medium for retaining the interactive and live aspects of the plays, and about the legacy of a theatrical tradition in preserving performance for the future will doubtless continue to inform the production of Shakespeare films into the twenty-first century.

References


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**Filmography**

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*Hamlet* (1948), dir. Laurence Olivier. UK, English.


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**Further reading**


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