

Cinematic vs. Theatrical Space

Adapting Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

By: Naomi Noir

When William Shakespeare wrote the play *Romeo and Juliet* in 1595, he could not have anticipated the endless possibilities that adapting his story to film could offer. Free from the physical confines of the stage, the play's action, dialogue, and structure can all be transformed. 'Can' being the operative word, 'should' being the problematic question. "Shakespeare should only be read," states English essayist Charles Lamb.¹ "Shakespeare's plays were never printed in his lifetime. They were meant to be enjoyed in the immediate sense,"² writes Douglas Brode, author of *Shakespeare in the Movies*. "Less purity! Less respect! More provocation! More fun!" declares an arts review in the *Guardian*.³ There is no limit to the varying, and often strong, opinions on this ongoing debate over whether Shakespearean film has "a right to exist."⁴ So, can Shakespeare be adapted successfully to screen while still remaining true to the text? At what point does the story stop being Shakespeare, and become something else? What makes Shakespeare 'Shakespeare': the language, the plot, the spirit, or must it be a combination of all of the above?

"The uncertainty about just what Shakespearean film ought to strive to accomplish will no doubt continue unless there is an attempt to discern clearly the subtle and significant differences which distinguish the two media in their presentation of dramatic material."⁵

Anthony Davies wrote this in his essay *Filming Shakespeare's Plays* in which he does just that. Davies argues that the medium of film demands different sets of critical and aesthetic criteria from the stage by acknowledging the disparity between cinematic and theatrical space. These differences can, according to my observation, be divided into two categories: the *physical space* of the theatre verses that of the cinema, and the *internal space* as experienced by their audience. It is in these characteristics unique to each medium that one can begin to ascertain what makes a successful adaptation, and what doesn't.

¹ Lamb, Charles. *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare*. Godwin Publishing, 1811.

² Brode, Douglas. *Shakespeare in the Movies: From the Silent Era to Shakespeare in Love*. Oxford University Press, 2000. p.3

³ Logan, Brian. *Let's Shake Up Shakespeare*. www.guardian.co.uk. 27 November, 2006. p.1

⁴ Brode, Douglas. *Shakespeare in the Movies: From the Silent Era to Shakespeare in Love*. Oxford University Press, 2000. p.3

⁵ Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 1988. p.5

Physical Space

The most obvious difference between theatre and film is that in the theatre everything that the audience sees is three-dimensional and exists in the same physical space as they do, whereas film projects a three-dimensional illusion onto a two-dimensional screen. While the presentation of the world of the story is limited to the space of the stage in theatre, in cinema there is an infinite amount of space that can be explored. One example of this is ‘the reveal’ in which the camera pans or pulls back during a particular point in a scene to reveal more, and often surprising, information. The space remains the same throughout the scene, but the camera chooses what part of that space the spectator will see, a feat that is simply not feasible on a stage where the audience can choose where to look.

Theatre mimics reality. The stage actor plays a role and everyone watching knows that they are watching an actor act before them.⁶ Film on the other hand, according to Davies, is a reproduction of reality in which the actors are meant to *be* the character that they play. Film theorist Leo Braudy notes that “films make us fall in love with, admire, even hate human beings who may actually in the moment we watch them be dead and dust.”⁷ Davies believes that this act of extreme empathy occurs because the action continues off screen for a character in a film, while in theatre the action is limited to the frame of the stage so that when a performer walks off into the wings they are no longer a character but actor waiting for cue. Though there is a physical frame around a movie screen, we perceive the character as so real that even when not in a scene they continue to exist as real in our minds.

While Braudy maintains that acting has taken on the central importance of film because of the audience’s identification with the struggles of the character,⁸ Davies asserts that it is in fact the actor of the stage who reigns supreme because they manipulate the theatre space and interact with its props. There would be no play without actors, but there can be a film without them. “The actor on the stage is an autonomous manipulator of theatre space” he writes, “but on the screen he is part of the manipulated space within the frame.”⁹ Therefore, according to him it is the environment that is the most important element in cinema.

⁶ Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare’s Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 1988. p.9

⁷ Braudy, Leo. *Acting: Stage vs. Screen*. Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 425

⁸ Braudy, Leo. *Acting: Stage vs. Screen*. Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 425

⁹ Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare’s Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 1988. p.10

Yet another difference between theatrical and cinematic space is that in the theatre objects are props and therefore take on qualities of being fake. Davies describes this as “a living actor in dead scenery.”¹⁰ Objects in a film, on the other hand, are part of the character’s world. Because both the actor and the object are compressed into the same medium, they both exist in each other’s reality, a reality perceived as real by the average movie-goer. Thus the object becomes as real as the character that holds it.

Furthermore, the action that takes place within the physical space of the stage encompasses the meaning of that action. According to André Bazin, renowned French film critic and theorist “it is because that infinity which the theatre demands cannot be spatial that its area can be none other than the human soul...”¹¹ Cinematic space, on the other hand, utilizes the structure of the film to convey its meaning. Through shots and editing an actor’s performance can be altered as discovered in Lev Kuleshov’s famous 1910 experiment in which he took an identical shot of an expressionless man sitting and looking off screen and cut it together with three separate shots of a bowl of soup, a girl, and a child’s coffin. Called the Kuleshov Effect, those who viewed the combined shots bestowed differing emotions onto the same shot of the man depending on which image had been cut together with the shot.¹² This is unique to the medium of cinema and one of the ways in which a more subtle performance of Shakespeare’s plays can achieve an equally powerful meaning.

Internal Space

“The nature of the audience relationship with the stage space is both psychologically and architecturally determined”¹³ asserts Davies. The theatre is first and foremost a social experience where audience members can watch both the play and each other (if they wish). Going to the movies, conversely, may start off as a social affair, but as soon as the lights go out and the lion roars it becomes an act of individual escapism in which the viewer becomes so thoroughly engaged in what they are being shown (if it’s a good movie, of course) that the physical space which they occupy ceases to be. The physical spatial separation that exists both between the audience and stage and the audience and screen is overcome in cinema in a way that it cannot in

¹⁰ Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare’s Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 1988. p.11

¹¹ Bazin, André. *What is Cinema?* University of California Press, 1971. p.13

¹² Vardac, Nicholas A. *Stage to Screen*. Benjamin Bloom, Inc. New York, 1949. p.17

¹³ Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare’s Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 1988. p.5

theatre. While physically the audiences of both theatre and film are stationary, the film audience moves with the camera (pans, zooms, aerial shots, shot-reverse-shot, etc).¹⁴ Seeing through the eyes of the camera, the cinema audience experiences an interior dimension that enables an intense identification with characters, especially through the use of the close-up. This is not the case in the theatre in which the action is viewed from the exterior of the theatrical boundaries of stage space. In the theatre every single audience member has a slightly different view depending on where they are sitting, while every single person in a movie theatre has the same view, a communal experience that can be powerfully uniting.

Carried through the story by the moving camera the cinema audience is along for the ride as a passive spectator. In the theatre, however, the spectator must be an active participant in directing their attention toward the stage. Stage actors often play off of audience reaction, and the success of a play is ultimately dependent on audience response. A movie plays the same whether the audience is laughing, crying, or booing (the booing only happens when the film is unsuccessful and the audience becomes aware that they are watching a movie). When the film audience is taken out of the film, in what Davies calls a “sense of unacceptable artificiality,”¹⁵ is the only time they become objective. Theatre actors have the much more difficult job of pleasing an audience made up of actively objective critics who know that everything they are watching is a lie meant to manipulate them into having a good time.

Adaptations

The objective audience, it seems, is one of the essential differences between a successful and unsuccessful adaptation of Shakespeare to the silver screen. To clarify, by ‘successful’ I mean adaptations that in some way exploit the potential of cinematic space in order to deepen our connection with the play. This hasn’t always been easy. During the silent film era a number of Shakespeare adaptations were attempted, but with title cards used to summarize plot and reduce speeches down to a single line, “only with the coming of sound could justice be done to Shakespeare’s plays.”¹⁶ Still, sound didn’t solve all the problems of early adaptations. “The

¹⁴ Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare’s Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 1988. p. 14

¹⁵ Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare’s Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 1988. p. 12

¹⁶ Manvell, Roger. *Shakespeare & the Film*. Praeger Publishers. New York, 1971. p.3

history of the adaptation of Shakespeare's plays to the screen is also the history of the adaptation of the screen to Shakespeare's plays,"¹⁷ explains Roger Manville, author of *Shakespeare & Film*.

The first version of *Romeo and Juliet* with sound was produced in 1936 by Director George Cukor. Here is an example of the reception it received as voiced by playwright Graham Greene: "I am less than ever convinced that there is an aesthetic justification for filming Shakespeare at all... the effect of even the best scenes is to distract."¹⁸ The scenes distracted because they respected the historical conventions and styles of stage acting while almost always keeping the camera static. Here the potential of cinematic space is completely ignored and the film on which the play is shot is used as a tool of "transmission and preservation."¹⁹ Cinema thus becomes a medium to capture a staged performance in a staged space.

Davies proposes that the solution to this inevitably false-feeling product is not to use cinema as a medium, but instead as a form that creates new relationships between actor and place, and space and time²⁰ Instead of being restricted by the special dimensions of the stage, a successful adaptation should fully utilize the spatial potential of cinema. It is my opinion that no one has utilized it like in Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo + Juliet*.²¹ The prologue alone includes montage, zooms, pans and reveals setting the visual landscape of the feuding houses in their modernized world in which they exist before the first scene even takes place. Another simple but ingenious example from the film is the meeting of Romeo and Juliet through a fish tank separating the men's and women's bathroom. The star-crossed lovers are literally seeing each other through another world.

One of the other reasons why Luhrmann's version was so successful was that he did not limit the story to the confines and protocol of the times in which it was originally set, referred to by Davies as geo-historical authenticity. Furthermore, the unsuccessful adaptation confines itself to the historical environment and/or landscape in which the original play takes place. A perfect example of this is Renato Castellani's 1954 color film adaptation of the same play, shot in Italy

¹⁷ Manvell, Roger. *Shakespeare & the Film*. Praeger Publishers. New York, 1971. p.9

¹⁸ Jackson, Russell (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. p.21

¹⁹ Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 1988. p.9

²⁰ Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 1988. p.9

²¹ *Romeo + Juliet* (Baz Luhrmann, USA, 1996)

with as much authenticity as then possible.²² To his credit, Castellani did attempt originality by cutting certain scenes and dialogue that did not involve the central story of the two lovers while keeping the rest authentic. The result was a confusing and boring film about a boy in tights who runs about whining a lot and a silly girl with a fancy hairdo who thinks he's cute.

A successful adaptation transcends historical boundaries to tell story where best suited. Examples of this are Orson Well's *Voodoo Macbeth*²³, *West Side Story*²⁴, and the fictional Verona Beach of Luhrmann's visionary film. In these films the environment and/or landscape sets the mood acting as another character in the film²⁵. When Mercutio dies in Castellani's film he falls to the ground of the brightly lit courtyard, says his lines and dies. In Luhrmann's version, he staggers towards the turbulent grey ocean as a storm rolls in and palm trees sway violently in the wind. The sky opens up and drenches Romeo and Mercutio utters his last words "a curse on both your houses." The cinematic impact is obvious.

To Speak or not to Speak?

That is the question. Obviously film adaptations that have kept the language have been successful, notably with Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 traditional version of *Romeo and Juliet*²⁶, popular for it's use of young actors in the leading rolls for the first time, and of course with the aforementioned Luhrman adaptation. But in an age where 'Show don't tell' is the mantra of the modern day screenwriter, and *10 Things I Hate About You*²⁷ is the contemporary take on *The Taming of the Shrew*, the question is: why bother?

"Filmmakers, faced with the necessity of adapting the plays to a different, some would say alien, medium, are tempted to make free with the text, cutting it back to the barest essentials in order that they may carry the action forward in broadly pictorial terms."²⁸

²² *Romeo and Juliet* (Renato Castellani, UK, 1954)

²³ *Voodoo Macbeth* (Orson Wells, Federal Theatre Project, USA, 1936)

²⁴ *West Side Story* (Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins, USA, 1961).

²⁵ Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 1988. p.10

²⁶ *Romeo and Juliet* (Franco Zeffirelli, Italy, 1968).

²⁷ *Ten Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, USA, 1999)

²⁸ Manvell, Roger. *Shakespeare & the Film*. Praeger Publishers. New York, 1971. p.13

This is not an option argues Frank Kermode in his book *Shakespeare's Language*²⁹. Kermode writes about the complexities and nuances of the different forms of poetry Shakespeare used. From the rhythm of the language to the number of lines in a verse, the poetry itself adds a layer of meaning that would be lost without the original use of the language. Kermode argues that the language is deliberate and essential to the meaning of the story. He uses an example from the play *Romeo and Juliet* in which the type of language is used as a reflection of mature love in contrast to earlier romantic flowery language regarding Romeo's infatuation with the mysterious Rosaline: "Romeo abandons the artificial language that goes with his youthful posing, and as his language clears, Juliet also becomes a plain speaker."³⁰ This use of the plainest possible style to signal the gravity of their situation would not be achievable without the earlier use of extravagant poetry.

Roger Manville suggest that the only way to successfully preserve the spirit of the language in order to make a film which is more accessible is by "carefully replacing Shakespeare's poetic imagery with imagery re-conceived visually."³¹ Manville goes on to use Akira Kurosawa's version of Macbeth, *Throne of Blood*³², as a successful example of poetic imagery replacing the visually stimulating dialogue that would have been needed to set the scene and mood for a low-budget Elizabethan production with little scenery or props³³ but which has become superfluous in the visual medium of the cinema: "It would be indeed an odd outcome to our discussion if it transpired that Shakespeare's plays stand the best chance of a wholly satisfying transfer to the screen in those countries which are farthest removed from his overwhelming verbal influence."

The truth is that though we may technically speak the same native language in the English speaking world that Shakespeare spoke, the modern movie-goer can no longer understand all of the subtleties, jokes, or even simple sayings that he wrote for the Elizabethan audience. If anything, Shakespeare was accessible in his time with low jokes and plot

²⁹ Kermode, Frank. *Shakespeare's Language*. Farrat, Straus, and Giroux, 2000.

³⁰ Kermode, Frank. *The Age of Shakespeare*. Random House. New York, 2003. p.88

³¹ Manvell, Roger. *Shakespeare & the Film*. Praeger Publishers. New York, 1971.p.13

³² *Throne of Blood* (Akira Kurosawa, Japan, 1957)

³³ Brode, Douglas. *Shakespeare in the Movies: From the Silent Era to Shakespeare in Love*. Oxford University Press. New York, 2000.

summarizing speeches. Should we then dispense of the language that so many find confusing and alienating? If Shakespeare were a screenwriter, would he be a purist?

“It is well known that the degree of almost hypnotic attention we pay to what we *see* (especially in the artificial conditions of the darkened cinema with its highly lit screen) is very much greater than the attention to what we *hear*,” Manville reminds us.³⁴ This, he says, is a challenge for directors of Shakespeare adaptations because as an audience we take in an actor’s “*manner of expression*” rather than their actual choice of words. Manville suggests the use of the close-up as a technique for encouraging the audience pay greater attention to Shakespeare’s dialogue. With nothing but the inner dimension of the character to distract them, the audience is forced to concentrate on the full meaning of what is being said. Patrick Stewart accomplishes this brilliantly as Macbeth in PBS’s *Great Performances*³⁵ series. The camera slowly moves in on him as he speaks to himself those famous words “is this a dagger that I see before me?”

Curtains Down

The above scene is a perfect example of marrying Shakespeare with the cinema. It seems to me that with the massive potential of cinema that it is a waste not to use those conventions to better tell Shakespeare’s stories. ‘Shakespeare is like a genre, similar to the western, that offers materials for contemporary statement.’³⁶ There will always be a demand for a new adaptation to keep up with the next generation of changing youth.

“One of the many things that *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet* continue to demonstrate that now is never now for long. The years between that writing of Sondheim’s lyrics “Cool” in the mid-fifties and the emergence of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones in the early sixties, and a way in which the sixties took the fifties (them, us) by surprise.”³⁷

One can only wonder after the Disney approved happy ending of *High School Musical*³⁸ (Romeo and Juliet set in, you guessed it, and American High School where instead of dying everyone bursts out in song at the end) what our youth will want to see next. I’m thinking *Romeo*

³⁴ Manvell, Roger. *Shakespeare & the Film*. Praeger Publishers, 1971.p.14

³⁵ *Macbeth* (Great Performances, UK, 2012)

³⁶ Braudy, Leo. *Acting: Stage vs. Screen*. Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 424

³⁷ Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*. Pantheon Books. New York, 2008. p.49

³⁸ *High School Musical* (Kenny Ortega, USA, 2006).

and Juliet in outer space (Romeo will be from Mars and Juliet from Venus, of course). To quote Bazin “to adapt is no longer to betray but to respect.”³⁹ As long as we continue to explore both traditional and experimental takes on Shakespeare through the movies, the debate will go on, and we will continue to uncover the many truths buried in the words of Shakespeare. Read it, act it, or watch it, love it or hate it, I bet you’ve got an opinion.

³⁹ Bazin, André. *What is Cinema?* University of California Press, 1971.

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