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### ‘All a matter of scale’? – Shakespearean acting and the cinema’s eyes and ears

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# 'All a matter of scale'? – Shakespearean acting and the cinema's eyes and ears

Russell Jackson

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- 1 This paper focusses on questions (indeed, problems) raised by the need for actors in films to accommodate the language of Shakespeare's plays. The implications of this for other aspects of acting technique, and the physical energy required in stage speech, particularly the speaking of verse, have long been recognised in actor training. The sense of an underlying emotional *truth* (however defined) in any impersonation is the quality that acting technique is expected to serve. But how have Shakespeare's words fared in a medium that does not normally privilege – or even accommodate – poetic speech?
- 2 The received wisdom on acting for the cinema is simple. Henry Fonda, asked about the difference between screen and stage acting, replied: "There isn't a great deal. The main difference is projection. In film, your camera – that lens – is your audience and you don't have to do anything you wouldn't do naturally." Actors with specifically Shakespearean credentials agree. Michael Pennington, in a book aimed at aspiring actors, advises that the camera "loves the unguarded moment and rears away from calculation;" and Kenneth Branagh, directing Ian Holm as Captain Fluellen in his 1989 film of *Henry V*, was impressed by his mastery of film technique: "I'd heard the Ian Holm School of Acting described as follows: 'Anything you can do, I can do less of.'"<sup>1</sup> Another piece of received wisdom is that the camera can register from the actor's eyes – let alone the rest of their face – the thoughts and feelings of the character impersonated. In *Acting in the Cinema* James Naremore suggests that "[t]he first step in facilitating the change toward psychological realism was to shorten the distance between actors and camera." This step was taken early in the twentieth century, a vital element in the development of editing as well as photographic technique.<sup>2</sup>
- 3 There is no mystery about this: most experienced actors are able to adjust the expressive scale of their performances to varying circumstances, whether in the size

and intimacy of theatre auditoria, the specific demands of radio performance, or the proximity of both camera and microphone in film and television. The experience of Edith Evans, who had not acted for the camera until she was cast as the old Countess in Thorold Dickinson's film of Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades* (1949), shows how quickly the lesson might be learned. The director recalled her telling him a friend had said "One shouldn't show anything, one should just try to feel it." Dickinson replied "Well, look, you'd better go see yourself on the screen because in some of the scenes there's nothing there except you, there's no feeling of what the scene is about." The next day, having watched herself in the rushes, she said "Yes. I'll give you a bit more," and, as Dickinson confirmed, "it worked out all right after that."<sup>3</sup> In the film, Evans, her face covered with ageing makeup, delivers a subtly powerful performance whose restraint contrasts effectively with the appropriately expressionistic acting of Anton Walbrook as Herman, the anti-hero whose strategy for gaining her secret for winning at cards brings about her death.

- 4 I have cited this extraordinary film not because it sheds light directly on Shakespearean acting for the camera, but as an illustration of the co-existence in cinema (sometimes within one film) of more than one approach. The views quoted in my first paragraph reflect one set of co-ordinates, by which as if on a graph one might draw the relationship between acting for theatre and film. This was described succinctly by V. I. Pudovkin in a seminal work on film acting: "When we speak of the 'unnecessary staginess' of a film actor's performance, we so term it not because staginess necessarily involves anything wrong or unpleasant. We simply register an unpleasant sensation of incongruity, and therefore falseness, as though at the sight of a man striving to negotiate a non-existent obstacle."<sup>4</sup> This is especially useful in freeing the definition of "staginess" from association with any one kind of theatrical performance. Shakespearean acting has taken its place among the range of techniques available at different times in the history of the theatre, with successive innovatory performances hailed in their turn as more "natural" than those of the preceding generation. The history of acting, like that of other elements of performance technique, can be approached as a history of audience expectations, contingent in turn on standards of behaviour outside the theatre. In a culture where expressions of grief or joy (for example) are more emphatic, the stage version of these may well be heightened but will also correspond to societal norms. Judging the "incongruity" (or otherwise) of some screen performances can depend on this, as much as on accumulated traditions of acting technique.
- 5 In discussing the performance of Shakespeare for the camera, we have to add another co-ordinate, or perhaps superimpose another imaginary graph, which would take into account the specific demands of a dramatic text that was written for a particular kind of theatre and with specific linguistic and rhetorical features. Shakespeare's dialogue is more copious than that of most film scripts, with a mixed economy of rhetorically elaborated speech in various modes (soliloquy, extended descriptive passages, etc.), and quasi-naturalistic though carefully crafted prose. The plays encompass different kinds of verse, from the unrhymed iambic pentameter that can seem closest to colloquial prose, to passages of rhyming dialogue or such set pieces as the sonnet exchanged by Romeo and Juliet on their first meeting or those written by the young suitors in *Love's Labour's Lost*. The delivery of verse has tended since the middle of the twentieth century to move closer to contemporary colloquial speech. This has not always been welcomed and in some cases has proved problematic. Put simply, verse that is not spoken so as to

be identifiable as such usually loses the meaning its formal qualities express. (Branagh's demonstration of the iambics through tap steps in his 2000 film of *Love's Labour's Lost* is effectively a tutorial in verse-speaking, designed to demystify it for the audience.) Unfortunately, over-enunciated speech – coming too “trippingly off the tongue” – can seem as incongruous as any vocal and physical performance that is over-projected or, to put it another way, out of scale.

- 6 Consequently, an important element of Shakespearean film-making in mainstream cinema is the degree to which the director and actors accommodate this range of verbal registers, while at the same time supporting the familiar sense of reality that most cinemagoers expect. “Reality” here is not a simple category, but can stand for the kind of conviction achieved in the audience by films as diverse as, say, Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) and Alain Resnais' *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961): all can be convincing within the terms of the fictional mode we apprehend and accept. A Shakespeare film has to achieve a similar effect by hybridising the conventions of its original with the adopted cinematic genre's conventions, with which the actor's voice and gesture have to be consistent. Discussion of matters of dialogue should also take account of the wide range of cinematic modes. In *Overhearing Film Dialogue* Sarah Kozloff quotes John Ford's dictum that “When a motion picture is at its best, it is long on action and short on dialogue,” but her study illuminates the variety of cinematic modes in which dialogue plays a major role, observing for example that in the Hollywood screwball comedies of the 1930s “[v]erbal dexterity is as highly prized as the quick draw in Westerns.”<sup>5</sup> Some elements of the Shakespearean text militate, though, against one of the principal markers of what passes as “natural” in screen dialogue, by making it difficult to ‘overlap’ the end of one speech with the beginning of another. Moreover, it is important to remember that the spoken word is not cinema's primary means of expression, and that the impact of some major Shakespeare films does not depend on it. Jack J. Jorgens observed that Orson Welles's *Othello* (1952) “was one of the few Shakespeare films in which the images on the screen generate enough beauty, variety, and graphic power to stand comparison with Shakespeare's poetic images,” with “visual images [that] compensate for the inevitable loss of complexity and dramatic voltage accompanying heavy alterations in the text.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, in most mainstream cinema, actors may find themselves challenged by the Shakespearean text's strong pull away from conventional screen naturalism. In responding to the opportunities and demands of the text, “doing less” is not invariably the best advice for an actor.
- 7 Before considering some performances where the relationship between psychological realism (variously defined) and the Shakespearean text is not straightforward, we should note that historical films in which an older mode of performance is supplanted by a new one tend to exaggerate the artificiality of the acting to be replaced. Thus, in *Shakespeare in Love* (1999) when Emilia de Lesseps (Gwyneth Paltrow) steps into the role of Juliet, a new sense of authenticity is achieved and acknowledged. In Richard Eyre's *Stage Beauty* (2004) a similar revolution is achieved when the carefully stylized representation of femininity by the established star Edward Kynaston (Billy Crudup) is challenged and rendered redundant by the unaffected acting of the dresser Maria Hughes (Claire Danes). As a woman, she is simply more *real*. Although here the historical moment is represented entertainingly in specifically feminist terms, the plots correspond anachronistically to a trope no longer current in theatre historiography, whereby over time acting and production techniques have simply become more

effectively convincing – more *natural*. The implication is that in the course of several centuries the theatre moved inexorably towards the naturalism (or realism) of Stanislavski, if not the Actor's Studio. When an outmoded performance style is represented, the desired effect is usually comic. In Laurent Tirard's *Molière* (2007) Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (Romain Duris) is educated by experiences of love, loss and comic imbroglio that mature him as a performer and lend new depth to his writing. By the end of the film he has arrived at a new way of writing, neither hectic farce nor stilted tragedy. By way of contrast, in *The Dresser* (1993), where the acting of "Sir" (Albert Finney) is based on that of Sir Donald Wolfit (1902–68), notoriously grand in tragic delivery and gesture, there is an appeal to another kind of authenticity. Finney's "Sir" acts Othello and King Lear as he feels them, and it is clear that this extraordinary passion is communicated to his admiring audiences.

## Silent eloquence

- 8 Over the thirty years between the beginnings of commercial cinema and the advent of synchronised sound, film acting developed a range of techniques specific to the new medium. Acting for the silent screen could be subtle and moving in comedy and drama. Little more than documentary interest attaches to the extravagant histrionics of the brief shot of Herbert Beerbohm Tree's death scene in *King John* (1899) and the awkward fit between stage performances and the fixed camera in F. R. Benson's *Richard III*, filmed on stage at Stratford-upon Avon in 1910. Development was rapid. By the time of Asta Nielsen and Svend Gade's *Hamlet* (1920) and Dmitri Buchowetski's *Othello* (1922), every aspect of film-making was far more sophisticated, but theatrical experience as a Shakespearean actor was no guarantee of success. As the Danish princess who has to pass as the male successor to the kingdom, Nielsen's acting stands out as subtle and accomplished, encompassing a wide range of moods, from righteous indignation to comic playfulness. That this is the product of her own talent and experience rather than some radical change in the medium itself is emphasized by the extraordinarily melodramatic facial and gestural acting of Eduard von Winterstein as a Claudius whom no one in Denmark could possibly have mistaken as anything less than villainous.
- 9 In Buchowetski's film, Emil Jannings's Othello appears to be compensating for the absence of passionate language by a physical performance that is grotesque in moments of anger or anguish. Comparison with the subtle eloquence of his performances in other films – notably *Der letzte Mann* (F. W. Murnau, 1924) and (with sound) *Der blaue Engel* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930) – suggests that Jannings's Othello, unlike Werner Krauss's Iago, suffers from the actor's anxiety when faced with a role whose glamour and pathos depend on grandiloquence of a kind welcomed by the theatre but unavailable in a medium without sound. Unlike the case of von Winterstein, whose Claudius seems to be the product of a distinct lack of screen (or any other) technique, Jannings's Othello is a prime example of the problem of scale in a role that can easily betray a skilled actor into behaviour that would validate Iago's description of the general as a bombastic teller of tall tales. In her perceptive and thorough study of the two films, Judith Buchanan cites the warning in *Practical Hints on Acting for the Cinema* (1920) to the effect that "[i]n film work, exaggeration of any kind is a mistake [...] It is hardly too much to say that the less facial contortion you use the better."<sup>7</sup> When in the film's most notorious scene Jannings tears a handkerchief with his teeth, it

is as though this already by no means uncommon wisdom has been ignored, especially because elsewhere in the film he achieves a degree of dignity and tenderness.

## Speaking the speech

- 10 For the silent cinema Shakespeare's works had provided script material for a language-free zone, demanding physical eloquence and subtlety from the best actors, but missing out on verbal poetry. By way of compensation, a potential cause of incongruity had been avoided. At the end of the 1920s, the opportunity to provide synchronised dialogue meant that another element of the spectator's expectations and experience had to be accommodated. The Shakespearean dialogue itself, by its antiquated idiom and sheer copiousness, might now create exactly what Pudovkin compares to "the sight of a man striving to negotiate a non-existent obstacle." If an appeal were to be made to its theatrical pedigree as part of a film's cultural capital, an underlying credential of a film as a "prestige product," how was this to be distinguished from obtrusive staginess?
- 11 In the first Shakespeare feature film with synchronised sound, Sam Taylor's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1929) with Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks as Katherina and Petruchio, both stars had stage experience early in their career, and their verbal performances have clarity and energy that complement the physical exuberance of a handsomely produced knockabout farce. In the 1935 Warner Bros. production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle, the cooing delivery of Anita Louise as Titania and Victor Jory's over-incisive speaking as Oberon are jarring, but they may be thought consonant with the film's lavish stylisation of the fairy world. The vocal range of the film also encompasses the squeaky pertness of Mickey Rooney as Puck, the staid "Shakespearean" delivery of Ian Hunter and Veree Teesdale as Theseus and Hippolyta, and the down-to-earth colloquial register of the craftsmen, led by James Cagney as Bottom. Only Dick Powell, a crooning Lysander, seems particularly incongruous in a film where congruity is, to put it mildly, a relative term, and where Cagney and the familiar Warner Bros. comedians playing the workers are the actors in touch with the reality of the audience.
- 12 The Reinhardt/Dieterle *Dream* achieves a harmonious blend of performance elements, from modern dance to slapstick, that might be stagey in Pudovkin's sense, but in a film when anything might happen from scene to scene (if not shot to shot), there is little for them to collide with. Unfortunately, a collision does occur in the 1936 *As You Like It*, directed in England by Paul Czinner with Elisabeth Bergner and Laurence Olivier as Rosalind and Orlando. Bergner, the most notable exponent of the role in the German-speaking theatre of the 1920s, delivers a Rosalind remarkable for restless and at times acrobatic physical vitality, with a vocal delivery that is idiosyncratic in both accent and the determined cultivation of winsomeness. Olivier "does less" to good effect. His Orlando seems so bemused by the androgynous forest-dweller's energetic skittishness that his failure to realise she is a woman is almost believable – *almost*, but not quite. As well as Olivier, the cast includes other actors with stage experience of Shakespeare, including Henry Ainley as the exiled duke, and Leon Quartermaine as Jacques. In his review for the *Spectator*, Graham Greene complained that Ainley's "false fruity enunciation" carried him back to "the Edwardian stage", and felt that with Quartermaine "the great public [might] well wonder why this hearty good fellow was known to his companions as 'melancholy.'"<sup>8</sup> The "Seven Ages of Man" speech (2.7.139–

66) was “as falsely italicised as it is on the stage.” Congruity is in any case at a discount in the film’s settings of a fairy-tale castle and correspondingly lavish artificial woodland. Like the 1935 *Dream*, the film is sound-stagey rather than stagey, but the radically artificial acting of Bergner, even when she is not being Rosalind-as-Ganymede-as-Rosalind, challenges the most willingly suspended disbelief. It is in effect a record of a stage performance that she had polished over several years in the theatres of Germany and Austria, and which had been greeted as fresh and seductively vital. A significant source of incongruity, which mirrors Greene’s complaints about old-fashioned “Shakespearean” acting, is suggested in the *Daily Telegraph*’s report that Bergner’s own performance was successful despite her accent and the fact that “her appearance, her mannerisms, her technique” were all “essentially modern.”<sup>9</sup>

- 13 The final Shakespearean “talkie” of the 1930s, MGM’s *Romeo and Juliet*, was another prestige production, designed like the Warner Bros. *Dream* to enhance a studio’s cultural standing, especially with Leslie Howard, a well-established star of the stage and film in Britain, cast as Romeo opposite Norma Shearer as Juliet. MGM lavished its resources on this evocation of Renaissance Italy. It was directed by George Cukor, with the participation in the design team of Oliver Messel, “gowns by Adrian” for Miss Shearer, and dances by Agnes De Mille (her first screen assignment). The cast included Basil Rathbone as a suavely malevolent Tybalt, and Edna May Oliver as a Nurse with speaking looks and an easy assumption of dignity that does not prevent her appreciating the innuendos of John Barrymore’s Mercutio. Unfortunately, the forty-two-year old Howard, at an age when most stage Romeos are hard pressed to imitate the behaviour of a teenager in love, is graceful, mature and mellifluous, but lacks any hint of passion. In their scenes together Shearer projects dignity combined with wistfulness, in which she is at her most demonstrative when leaning her cheek upon her hand. The incongruity here derives partly from the mature actors’ lack of qualities essential to their roles, and in the case of Shearer more from acting that is simply poor, rather than any collision between her technique and the medium itself. In that respect it is not strictly speaking “stagey” but rather subordinated to an exaggerated sense of what might be “Shakespearean” behaviour combined with anxiety to look like a figure in a Renaissance painting.
- 14 It seems that after the respectful but lukewarm reception of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1936 Shakespeare inspired little confidence as a potential scriptwriter: no feature-length Shakespeare film appeared until Olivier’s *Henry V*, released in 1944. Other factors apart – including its patriotic appeal and the fact that a colour film had been made in Britain under wartime conditions – *Henry V* made a notable break with the conventions of studio realism. After its documentary-like opening sequences in the Globe Theatre it embraces theatricality and stylization. In the transition from Southampton to France, and in the settings for the palace interiors, Roger Furse’s designs imitate the forced perspectives and decorative colouring of the *Très riches heures* of the Duc de Berri. (The duke himself is glimpsed, evidently perusing one of his treasures, in 2.4, when King Charles is urging his nobles to come to the defence of France.) With the notable exception of a return to a quasi-realistic studio set for the foreground of the scene at the siege of Harfleur – the background is in the stylised mode – and the open-air location for the battle of Agincourt, the film’s artificiality is maintained.
- 15 The audience is introduced to a theatre where the physical and vocal acting style is broader than is by now customary on film or in the theatre, but in the main body of the



narrative Shakespearean dialogue is spoken with the unforced, “natural” ease already familiar in stage productions. Olivier intended the opening sequence to acclimatize audiences to Shakespearean language, preparing for the relative naturalism of speech and action in the main narrative. The implicit message is that they may have thought Shakespeare was stagey and archaic, but that is simply how it used to be: now it can become part of the familiar world of the cinema. The only character to persist in any kind of over-theatrical exaggeration is Pistol (Robert Newton), a performer in his own right, who uses rhetorical decoration (and borrows from Christopher Marlowe) to embellish his criminality. This is a film where Shakespeare, a patriotic version of history, and the evocation of a colourful and idyllic London are combined to authenticate contemporary heroism. Olivier’s strategy for acclimatizing the audience to “poetic speech” was understood and generally welcomed, though some reviewers found the film “wordy.”<sup>10</sup> In the *Sunday Graphic* Helen Fletcher welcomed the decision to “put aside the absurd convention that deems it poor cinema for any character to speak more than ten words running.”<sup>11</sup> The tactical use of incongruities thus serves the film’s purposes as propaganda for the war effort and a celebration of a major element of the English cultural heritage, while making its formal qualities accessible to a wider public.

- 16 The stylised settings and costumes of Olivier’s *Hamlet* (1948) create an idealised environment for the tragedy. Through camerawork and lighting, with a use of chiaroscuro that has been compared to that of *film noir*, Olivier intensifies the sinister qualities of a world that is already romantic. In this context the acting and speaking achieve a sense of naturalism, as though, despite its stylization, “real” people inhabit it. Olivier is more successful in this than Orson Welles, whose personal performance in *Macbeth* (1948) is extraordinary in a manner consonant with the caverns measureless to man his character inhabits by way of a castle. In *Othello* (1952), with a much stronger supporting cast, it seems appropriate that beside him even such skilled Shakespeareans as Michéal MacLiammóir and Fay Compton (Iago and Emilia) should seem to inhabit a more prosaic, and less rhetorically sophisticated world. In *Chimes at Midnight* (1964) the egregiousness and vitality of Welles as Falstaff contrast well with the range of acting styles in the rest of the cast, from the incisive coolness of Keith Baxter as Hal to the vehement energy of Norman Rodway’s Hotspur and the pained hauteur of John Gielgud’s King Henry IV. Vocally, within his idiosyncratic orotundity Welles can encompass mental agility, roguishness and pathos, but there is never any doubt that what we enjoy is Falstaff-plus-Welles. (But does anyone mind?)
- 17 These examples suggest the importance in Shakespeare films of accommodating a range of appropriately contrasting registers in the acting, especially in principal roles. Something analogous can be observed in Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957), made outside the anglophone tradition, with significant elements of Noh theatre alongside a degree of naturalism. Here the performances most strongly inflected by Japanese theatrical technique are those of Toshiro Mifune and Isuzu Yamada, as Washisu Taketoki and his wife Asaji, the equivalents of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Although Yamada’s gestural and vocal performance is consistently reminiscent of the Noh theatre – her makeup even resembling a mask in that tradition – Mifune varies between the kind of naturalism familiar from his roles in other period films and moments that evoke the grimaces and heightened vocal register of Kabuki. In neither case can the juxtaposition of styles be properly classed as incongruous: rather, they raise the characters to a level of tragic dignity. A comparable effect can be identified in *Ran*



[1985]), Kurosawa's *King Lear* film, with the acting of Tetsuya Nakadai as Hidetora Ichimonji, the Lear figure, and Mieko Harada as Lady Kaede. Although differences of language and culture may place these films outside the scope of a discussion of Shakespearean acting, they offer an equivalent of the qualified naturalism of the Anglophone stage or cinema.

- 18 In British and American Shakespeare films from the 1950s to the present day the instances of perceived failure in acting have often been related directly to matters of speech. Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* (1953) brings together actors with acknowledged Shakespearean credentials – including Louis Calhern (Caesar) as well as James Mason (Brutus) and John Gielgud (Cassius) – and a leading actor, Marlon Brando, whose performance confounds expectations that his Antony would be in the same mode as his Stanley Kowalski in the film of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). As Michael Anderegg notes, after playing “characters whose words were inadequate to the feelings he wanted to express,” Brando was “called on to perform a character for whom language is a subterfuge designed to keep his true feelings from showing at all,” and “gives Shakespeare’s lines ‘their necessary rhetorical weight, even if the rhythm and breath control are sometimes off kilter.”<sup>12</sup>
- 19 Notable examples of incongruity, arguably arising not from “staginess” but rather from the fear of it, are the Hamlet of Nicol Williamson in Tony Richardson’s 1969 production, the Brutus of Jason Robards in Stuart Burge’s 1970 *Julius Caesar* and Keanu Reeves as Don John in Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado*. In Burge’s film there is a notable clash of inappropriate styles of playing. Kenneth S. Rothwell notes that Charlton Heston, as Antony, “speaks with the big voice and authoritative manner of an old-fashioned Shakespearean actor.” For his part, Robards had decided that Brutus was “an intellectual suppressing his emotions after being traumatized by his entanglement in a political situation.” Consequently, his delivery of (for example) Cassius’ reflections on the prospect of assassination and “th’abuse of greatness” (2.1.10-34) is, in Rothwell’s words, “totally flat and uninflected.”<sup>13</sup> Williamson’s stage performance as Hamlet – the film was effectively a version of a production at London’s Roundhouse Theatre – was widely regarded as defiantly undignified in speech and behaviour. From his first appearance in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), when the Prince and his entourage gallop towards the villa, Reeves exhibits the villainous scowl that remains the dominant effect of his performance. (It should be noted that Reeves is much more at home as the Prince Henry figure in Gus van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho* [1991], with scenes that paraphrase the dialogue of the two parts of *Henry IV*.)
- 20 Prejudice against North American accents may persist in some quarters, and embracing the formal qualities of the language may have run counter to the teaching of some influential American acting schools. My inclusion of Williamson in this brief and informal list of unsatisfactory performances in a Shakespearean role suggests that nationality is not necessarily a significant factor. But in some performances an older, and no less inappropriate style can be sampled. Maurice Evans and Judith Anderson in George Schaefer’s *Macbeth* (1960) and the performers in the *Othello* production seen in *A Double Life* (1947) adopt the pseudo-British pronunciation and over-enunciated speech once prevalent in the American theatre.<sup>14</sup> In *A Double Life*, the Shakespearean performances do not read as ‘stagey,’ except in so far as they exemplify a now outmoded approach, while in the *Macbeth* film Evans and Anderson lack the energy that

would inform a freer, less deliberate kind of expressiveness. It is in this that one can identify that “incongruity” that undermines the production’s effectiveness.

- 21 In any case, since the 1950s, American Shakespeare performance in the theatre as well as on film has moved on. In her introduction to a volume in Palgrave’s *Directory of Shakespeare in Performance*, Katherine Goddard describes “something like a return of the native” in the final decades of the twentieth century: “Shakespeare was nudged from his pedestal and his plays began appearing with increasing frequency in college auditoriums, tents, decaying mansions, forest and fields, their four-hundred year old poetry tripping off the tongues of Canadian and American actors no longer self-conscious about their accents and before enthusiastic, unabashedly grateful audiences.”<sup>15</sup> Paul Barry, in *A Lifetime with Shakespeare. Notes from an American Director of all 38 Plays* (most of them for the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival), declares that he has “always resented producers who hire British directors for American Shakespeare productions out of some misguided notion of British superiority, especially when they try to impose British dialects as ‘proper speech’.” Barry insists on the use of “American dialects or speech that is as dialect-free as possible” so as to make “performances clear and accessible.”<sup>16</sup> The directors canvassed by Charles Ney for *Directing Shakespeare in America: Current Practices* evince no particular anxiety about the threat of “a watered-down version of how the Brits do it.”<sup>17</sup>

## Branagh’s 1996 *Hamlet*: a range of styles

- 22 I conclude by reflecting on Kenneth Branagh’s film of *Hamlet*, partly because I was involved in its production on a day-to-day basis as text adviser, but also because it encompasses a range of approaches to Shakespearean performance by actors with a variety of backgrounds that reflects a quality of the play itself, and also exemplifies the different challenges of working with the texts on film. One of Branagh’s aims has always been the achievement of clarity in productions calculated to appeal to a mainstream audience – a preference that has broader aesthetic implications, and sets him apart from more radical film makers. He has also insisted on engaging notable North American actors with varying degrees of experience in Shakespearean performance – admittedly, a policy that serves the box-office prospects of the films as well as broadening their cultural appeal.
- 23 In a self-consciously “epic” four-hour film, using the whole of the play’s text – defined by the 1623 Folio, supplemented by passages found only in the Second Quarto (1604) – Branagh’s desire to keep the action moving was paramount. Extended takes allow characters to move through different locations on the main palace set, so that, for example, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have their first audience with the king and queen in 2.2, the camera follows the group from the royal bedroom, along a corridor and into the mirror-lined hall, halting near the door and circling round them as the plans for dealing with Hamlet are laid. (Arguably, this circling movement suggests the immediacy of a news report, but this is an unavoidably choreographed shot in a film where the camera and its magazine would have been too heavy for a Steadicam operator.) In this situation, we can imagine Welles would have cut into speeches, making a sometimes not altogether coherent patchwork of dialogue of the kind found in his *Othello*. Even when shifts in location were the result of contingencies beyond his control, Welles’s editing of the text invariably seems to serve an expressive

purpose. Branagh's approach is quite the opposite. His *Hamlet*, which privileges the continuity of the text, sometimes results in effects that have been faulted for their lack of interpretive significance: the circling camera in the sequence I have just described is a notable example. I would suggest that, taken as whole, the film achieves a balance between these physically energetic sequences and others where relative stillness is achieved. Nevertheless, there sometimes the behaviour of the characters seems adequately motivated, while that of the camera does not.

- 24 One notable – it is fair to admit, notorious – example of this occurs just before the intermission, when Hamlet stands against the background of troops moving across a wintry plain to deliver “How all occasions do inform against me” (in Q2's version of 4.4.) As the camera gradually pulls back, his voice rises to a climax, so that the final line, “My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth,” is a defiant shout. This is a powerful defiance of the forces marshalled against him – and it gives a rousing end to the first part of a long film – but the effect undermines the quiet self-reproach that is also an important element of the speech. Nevertheless, the staging is consistent with the overall treatment of soliloquies, which are spoken out loud and thus benefit from the energy of an on-screen speaker. At other extreme, in “To be or not to be” (3.1.1-90), Branagh achieves a visual effect that provides a visual correlative to the sense of the words. As he speaks, he contemplates his reflection in one of the hall's mirrors, and the camera moves towards him and his reflection until, when he places the point of his dagger against the mirror, it is momentarily unclear which is Hamlet, and which his reflection. Unlike the treatment of “How all occasions,” here the intimacy and inwardness of the soliloquy is achieved with a strikingly eloquent visual effect. For Hamlet's soliloquy in 3.3, when he has opportunity for killing Claudius while he is praying, Branagh considered using voice-over, but opted for speaking on camera.
- 25 I have used the word “eloquence” because, for all its occasional lapses, Branagh's treatment of the play's language is responsive to its great variety of registers and its appropriately varied cast. A few notable examples stand out from my memory of the sixty days of shooting. One is the sleight of hand with which Charlton Heston, admirably suited to the grandiloquence of the Player King's account of the fall of Troy (2.2.471-500), was encouraged to modulate into a more intimate manner for the “mousetrap” itself: the director's most important note was that Heston and Rosemary Harris should play the King and Queen “like Chekhov”. (Paradoxically, this results in a performance that, while it favours the camera, would have been scarcely audible to most of the on-screen audience.) Another was the decision to have the Ghost whisper his exhortations to Hamlet, a suggestion that was liberating for Brian Blessed, whose instinct is to speak at a higher volume. It also facilitates an intimacy between father and son that has become customary in stage productions, and allows the language to be explored more thoroughly.
- 26 The approach to the play's comic characters respects the differences between them. Of the two gravediggers, the first (Billy Crystal) is appropriately outgoing, priding himself on his ability to deliver a comic act, while the second (Simon Russell Beale) is not so much slow-witted as quietly appreciative of his colleague's comedy. He is clearly Goodman Delver's greatest fan. Osric (Robin Williams) is in a class of his own, a newcomer to the court whose absurd verbal affectations are powered by the dynamo of his nervousness. But there is also a notable example of silent comic acting. As Yorick, Ken Dodd, a great comedian of the English variety stage, is seen but not heard keeping

the table on a roar in an interpolated flashback. Lines were cobbled together from Shakespeare's comedies to make script pages, but he was happy simply to tell his own jokes. Because his eccentric facial vitality was part of his performing persona, Dodd registers perfectly on (silent) film as the allegedly side-splitting Yorick. Dodd's effect on his royal audience was genuinely riotous: for them, a case of "no acting required."

## Some Conclusions

- 27 This paper has focused on films made for the mainstream that aim to persuade as wide an audience as possible that Shakespeare is accessible, while at the same time trying not to make the judicious grieve – at least, not too much. It suggests ways in which the effect of "staginess," as defined by Pudovkin, can be related to the delivery of the plays' language as much as to other sources of the "incongruity" he identifies as its cause. Beyond the examples I have chosen to discuss, one might add films that either "translate" the language into equivalent modern terms (such as *My Private Idaho*), or those that make occasional adjustments to eliminate what are perceived as obtrusive archaisms (Olivier's *Hamlet* is a notable instance of the second procedure.)
- 28 Two recent films evince an uneasy relationship with the language, while at the same time avoiding a wholesale revision of it. In Michael Almereyda's version of *Cymbeline*, *Anarchy: Ride or Die* (2014) and Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015), the imperatives of emotional expressiveness appear to override those of speaking the speech with its appropriate rhythm and momentum. Put simply, the characters often seem to take a long time to come up with their words. The result is often an incongruous sense of deliberation: the words are being weighed too much. By way of contrast, in Joss Whedon's *Much Ado About Nothing* (2013), set in contemporary Los Angeles, there is no embarrassment about speaking the play's dialogue with only minimal adjustments to the time and place. As in many 'updated' stage productions, in Whedon's film the lack of a precise match does not seem obtrusive, although it should probably be admitted that habitual theatregoers are less likely than that all-important "wider audience" to be disturbed by the combination of a physical "now" and a linguistic "then." The question of "scale" invoked in my title can be interpreted in terms of the balance to be achieved between the degree of expressiveness given to Shakespeare's language, and the desire to achieve performances that convince in the conventions of naturalistic acting that the cinema favours. Perhaps the real question is what, in acting Shakespeare on screen, is the right degree of "less"?

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## NOTES

1. Bert Cardullo *et al.*, ed., *Playing to the Camera. Film Actors Discuss Their Craft*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 213; Michael Pennington, *Let Me Play the Lion Too. How to be an Actor*, London, Faber and Faber, 2015, p. 113; Kenneth Branagh, *Beginning*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1989, p. 235.

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3. Thorold Dickinson, interview in liner notes for the Studiocanal DVD (2010) of *The Queen of Spades* (1949).
4. V. I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting: Memorial Edition, Revised and Enlarged*, trans. and ed. Ivor Montagu (1949) New York, Grove Press, 1970, p. 324.
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6. Jack K. Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (1977), Lanham, University of America Press, 1991, p. 175.
7. Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Silent Film, an Excellent Dumb Discourse*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 249.
8. Graham Greene, *Spectator*, 11 September 1936, in David Parkinson, ed., *The Graham-Greene Film Reader: Mornings in the Dark*, Manchester, Carcanet, 1963, 136-8, p. 137.
9. *Daily Telegraph*, 7 September 1936, quoted in Russell Jackson, "Remembering Bergner's Rosalind: As You Like It on film in 1936," in Peter Holland, ed., *Shakespeare, Memory and Performance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 237-55, p. 251.
10. Ernest Betts, *Evening News*, 28 November 1944.
11. Helen Fletcher, *Sunday Graphic*, 26 November 1944.
12. Michael Anderegg, *Cinematic Shakespeare*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2004, p. 90.
13. Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen. A Century of Film and Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 154-5.
14. In fact, Anderson was Australian, while both Evans and Coleman were British, the former having made his mark on Broadway after a brief but successful career in London. Nevertheless, their accents correspond to the then prevailing standard for "Shakespearean" speech in North America.
15. Katherine Goddard and John O'Connor, eds., *A Directory of Shakespeare in Performance: volume 3: Canada and USA since 1991 and 2011*, Houndmills and New York, 2011, p. xi.
16. Paul Barry, *A Lifetime with Shakespeare. Notes from an American Director of all 38 Plays*, Jefferson, NC and London, 2010, p. 10-11.
17. Charles Ney, *Directing Shakespeare in America: Current Practices* (London, 2016), 248. The malign influence of "British Shakespeare" – and the importance of avoiding it – are addressed by some contributors to Al Pacino's film *Looking for Richard* (1996).

## ABSTRACTS

The paper discusses the acting of Shakespeare's plays for the screen, in the light of the conventional wisdom that a film actor should simply "do less." Starting from V. I. Pudovkin's influential work on *Film Technique and Film Acting*, it addresses the question of "incongruity" as a source of a sense of "staginess" in film performances. It is suggested that a degree of "incongruity" is created by the physical as well as vocal demands on the actor of speaking the Shakespearean dialogue, and by the potential unfamiliarity for audiences of dialogue that is more copious than that of most mainstream films and at the same time is in an unfamiliar idiom. Films

are cited from the silent era to the present century, and the paper concludes with examples from Kenneth Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet*, for which the author was text adviser.

L'objet de cet article est d'étudier la manière dont on joue les pièces de Shakespeare à l'écran, à la lumière de l'idée conventionnelle selon laquelle un acteur de cinéma devrait se contenter « d'en faire moins ». À partir du livre de V. I. Pudovkin *Film Techniques and Film Acting*, qui fait autorité, cet article aborde la question de l'« incongruité » qui fait naître le sentiment que le théâtre au cinéma d'un manque de naturel. On développera l'idée qu'un degré d'« incongruité » est créé par les exigences aussi bien physiques que vocales qui s'imposent aux acteurs qui disent le texte shakespearien, ainsi que par le fait que le public est peut-être moins accoutumé à des dialogues beaucoup plus longs que ceux de la plupart des films grand public, rédigés dans une langue à laquelle il n'est pas habitué. Les films cités vont du cinéma muet au 21<sup>e</sup> siècle et l'article se termine avec des exemples extraits du *Hamlet* (1996) de Kenneth Branagh, film pour lequel l'auteur a agi en tant que conseiller dramaturgique.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Bergner Elisabeth, Branagh Kenneth, Buchowetski Dmitri, Kurosawa Akira, Nielsen Asta, Olivier Laurence, V. I. Pudovkin, Reinhardt Max, Welles Orson

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