

Shakespeare Films Selected by Jerry Ferraccio, Santa Fe Shakespeare Society

It would take several lifetimes to see everything Shakespearean that has been recorded on film, videotape, and digital media. If you want some highlights, see the following movies (and other media), my personal faves ( I've included a few Shakespeare-inspired films).

***Romeo and Juliet*** (1968) is still the best version of this play on celluloid to date, even if Zeffirelli only used about 35% of Shakespeare's script. Perfectly cast with the young Leonard Whiting (17) as an almost-impossibly handsome Romeo and Olivia Hussey as a graceful Juliet (only 15 years old!), the supporting cast is all-star, too (Milo O'Shea, Pat Heywood and John McEnery, especially). Drenched in heat, love, lust, and lavish beauty.

***Much Ado About Nothing*** (1993) with Kenneth Branagh (who also directed), then-wife Emma Thompson, Kate Beckinsale, Richard Briers, Imelda Staunton and other gifted British actors hit the perfect note (although Staunton is underused as Margaret) in one of Branagh's best films. Unfortunately, neither Michael Keaton's disturbingly Beetlejuice-esque Dogberry nor Keanu Reeves' flat, monotone Don John give much credit to the American actors, although they are redeemed by Denzel Washington's dashing and charming Don Pedro.

***Henry V*** (1989) is arguably Kenneth Branagh's best work as a director: ugly where Olivier's version is pageant and regal splendor, it brings battlefield realism (mud, blood, chaos, and ethical ambiguity) to the fore, while embracing all the contradictions Henry navigates to win his war.

If you want to see a great *Macbeth*, go no further than Roman Polanski's 1971 version. The entire work evokes an 11<sup>th</sup> Century nightmare: a dirty, filthy, tainted world, where pageant and splendor rides side-by-side with beheadings and blood. It's just about perfect. Jon Finch (Macbeth) is the right balance of virile impulse and thoughtful rumination, a true tragic villain; and kudos to Francesca Annis (Lady Macbeth) for an amazing "Out, out damn spot," physically and emotionally naked. The juxtaposition of Polanski's foul visuals with the play's poetry is astonishingly raw.

Another very good *Macbeth* is Trevor Nunn's Royal Shakespeare Company production (1979), featuring Ian McKellen (Macbeth) and Judi Dench (Lady Macbeth). The TV version was directed by Philip Casson. Originally performed in the round before tiny audiences, on a bare stage and with simple costuming, this production really makes you feel like you are seeing it live. Dench, in particular, is unexpectedly unbalanced- warm and yet mentally unhinged, even before the murder of Duncan.

***Richard III*** (1995) is a fascinatingly fascist, 1930s take on Shakespeare's play, where deformed Richard Gloucester becomes King Richard by sly machinations and casual murder. Worth watching Dame Maggie Smith tear into Ian McKellan and then flee the country by plane! Daring and vigorous.

***The Hollow Crown*** (2012) is a must see, made for TV film series, covering Shakespeare's Henry plays: Richard II, Henry IV (parts one and two), and Henry V. A vast undertaking, and almost uniformly good. It features just about every well-known British actor under the sun, including Ben Wishaw, Rory Kinnear, David Suchet, Patrick Stewart, Lindsay Duncan, Jeremy Irons, Tom Hiddleston, Julie Walters, Alun Armstrong, Michelle Dockery, and John Hurt. Look for *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses* in 2016.

Some really great Shakespeare inspired works:

***Shakespeare in Love*** (1998): a delightful, fictional account of how Shakespeare came to write *Romeo and Juliet*. Although there are some tidbits to delight Shakespeare scholars (Shakespeare practicing his signature, a memorial cup from Stratford, a cameo by Anthony Sher, and references to the little we know of Shakespeare's life), it's best to take this as a delightful, respectful historic fiction. Shakespeare (a fantastic, subtle and sensitive Joseph Fiennes) finds his Muse in Viola De Lesseps (Gwyneth

Paltrow), the daughter of an ambitious merchant. About to be betrothed to a selfish, egotistical nobleman (brilliantly underplayed by Colin Firth), Viola yearns only for the magic of the stage, and is willing to break the law and dress as a boy to experience it. The delightful supporting cast includes Geoffrey Rush as the eccentric- and pragmatic Phillip Henslowe and Judi Dench as a frosty Queen Elizabeth I, whose chilly demeanor hides a surprisingly large and romantic heart. It deservedly won 7 Academy Awards, and should have won more.

***A Midwinter's Tale*** (1995). Written and directed by Kenneth Branagh, and filmed in black and white, this tells the story of Joe, a young actor and director desperate to restore his faith in himself by presenting *Hamlet* in his home town, called, appropriately, Hope. With only seven actors to play all the parts. And no budget. And constant bickering, nerves, and a heroine who refuses to wear glasses and therefore falls all over the place. It's brilliant, and restores your faith that Shakespeare belongs to regular, crazy, enthusiastic people. With Richard Briers, Hetta Charnley, Joan Collins, Nicholas Farrell, Gerard Horan, Jennifer Saunders, John Sessions, and Julia Sawalha. Its UK title was *In the Bleak Midwinter*.

***Slings & Arrows***: a three-season Canadian TV series, it covers the adventures of the New Burbage Shakespeare Festival, loosely-based on the Stratford Festival in Ontario. Geoffrey Tenant, a former star at the festival, returns after the death of his former friend and mentor to take up the reigns as Artistic Director. With a tenuous grip on his sanity, Geoffrey has to grapple with fist-fights, egos, funding, devious board members and all the other terrors that producers deal with every day. A must see, all three seasons!

***RAN*** (1985). Mixing *Lear* with legends of a 16th-century warlord, Kurosawa uses bright, primary colors and over 1,000 extras to create a scintillating kaleidoscope of blood and war- armies clash on behalf of leaders who are unworthy of so great a cost. The central character (played by Tatsuya Nakadai) is a brute getting his just desserts, and the film has no room for stereotypical honor or warrior codes- fighters are slain from afar in hails of arrows or mowed down by primitive guns. Equally brilliant is his Macbeth adaptation, *Throne Of Blood* (1957).

There are so many more works worth seeing: *West Side Story*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales*, *Chimes at Midnight*, the *BBC Television Shakespeare* (the entire canon: be warned, some are delightful and some are awful), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Reinhart's 1935 version, just for its star power and place in history), Zeffirelli's 1967 *Taming of the Shrew* (same reason) . . . .

Many of these are available at local libraries and small, owner-operated movie rental shops (such as our excellent Video Library, here in Santa Fe). Enjoy!