

**2019 Seminar Abstracts: Shakespeare in Film History**  
**Greg Semenza, University of Connecticut**

**SAA Seminar Description:**

**Shakespeare in Film History (#42).** Saturday, April 20<sup>th</sup>. 4:00-6:00 PM.

In spite of increased sensitivity within Adaptation Studies to the importance of history for adaptation and appropriation, the literary text too often continues to dominate the conception and structure of most studies of literature on film. This seminar seeks to redress this imbalance by exploring how Shakespeare films have functioned and evolved in the context of the film industry. Papers are welcome on the cultural and political forces at work in various eras of film history from 1895-2018.

**Seminar Respondent:**

**Courtney Lehmann, University of the Pacific**

**Eric Brown, University of Maine at Farmington**

**“The Lost Years: *All Is True* and the Branagh Lacuna”**

For the better part of a decade, no film director did more to build and popularize cinematic Shakespeare than Kenneth Branagh. Critical and box office successes, his films were the crown jewels of 1990s Shakespeare on screen. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Branagh was poised to deliver increasingly experimental adaptive works: a musical *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, a Mafioso *Macbeth*, and a version of *As You Like It* set in Japan. *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, however, was perhaps the greatest flop of 2000 and doomed the others—*As You Like It* was eventually completed but had minimal theatrical release and maximal poor reception. *Macbeth* was never made.

Twelve years have passed since Branagh’s last Shakespeare film, during which time he morphed from the gritty upstart crow of *Henry V* to a polished deliverer of recent Hollywood blockbusters. As Branagh remarked in 2015, “*Thor* changed everything. I couldn’t tell you why they thought of me. I had just come off three films that hadn’t done so well at the box office: *As You Like It*, *The Magic Flute* and *Sleuth*. They were all films I was proud of. But they didn’t move the dial at all. I wasn’t hot.”

Branagh’s 2018 Shakespearean biopic *All Is True*, on the surface, lends an arc of romance to his directorial work: sudden (box office) fortune has restored an abandoned first love. But *All Is True* is unlike any other Branagh treatment of Shakespeare, strongly ambivalent about the art and the man. This paper will consider the gap in Branagh’s career, exploring especially the current historical moment in (re)shaping his return to Shakespeare.

**Stephen M. Buhler, University of Nebraska-Lincoln**

**“Listening to Soviet Shakespeares”**

This paper re-examines the reception of four accomplished Shakespeare films produced in the Soviet Union during the extended post-Stalin era: Fried's *Twelfth Night* (1955), Yutkevich's *Othello* (1955), and Kozintsev's *Hamlet* (1964) and *King Lear* (1970). The focus will be on the actual dialogue spoken by the actors and on the dubbing and subtitles provided in prints meant for English-speaking audiences. In most cases, the English versions of the dramatic language revert back to Shakespeare's texts (however sharply edited), rather than offer renderings of the Russian used to translate Shakespeare for audiences within the Soviet Union. This practice creates a variation on linguistic false friendship, suggesting an identity of listening experiences for different audiences, eliding debates among Soviet viewers about the diction used in the films, and misleadingly suggesting levels of “fidelity” to Shakespearean language that the film makers avoid.

**Catherine G. Canino, University of South Carolina Upstate**

**“Silent Story Telling in Early Shakespeare Films”**

In 1927, the German theatrical producer Max Reinhardt wrote an essay for *The New York Times* in which he railed against the relatively new medium of film. “Moving pictures are a dangerous parasite of the theatre,” he writes, “Music borrowed from opera cannot save film from that unfortunate dumbness to which is its fate. Whither is this ever increasing staging of masses to lead?” Less than a decade later, Reinhardt was named the director of Warner Brothers’ filmed production of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and, in a remarkable example of self-fulfilling prophesy, created an over-staged, over-cast, overwrought jumble of Rococo décor, Pre-Christian Greece, Sixteenth Century England, Nineteenth-Century Book illustrations, and Victorian etchings, interspersed with extended ballet sequences and an overpowering operatic score. The film failed at the box office, as did the other “pre-Olivier” Shakespearean films of the 1930s. The problem did not lie in the subject matter—Shakespeare had succeeded in the silent era of the 1900s and 1920s---but in a basic misunderstanding of film that was voiced by Reinhardt and shared by others in the nascent industry. Film is not a parasite of theatre, as Reinhardt claimed, because it is not artistically related to theatre. Rather, film is an artistic descendent of the visual arts, or precisely, of the still photograph, and became a brilliant realization of that medium. At its inception, film was intended to be entirely visual, and in the silent era that intention was perfectly fulfilled. Stories were told through moving pictures, characters communicated with gesture and facial expressions and, periodically, the more complicated dialogue or expository material was visually displayed on inter-titles. When sound was introduced into film, many filmmakers saw the art form differently and attempted to make movies into filmed stage plays, using material that was dialogue heavy and more appropriate for the theatre. Occasionally, as in the case of musicals or comedies, they were successful; more often, as in the case of Shakespeare or other adaptations of classic literature, they were not. The reasons were based on the expectations of genre. Musicals rely on short, snappy dialogue and visual spectacle. Comedies rely on short snappy dialogue and physical action. Shakespeare and

classic literature rely on complicated language, significant subtext, and emotional nuance, none of which were easily realized in early film. This tension between the vision of film as an expression of images and the vision of film as an expression of dialogue is conspicuously evident in two Shakespearean films that were produced by rival studios within a year of each other. The first is Reinhardt's *Midsummer Night's Dream* from Warner Brothers, and the second is George Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* from MGM. These films attempt, and fail, to reconcile both of the aforementioned cinematic visions. They have extended periods of dialogue but are bloated with spectacle and visual effect. They feature a collection of stage and film actors who are trying to negotiate iambic pentameter while learning the art of the close-up. They contain overlong scenes that are in serious need of editing, and camera shots with an unnecessarily narrow field of vision. Nonetheless, despite their failings, each of these films includes one scene that works remarkably well, primarily because it reaches back to film's original intent and art form. Reinhardt and Cukor both begin their movies with extended pantomimes that function primarily as silent films. These scenes are wordless, and rely exclusively on gesture and facial expression to give the audience exposition and understanding. In addition to the actions of the characters, the scenes also provide remarkable narrative images that testify to film's unique storytelling abilities. These are not the first instances, of course, when the "talkies" returned to their roots and inserted a "silent film scene" within an otherwise sound film; the Marx Brothers were famous for such scenes even before Reinhardt and Cukor imagined them. Within a few generations, the "silent scene" became a staple of movie-making, and, in effect, now functions as an ancient chorus for modern films—providing background and off-stage information, displaying character and time development, and bringing the audience closer to the narrative. However, the Cukor and Reinhardt opening pantomime scenes, though not as famous as the mirror scene in *Duck Soup* or the monster's encounter with a little girl in *Frankenstein*, proved to be particularly influential on subsequent Shakespearean films. Since the release of these two films, directors of Shakespeare films invariably use a pantomime scene not only to act as a chorus, but also to allow the director to become both *auteur* and Shakespearean scholar and insert his own personal interpretation of Shakespeare's work into the film. This paper will examine Cukor and Reinhardt's pantomime scenes in detail, and trace their influence on subsequent Shakespearean films.

**Melissa Croteau, California Baptist University**

**"Tinsel Town Histories:**

**Casey Wilder Mott's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2018) in Hollywood"**

While many fine volumes have been published on the adaptation of literature to film, there is no consensus in regard to the methodology that best attends this type of study. In actuality, adaptation studies covers a broad constellation of interrelated concepts and methodologies, to a large extent because it is always already interdisciplinary in nature, encompassing both the literary and the cinematic texts plus the transtextual, interpretive process of creating a new piece of work in dialogue with one or multiple hypotexts. This can particularly be a struggle in analyses of Shakespeare adapted to film due to the nature of the language and the long legacy of performance in several media, each of which has its own history. This essay explores the cinematic historical contexts in a recent film adaptation, Casey Wilder Mott's engaging *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2018), an indie-style romantic comedy set in present-day Los Angeles that retains Shakespeare's language. Mott, a ten-year veteran of the Hollywood-based

film industry, places the play in dialogue with the discourses of film history. Instead of looking at previous adaptations of *MND* to read this one, this paper examines the ways in which the film participates in significant Hollywood generic categories, such as contemporary romantic comedy and screwball comedy of the 1930s and early 1940s, but also subgenres such as romantic films specifically about Los Angeles and the film industry, such as *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *The Artist* (2011), and *La La Land* (2016). Mott's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* generates meaning through its intersections with numerous hypotexts of diverse types, thereby weaving together an interpretation of the play that illuminates the play expressly for twenty-first century audiences. Accordingly, this study will apply the concepts of Gerard Genette's theory of transtextuality and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, heteroglossia, and intertextuality throughout.

**Don-John Dugas, Kent State University**

**“Echoes of *Henry V* in Victor Korda's *Sahara* (1943)”**

Zoltan Korda's *Sahara* is an impressive double adaptation. Its major text ultimately derives from Philip MacDonald's 1927 novel, *Patrol*. Its minor text is none other than Shakespeare's *Henry V*—a fact that appears to have escaped notice.

This unlikely synthesis was the product of the historical moment in which *Sahara* was made. MacDonald's story had already proved itself a fertile source for cinematic adaptation, inspiring no fewer than three film versions in the decade following its publication. Commercially, *Patrol* had much to recommend it in 1943. Politically and culturally, it could no longer be told in its original form for the simple reason that its message is decidedly anti-war.

The solution director Korda, adaptor James O'Hanlon, and screenwriter John Howard Lawson arrived at involved adding material inspired by and even from *Henry V* to give MacDonald's story the pro-war message Hollywood and the American public demanded. Unfortunately, the kind of victory *Henry V* depicts was not something they could use because the outcome of World War II was still very much in doubt in early 1943. So while they retained the basic structure of Shakespeare's Agincourt, the “victory” they portrayed, while still heroic to the point of implausibility, was the highest form conceivable in that historical moment: sacrificing the unit—possibly to the last man—in order to buy time for the Allies to assemble a force capable of overthrowing the Axis.

**Scott Hollifield, The University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

**“Shakespearean Film Technologies and the Birth of Consumable Wonder”**

Beyond his material value as appropriatee and cultural value as muse, Shakespeare's words and author-consciousness are foundational components of our cultural consciousness. More deeply interwoven with narrative cinema than mere adaptation or appropriation, Shakespeare's tendrils wend through the ways Western audiences hear and process dialogue, connect sound and image, navigate between images, and construct their expectations of dramatic scale. With a keen awareness of the epic auditor's imagination, the poet fostered a convincing illusion: That two senses, perhaps those easiest to lose or take for granted, can stand for all five.

From the printing press to the motion picture camera, each modern replication technology has rendered intimate sensory subjectivities visual while revealing those most private impressions as irrevocably public. Readily evidenced in the visual arts (and exemplified in Walter Benjamin's invocation of the word *kultisch* in "The Work of Art..."), this dichotomy requires the spectator to construct a private, interpretive bubble within which to direct their observing eye. In the public, gallery-like spaces of theater and cinema—each defined by the technologies it eschews or contains—many first encounter Shakespeare. But theater allows willing eyes to wander its non-theatrical spaces and ears to dial in the significance of their choosing, while cinema locks eyes and ears in the forward position, antennae to receive meaning rather than subjectively process it.

The earliest cinematic spectators, however, enjoyed the privilege of looking through the camera eye for themselves. Whether hypnotized by a spinning zoetrope or riveted to the eyepiece of an Edison-Dickson kinoscope, they functioned as agents of their own perception, retaining a fundamental advantage of the theater. In technological circumstances more or less under their control, these makers of perceived motion became the authors of moving images, like a film editor cutting a sequence together or an actor reinterpreting a role. If that actor's job is indeed, as Hamlet observes, "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" and the screen actor's fate, as Walter Benjamin put it, is "the same kind of estrangement felt before one's own image in the mirror," the reflected image each actor strains to discern is Shakespeare, lurking at the edges of the mirror's frame and reiterated in its bevels and planes.

**Anthony Guy Patricia, Concord University**

**"Queer Shakespeare Film and the Problems of Unhistoricism, Presentism, and Historicism"**

As evidenced by the recent work of Will Stockton ("The Fierce Urgency of Now: Queer Theory, Presentism, and *Romeo and Juliet*"), Mario DiGangi ("Shakespeare After Queer Theory"), and Valerie Traub ("New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies"), concerns have been raised about some Shakespeareans' engagement with the theoretical/analytical concepts of unhistoricism and presentism. The overarching problem seems to be that "unhistoricists" and "presentists," while right to be leery about the "straightwashing" of things that traditional history sometimes tends to engender, are in actuality in danger of eliding far too much of history that is truly valuable and productive to analysis—particularly queer analysis. So far, this debate has focused only on the print texts of Shakespeare's works. As such, part of the purpose of this paper is to map the debate about merits between unhistoricist/presentist critics and their historicist (whether old or new) counterparts onto the field of queer Shakespeare film. Arguably, queer Shakespeare film is something of an anomaly within the larger conception of Shakespearean cinema as a whole. What counts as queer Shakespeare film? Does the fact that there is one significant male same-sex kiss (between Antonio and Bassanio) in Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004) make that a queer Shakespeare film? Does a film like Tom Gustafson's *Were the World Mine* (2008) count as a queer Shakespeare film given that it is a musical appropriation of—rather than a more-or-less strictly faithful adaptation of—*A Midsummer Night's Dream* with plenty of homoerotic elements as well as messages against bullying and for same-sex marriage (the film appeared a few years before the U.S. Supreme Court would rule in favor of same-sex marriage)? Or, in both

cases, are these mere ahistorical interpolations on the part of 21<sup>st</sup>-century queer/queer-allied Shakespeare filmmakers? Furthermore, how do such questions—and their possible answers—fit within the larger rubric of Shakespeare and (queer) film history?

**Kendra Preston Leonard, Silent Film Sound and Music Archive**

**“Shakespeare, Elizabeth, and Early Modern Song in the Early Cinema”**

Shakespeare was a popular source for early filmmakers: his works were in the public domain, they helped the nascent film industry promote its offerings as high art, and they appealed to actors and audiences alike. During the silent era (c.1895-1927), more than five hundred adaptations of Shakespeare’s works—which could represent up to twenty-five percent of all studio-produced films made during the period—were made as “silent films.”<sup>1</sup> But silent Shakespearean films, like most silent movies, would have been accompanied by music. These films and the music for them can tell us much about attitudes towards Shakespeare’s work and the issues his plays raise, such as those surrounding gender, religious, class, and ethnic difference. I will explore two genres of silent film music used for Shakespeare in early film: that which depicts early modern English culture; and that which was used for the exotic or Other, such as music for Cleopatra and Shylock. Pieces such as Gaston Borch’s 1916 *Songs from Shakespeare’s Time* indicate that heroic characters were accompanied by well-known seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pieces and new works that mimicked early modern dance tunes and songs written for the aristocracy by professional male musicians, while music for Cleopatra is redolent of sinuous and chromatic nineteenth-century “snake charmer” motifs and that for mysterious but still “civilized” Venice is filled with signifiers for romance with hints of tragedy.

**Marguerite Rippy, Marymount University**

**“Orson Welles and The Other Side of Shakespeare”**

The 2018 re-edited Netflix release of Orson Welles’s unfinished film, *The Other Side of the Wind*, has been well received critically, often as “a summarizing work that, in its themes and methods, illuminates the entirety of Welles’s oeuvre...” (Hoberman). While reviewers note Welles’s use of Shakespeare (characters try to “top each other with Shakespearean bon mots,” according to Hoberman), they have yet to engage with the significance of Shakespeare in this capstone Wellesian work. Shakespeare in *The Other Side of the Wind* acts as a signpost, a marker of sorts, of not just Welles’s work with the Bard over the course of his career, but also of a type of intermedia improvisation that leaned away from classic cinema and toward collaborative performance art. This multitextual play increasingly informed his late-career aesthetic and contrasted attempts to position him as a solo genius director.

A highly collaborative film in its production, *Other Side of the Wind* is a result of a team editing footage shot over 10 years by Welles and his cinematographer Gary Graver; in style it reflects the influences of his partner and lead actress, Oja Kodar. Reviews thus far have focused on the

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

editing process, the film's conscious meditation on and critique of emerging styles of cinema in the 1960s and 70s, and the self-referential plot of a documentary filmmaker following an aging film director, Jake Hannaford (John Huston), as his last project falls apart. Welles uses Shakespeare to represent issues of authorship, performance, and power—familiar themes in his work—in this late-career film, and Welles self-consciously connects Shakespeare to both the aging on-screen Hannaford and the aging off-screen Welles. Shakespeare's line, "Our revels now are ended" frames Hannaford's contemplation of his last film's final scene, and the central theme of the film emerges as an aging Prospero contemplating the world he has created but that has evolved beyond him.

*Other Side of the Wind* suggests a legacy not of Shakespearean Welles, but of Shakespearean cinema. Welles associates Shakespeare with "play" in the sense of free play that recognizes and yet challenges conventions of camera use, of physical performance, of language itself. Welles marks these moments of playfulness with Shakespearean references, leading viewers to contemplate the malleability of cinematic art, rather than its fixedness.

**Amy Rodgers, Mount Holyoke College**

**"What's Class Got To Do With It?:  
Parsing Social Taxonomies in Cinematic Shakespeare."**

In his 2014 monograph *Reading Class in Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton*, Christopher Warley claims that "class criticism...emerge[s] occasionally in its full-throated actualist mode, but it typically appears by not appearing..." A similar sleight-of-hand occurs in much of Shakespeare's cinematic canon and scholarship based upon it: few Shakespeare adaptations (re)focus on class as a central concern. In part, this tendency derives from a fidelity issue; Shakespeare's plays rarely place social class at their ideological center. However, while late twentieth- and early twenty-first adaptations adjust their perspective to bring contemporary issues of race (Tim Blake Nelson's 2001 *O*); gender (Baz Luhrman's 1996 *Romeo + Juliet*); abuses of state power (Richard Loncraine's 1995 *Richard III*); and religious-ethnic conflict (Vishal Bhardwaj's 2014 *Haider*) to the fore, they tend to show class either as an element of *mise-en-scène* (such as Ralph Fiennes' 2012 *Coriolanus*) or erase it as fully as possible (such as Joss Whedon's 2012 *Much Ado*).

One recent film stands out as an exception: William Morrisette's 2001 *Scotland, PA*.<sup>2</sup> Unlike scholars who have studied this film as a commentary on the (failed) American Dream (Deitchman, 2006); as using class as interpellative marketing strategy (Brown 2006); or as a shared (with Shakespeare's text) philosophical exercise in *otium* (Moore 2017), I explore *Scotland PA* as a litmus test for why contemporary adaptations shy away from taking on class as a central narrative/thematic artery. In particular, I look at the film's swerve into comedy as directly related to this aversive desire or *aporia*.

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<sup>2</sup> Wise and Robbin's *West Side Story* constitutes another counterexample to this trend; while I will have time to reference it only briefly in this paper, this film's status as musical aligns with my argument that any focus on class will force an adjustment of the tragic genre.

**Garrett A. Sullivan, Pennsylvania State University**

**“The Black-White Gentleman:  
*Othello, The Man in Grey* and the Melodrama of Anglo-West Indian Relations”**

My paper, which is part of a book project on Shakespeare and British World War 2 film, centers on Leslie Arliss’s appropriation of *Othello* in the costume melodrama *The Man in Grey* (1943). One of the critically notorious, and wildly popular, bodice-rippers produced by Gainsborough Studios, *The Man in Grey* puts *Othello* to cultural work to two main ends. First, it explores, by way of the character of Swinton Rokeby (Stewart Granger), wartime tensions within British national identity. The narrative trajectory of the white Jamaican Rokeby, who appears in blackface in a regional performance of *Othello*, captures anxieties about race, sexuality and colonial participation that are generated by the migration to Britain of black West Indians to aid in the war effort. Second, the film takes aim, by way of its irreverent quotation of Shakespeare, at the cinematic value system of the period. In appropriating *Othello* as it does, *The Man in Grey* collapses the distance between Shakespearean tragedy and costume melodrama, thereby mocking the canons of taste generally shared by film companies, period critics and the propagandists at the Ministry of Information. To put it another way, the film gives the people what they want at Shakespeare’s expense, even while mobilizing Shakespeare to do so.

**Donna Young, Oklahoma Baptist University**

**“Michael Almereyda’s Millennial Adaptation of *Hamlet*:  
Palimpsest or Postmodern Pastiche?”**

Almereyda’s *Hamlet* strongly diverges from what early adaptation theorists would term *authentic* adaptation, setting the action in turn-of-the-millennium New York City. This setting resounds with its postmodern environment and seems to suggest that there is no longer any real originality, but only repetition and imitation. Indeed, Almereyda’s adaptation vividly includes echoes of other *Hamlet* performances, thereby declaring that it is not a completely original work, but the latest layer of a palimpsest that is the *Hamlet* tradition. Rather than subtle references to previous *Hamlet* films that exist in earlier adaptations, Almereyda overtly demonstrates the intertextual nature of his film using other signals that provide a sense of disjunction that defines the postmodern movement. In theoretical terms, the palimpsestic overwriting that unsuccessfully attempted to obliterate the previous performance text that defined cinematic *Hamlet* performance during the twentieth century becomes blurred into pastiche as Almereyda boldly acknowledges the tradition that precedes him, weaving references to previous films in a surface intertextuality that suggests random allusion to the past. In keeping with postmodern notions, and adapting to turn-of-the-century audiences, Almereyda’s screenplay utilizes only about forty percent of Shakespeare’s text. This condensation creates a “collage, a patchwork of intuitions, images and ideas” (Almereyda *William* xii) that incorporates cinematic traditions of *Hamlet* adaptations while establishing its location in the history of Shakespearean film adaptations as distinctly a part of the postmodern millennial moment.



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