

**FILM DIRECTOR KENNETH BRANAGH'S QUEST TO POPULARIZE  
SHAKESPEARE**

A Thesis

By

KENNETH WESLEY KNIGHT

Submitted to the Graduate School

Appalachian State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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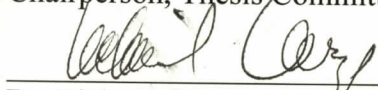
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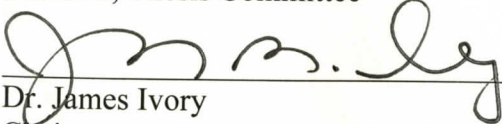
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## ABSTRACT

### FILM DIRECTOR KENNETH BRANAGH'S QUEST TO POPULARIZE SHAKESPEARE

(August 2009)

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During the 1990s the public's fascination with the plays of William Shakespeare was at an all time high. This cultural interest was sparked in 1989 with director Kenneth Branagh's film version of *Henry V*. His early financial success led to Hollywood studios green-lighting production on dozens of Shakespeare adaptations. My thesis will focus on the cultural impact of the Shakespeare film adaptations of Kenneth Branagh as he attempted to bridge the divide between high and popular culture. The paper will investigate the history of the plays on film, argue that Shakespeare film adaptations are a more effective introduction to the material than a theater performance, and then go into an in-depth analysis of Branagh's career as the "New Laurence Olivier." The thesis will then conclude with some thoughts about how Shakespeare can once again become a part of a larger popular culture and widen its audience into the twenty-first century.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to the staff and fellow graduate students of the Appalachian State University English department. A special thanks to Dr. William Brewer and Dr. Roger Stilling for their help and valuable insight. To Dr. Richard Carp, thank you for being my mentor and friend. Thanks to Dr. Jennifer Munroe at UNC Charlotte for her positive energy and encouragement. However, most of all, I dedicate this thesis to mom, dad, and Liz who have given me their encouragement and love over the years. Thank you for believing in me.

## Forward

My first experience with Shakespeare came in the form of a touring production of *Julius Caesar* sparsely staged in a high school classroom in 1986. I witnessed a messy, rag-tag group of actors stumbling through their lines. The end result was thirty students who were bored out of their minds and confused about who was who and what was going on in the storyline.

Five years later I attended the acting conservatory at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, Washington. An understanding of Shakespeare was required in a number of classes. Reluctantly I entered the first class with a look on my face that said: "Okay, let's get this over with." Right away our class began memorizing the first Chorus speech from *Henry V*. My acting coach broke down the lines word by word and beat by beat. She helped me to finally understand that Shakespeare's plays demand extra focus and patience to be truly appreciated. A week later I became fascinated by the linguistic complexity of the text and how the words dripped off the tongue like honey. This passion was solidified by a screening of Kenneth Branagh's film version of *Henry V* (1989). I had been bitten by the Shakespeare bug.

For the next ten years I worked as a professional actor, which included playing supporting roles in four Shakespeare productions. However, I had not yet studied the

plays closely from a theoretical or historical perspective. I switched careers from the realm of performance to academia and was eager to learn more from textual scholars. From 2001 to 2006 I attended various classes as an undergraduate that looked closely at such plays as *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Othello*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. What was surprising about these scholars was their blatant indifference, and sometimes open hostility, towards directors and actors. When I would bring up what would and what would not work on stage, I was often patted on the head and dismissed as "actor boy." I often considered pulling out my Actor's Equity card as a certification that I actually knew what I was talking about. These experiences were disappointing because for many years I had defended textual scholars against theater practitioners.

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## Introduction: Prologue

The plays of William Shakespeare are intricately intertwined with the culture of the western world. The characters and storylines have been staged, filmed, rewritten, reinterpreted, deconstructed, and reinvented time and time again. However, when someone is reading one of these texts in the twenty-first century or attending a performance of one of the original plays, the versions found in both the good and bad quartos and folios are often perceived as a type of high culture reserved for a select audience. This reputation often keeps the plays from expanding into the realm of popular culture and therefore limits their full potential audience.

Director and actor Kenneth Branagh directly challenges this system by making films as accessible as possible to a mass audience. He has produced five Shakespeare film adaptations including *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Hamlet* (1996), *Love's Labour's Lost* (2000), and *As You Like It* (2006). Many film and Shakespeare scholars can agree that Branagh is largely responsible for a renewed interest in cinematic adaptations of the plays after an unusually long absence of them between 1971 and 1989 (Crowl 31). He revitalized the genre of Shakespeare film adaptation at the end of the twentieth century and made it possible for other filmmakers, such as Baz Luhrman and Julie Taymor, to get their projects financed by major production companies. Film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays are and will continue to be an essential element of keeping the four-hundred-year-old material relevant for a modern audience.

This thesis will explore the Shakespearean film adaptations of Kenneth Branagh and his mission to navigate the conflicting forces found in the realms of academia and popular consumerist culture in an attempt to bring the plays back to a mass audience. In addition to this the paper will investigate four related issues. First, it will look at the state of Shakespeare in the current cultural landscape in the United States and investigate how cinema can be used to help expand the plays' untapped audiences. Second, the paper will also look at the history of the Shakespeare film adaptation genre. Third, the thesis will take an in-depth look at Branagh's career. Following that, it will examine two filmmakers that benefited from Kenneth Branagh's labor during the 1990s, director Baz Luhrman's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and director John Madden's *Shakespeare In Love* (1998). And the thesis will conclude with some commentary on how Shakespeare scholars and enthusiasts can widen, or at least maintain, their audiences into the twenty-first century.

## Chapter One: Theater or Film? Bringing Shakespeare to a Modern Audience

*"Hello kids. Do stop watching Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and come watch a four-hundred year old play about a depressed aristocrat. I mean it's something you can really relate to."* From Kenneth Branagh's 1995 Film *A Midwinter's Tale* (28).

Theater has been around in one form or another for several millennia across multiple cultures. In the west this storytelling form has been elevated to a level of high culture. Attending a play, no matter the quality, is now seen as a form of high cultural practice that is somehow always more refined than viewing a film or television show. It is an event in which real people on a stage interact with the kinetic energy of an audience. No single performance is ever exactly the same, which makes the event unique and pleasurable. Andrew Hartley writes:

The theatrical experience is...semiotically reflexive: not a broadcast but an exchange. In other words, meaning is constructed by the audience as they watch, but their presence and mood also plays to the actors on stage, thereby altering the theatrical event. (31)

How many people experience a live performance of a Shakespeare play in a year in the United States? The only exact way to answer this question would be to assemble all the attendance records from every professional, amateur, and college production produced in a single year. From a simple Google search using the keywords "Professional, Shakespeare, and Companies" there are roughly sixty-five professional groups with the word "Shakespeare" in their names. The results vary from the smaller companies such as the North

Carolina Shakespeare Festival located in High Point to the much larger Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. The organizations can vary greatly in the number of productions and performances. The typical union house has anywhere between six and eight performances a week. The length of a season can vary from a few weeks to almost year round. For argument's sake, we will estimate that the average company runs twenty-six of the fifty-two weeks a year. The twenty-six weeks multiplied by eight performances a week, multiplied by sixty-five professional companies equals 13,520 individual performances. In the next step of the equation, and this is being generous, estimate that two hundred individuals attended each performance. A rough calculation would then be that 2,704,000 Americans attended a live Shakespeare performance by professionals during the course of one year. When one compares this number to the US population as a whole, roughly three-hundred million citizens, less than one percent has partaken in this type of theatrical experience. The mathematical observation above illustrates an important point. If Shakespeare enthusiasts wish to expand, or at least maintain their audience base, into the realm of popular culture, it will not be done by the modern American theater.

While the theatrical event often brings pleasure and tells stories that are familiar, with a Shakespearean production there are extra complications and challenges for performers and spectators alike. Odds are that a number of the audience members will know very little about the play in advance. For many this will be their first and, if improperly executed, last live theatrical exposure to the material. A subpar product will often make the Shakespeare newcomer stay away. In addition to the linguistic complexity, performers must overcome their own cultural intimidation of the material. The structure of iambic pentameter in the dialogue demands exact precision in executing lines. There is little to no room for

improvisation caused by happy accidents on stage. The performers have to be clear with verbal intention and motivations. In other words, they need to understand every word coming out of their mouths. All too often actors, especially amateurs, do not understand the meaning of certain complex phrases. A Shakespeare audience cannot be a passive one. *Hamlet* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* demands focus to be understood. It is up to the performers to produce an exact and precise product that should be relatively easy to understand. The inability of a newcomer to follow or understand a Shakespeare play is more often the production's rather than the neophyte's fault.

In the United States, seeing Shakespeare done with such precision is an expensive proposition. Most do not have the economic resources to see the Royal Shakespeare Company when they are on tour in the United States, or to travel to the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, MA. These are organizations that perform classics and achieve commercial and critical success. Subpar amateur and professional productions will discourage a newcomer from giving the plays a second chance. Therefore, it makes much more sense for the Shakespearean neophyte to watch a film adaptation first. Rosenbaum writes:

There's something irritating about the snobbish disdain accorded Shakespeare on film by the middle-brow mentality that assumes that stage must always be a higher art form than its successor, film. Stage must always be preferable to film, however electrifying the film, because of some vague existential argument stage partisans make that there is something 'special' about being 'in the same moment' with the actors...[Right] now, at this very moment, one can see more great Shakespeare, one can find more transformative Shakespearean experiences, from

what is already on film, even in the form of tape or DVD on a television screen, than an average person, even the average critic, will see on stage in a lifetime...certain films can be more 'Shakespearean' than Shakespeare on stage. (316-318)

Comparing the cultural impact between a film and a piece of theater is certainly a subjective debate. However, once a film is finished the performances and language will remain the same. This permanency of cinema makes it a stronger recruitment tool for Shakespearean newcomers. A theater performance can vary in quality from night to night. An effective Shakespeare film adaptation will not forget lines or mumble like an amateur actor might, thereby losing another possible Shakespeare enthusiast.

The twenty-first century cultural landscape embraces consumerism and is not offended by notion of adaptations or alterations to the text to make them more accessible. For many twentieth-century Shakespeare textual scholars, adapting and altering the plays are perceived as a type of disrespect (Hume 65). An example of this can be found in the writings of Richard Burt, who has written extensively on Shakespeare and mass media in such books as *Shakespeare, The Movie II* (2003) and *Shakespeare After Mass Media* (2002). He calls the commercialization and radical adaptations of Shakespeare "Schlockspeare." The term is an obvious judgment upon any mass media re-imagining of the material. He attempts to create the illusion of his alignment with a cultural studies perspective when he puts the disclaimer: "Schlock and Schlockspeare are thus not meant as derogatory terms. I use them to draw attention, rather, to a central category of epistemic exclusion and, as such, also a category of dismissal based on a variety of criteria..." (14). Burt's commentary is a strong example of the divisions found between high and popular culture. However, scholars, theater

professionals, and filmmakers will have to adapt to the rules laid down by the current conditions in the cultural landscape. These rules include choices in marketing, product placement, and of giving consumers value for their money (more of this in chapter five). In the current cultural landscape, Shakespeare needs popular culture much more than popular culture needs Shakespeare.

As media continues to advance, in terms of accessibility and portability, textual scholars must be willing to let the plays adapt as well, otherwise the cultural resistance and indifference to Shakespeare will continue to grow. Audiences, performers, and scholars must remind themselves, and each other, that the plays, along with their educational value, are for pleasure and entertainment by the public at large. Popular culture and the multiple outlets it controls can deliver a film or television program to any corner of the globe. Film also has the power to overcome language barriers with visuals over language. Shakespeare film adaptations can easily be seen by millions over short periods of time.

## Chapter Two: A Brief History of Shakespeare Film Adaptations 1899-1989

“...*Henry V*, had the same warning sign hanging over it: *This is the property of Laurence Olivier—trespassers will be prosecuted...*” Branagh Biographer Mark White on the early comparisons between Kenneth Branagh and Laurence Olivier (1).

Film adaptations of Shakespeare have been in existence for over a century. The first on record is a handful of scenes from *King John* in 1899 (Hatchuel 12). One hundred and ten years later, The Internet Movie Database lists more than seven hundred film and television adaptations. These vary from silent films, such as a recently rediscovered American version of *Richard III* from 1912; musicals, such as *Kiss Me Kate* (1953) and *West Side Story* (1961); to radical reinterpretations, such as the Disney’s version of *Hamlet* with *The Lion King* (1994). “...Shakespeare can be found in Hollywood films, TV series (for example *Star Trek*) and even exploitative, pornographic movies” (Hatchuel 18). Such titles as *Tromeo and Juliet* (1996), *A Midsummer Night’s Cream* (2000), and *In The Flesh* (1999), a pornographic version of *Macbeth*, exist to make a profit while still maintaining some connection to a higher form of culture. Lines from Shakespeare are occasionally interwoven with advertising, including the “Band of Brothers” speech from *Henry V* for the Playstation 3 video game console and the tagline from Disney’s *Chicken Little* (2005) film trailer, borrowed from *Twelfth Night*: “Some are born great. Some achieve greatness. And some have greatness dropped upon them.” If one looks for William Shakespeare within the media it can be found in “...commercials, beer labels, and even theme parks” (Henderson 108).



For Shakespeare and film scholars there are five directors who inspire the bulk of scholarship. They are Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, Franco Zeffirelli, and Kenneth Branagh. All have directed three adaptations except for Branagh who has done five, more than anyone else in cinema history. His adaptations include *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Hamlet* (1996), *Love's Labour's Lost* (2000), and *As You Like It* (2006).

From 1929 to 1948 the Hollywood studio system and the British film industry produced several fairly large scale Shakespeare adaptations. Some of the most notable include Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935), featuring James Cagney and Mickey Rooney; George Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* (1936), featuring John Barrymore; and *As You Like It* (1936) with Sir Laurence Olivier. In 1944 Olivier directed and starred in his version of *Henry V*. Produced during the final push against Germany during World War II, the film was used as war propaganda on the British public (Crowdus 54).

In his film Olivier plays with setting and place. The first forty minutes take place in a reconstruction of the Globe theatre to give an audience a sense of what it may have been like to see the play in its original form. In this long sequence Olivier plays the actor Richard Burbage playing King Henry V. Ron Rosenbaum notes:

[In] the Originalist sense, another thing Olivier did was bring us closer to what might be called the Great Actor aspect of Shakespeare...in his *Henry V*, the scenes supposedly set in sixteenth-century production of the play at the Globe, Olivier is playing Richard Burbage playing Henry V. He's inhabiting the role not just of Henry but of Shakespeare's original star. (336)

It is this play within a play within a film that creates a meta-cinematic framework that Branagh would eventually pay homage to in his versions of *Henry V* and *As You Like It*.

In 1948 Olivier directed his second feature *Hamlet*, the only Shakespeare adaptation to win the Academy Award for best picture. This interpretation contained a radical edit of the original text. Mark White writes: "Olivier... was more cavalier than one might assume. Consider his *Hamlet*. Such were his incisions that there was no Fortinbras, no Rosencrantz, no Guildenstern" (97).

Filmmaker-actor-producer Orson Welles made two Shakespeare adaptations during this time period, *Macbeth* (1948) and *Othello* (1952). Welles had abandoned the Hollywood system because of continual financial disappointments. He headed to Europe and directed five films until his one and only return to Hollywood as a director with *Touch of Evil* (1958). Both Shakespeare adaptations were plagued with production problems and the end results vary in quality. *Macbeth* was primarily filmed on one location, not unlike a theatrical production. *Othello* started and stopped production multiple times (Anderegg 116). The final version has continuity and sound editing problems.

From 1952 to 1971 filmed Shakespeare continued to make it to the big screen on a fairly regular basis. In film scholarship the bulk of books and articles have been written about Olivier's *Richard III* (1955), Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), and Welles' *Falstaff/Chimes At Midnight* (1965). *Romeo and Juliet* is especially noteworthy due to its cultural impact, financial success, and how it is certainly a reflection of its time (Scott, Lindsey 137). It was one of the first Shakespeare films where the lead roles were given to younger actors. Zeffirelli's film was the most used in classrooms, from 1968 to 1996, until Baz Luhrman's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) replaced it.

In 1971 Roman Polanski released his large budget adaptation of *Macbeth*. Placed between his financial and critical successes of *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *Chinatown* (1974), *Macbeth* was a financial disappointment and is generally blamed for Hollywood's abandonment of Shakespeare on the big screen. A number of facts surrounding the film and its release set up its failure, especially the Manson family murder of Polanski's wife a few years before. The press made several connections between this incident and the especially violent content of the film. Speculation of life imitating art/art imitating life by the media made audiences stay away (Pilkington 68).

From 1971 to 1989 the British film industry and the Hollywood system avoided Shakespeare adaptations. The only exceptions to this were Paul Mazursky's *The Tempest* (1982), with John Cassavetes; and Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* (1987), featuring Woody Allen as the Fool. Both versions borrowed elements from the Shakespeare originals but were far from being cinematic representations of the original texts (Thompson 1056). The BBC filmed the complete canon for British television during the 1970s and 80s. These television programs ranged in quality and generated mixed reactions. In this eighteen-year absence the public was not able to see a large scale Shakespeare film and had to settle for what was shown on television, in revival houses, and what was selectively released in the infancy of home video during the 1980s.

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### Chapter Three: No Dogs or Irish: Kenneth Branagh's Attempts to Bridge High and Low Culture

*"I believe that it could be a truly popular film, that the audience that wants to see Rambo III could also be stimulated to see Henry V..."* Kenneth Branagh on the financial and critical success of his first film (White 60).

Big screen Shakespeare adaptations once again became a regular fixture from 1989 to 2000 due to the critical and financial successes of actor/producer/film director Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989) and *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993). Hollywood was willing to give the material a chance once again. Branagh is often given credit for revitalizing the genre, but he is also often a cultural target for bringing Shakespeare back to a mass audience. The biographical facts of his life make him an extremely unlikely candidate to take the theatrical Shakespeare crown from the late Sir Laurence Olivier. Branagh's main mission is to make Shakespeare accessible to a mass audience. He points out in his book *Beginnings*: "Why should audiences take an expensive chance on any theatrical experience, if what they are usually offered is dreadful? I was—and am—convinced that greater quality can mean greater accessibility" (46).

The British press was attacking Branagh long before he became a Hollywood fixture. Critics and journalists constantly mentioned his Irish background in their publications. All of the current existing biographies about Branagh deal with this subject to one extent or another. Ian Shuttleworth's *Ken & Em: A Biography of Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson* (1994) deals with this quite extensively. The book reads like a long British tabloid instead of a work of biography. The illusion that the British are somehow more qualified to perform and

interpret Shakespeare's plays often creates cultural baggage for the rest of the English-speaking world. Branagh's Irish heritage and fame is an open challenge to this cultural class system. His scapegoating is particularly puzzling considering the fact that the director's Shakespeare adaptations are considered somewhat more conservative due to his emphasis of language over cinematic visuals.

Kenneth Branagh was born in Belfast, Ireland in 1960 (Branagh, *Beginnings* 11). His parents were working class. At the age of nine, with increasing violence between Protestants and Catholics, Branagh's father relocated his family to England for work and safety reasons (White 3). Enrolled in primary school, he immediately became a target with his Irish background. He quickly changed his accent in an attempt to fit in. At age sixteen Branagh discovered the theater and more importantly saw Derek Jacobi in a production of *Hamlet* with the Royal Shakespeare Company (Branagh, *Beginnings* 36). Along with John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, and Richard Burton, Jacobi was considered one of the great Hamlets of the twentieth century. This ignited Branagh's interest in theater and film. At age eighteen he was admitted to the prestigious Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (White 10). As he developed his craft at the school, he began to develop the mission of trying to make Shakespeare's plays more accessible. He toured with a student production of *The Merchant of Venice* and detailed it in his 1989 autobiography *Beginnings*: "For the first time I confronted an audience who talked loudly all the way through the play, who heckled and threw things. It probably resembled the crowd's response in Shakespeare's playhouse" (63).

At the end of his time at RADA he began his professional career in a series of plays for television from the BBC while simultaneously playing the title role in RADA's production of *Hamlet* (White 15-18). After graduation Branagh began working steadily in British television

and film. He also came very close to landing the leading role in Milos Forman's Academy Award winning 1984 film *Amadeus* (White 25). In 1985 Branagh was offered a position with the Royal Shakespeare Company (White 18-19). At age twenty-three he was quite busy with various supporting roles in film and television. He kept the RSC waiting for over a year. Eventually the theater company asked him what it would take for him to commit a year to the world's most prestigious Shakespeare festival. He flippantly said that he wanted to play the title role in *Henry V* (Branagh, *Beginnings* 133-135). Branagh thought that it would never happen, but it did. He became the youngest actor in the history of the RSC to play the role made so famous by Sir Laurence Olivier. When media pressure began to arise about his playing of the role, Branagh said, "Olivier's performances exist, there's nothing we can do about them, [we] may as well just get on with the job" (White 1). He purposely avoided the subject and approached the daunting task by thinking: "...there was work to do. In any case, things were kept under control by another Irish legacy, that of philosophical acceptance. A drink in the hand and the familiar mantra, 'Ah, fuck it'" (Branagh, *Beginnings* 58). By refusing to be intimidated by all of the cultural baggage associated with the role, Branagh was raising eyebrows from the very beginning. Within a year he became a household name in the United Kingdom.

Culturally, Olivier was considered a national treasure in England. After his death in 1989 the media began to look for his replacement. Branagh biographer Mark White writes:

It was during this time period in the 1980s that Branagh and Olivier began to be compared. Finding the new Olivier had long been the Holy Grail for observers of British film and theater... These flattering comparisons must have been music to Branagh's ears, but in the end the accolade of being the new Olivier proved to be

invidious. When the backlash set in five years later, one of the charges leveled at him was that he had the gall to compare himself to Olivier. To be sure, Branagh had always conveyed the sense that he had a clear plan of action designed to make himself one of the acknowledged leaders in his field, and it may well have occurred to him that success as a twenty-three-year old on the great Stratford stage in the role of Henry V would cause some to consider his performance alongside Olivier's. However, it is worth making the point that it was various critics, rather than the actor himself, who originally spoke of the arrival of a new Olivier. (32)

He spent a year with the RSC but became burnt out by the internal politics and lack of creative control. He had become part of a system that continued to limit Shakespeare's plays to a selected audience. Branagh struck out on his own with his venture the Renaissance Theater Company (White 46-54). In the process he recruited several large names from the British theater, including Derek Jacobi and Judi Dench, as directors (White 78). Within a year the company was gaining momentum and set off on a European tour. Branagh's company specifically targeted communities that normally are not considered for such a cultural event. The tour's first stop was Belfast. He writes about this stop in his autobiography *Beginnings*: "There was a funny sort of inverted snobbery and pride about my involvement with Shakespeare. They liked the idea of one of their lads showing the English how to do it and were delighted that Belfast was the first stop on the tour" (213).

For much of his early career Branagh was conflicted about his Irish heritage and the cultural elitism of his adopted country. He writes:



I was working in a world...my Irish relatives didn't understand, and I felt ashamed of opening my English mouth in the street or pubs...This uneasiness about Ireland would remain for some years to come, and would only be exorcised when I could come to terms with my own guilt over this split in my personality.

(81)

Eventually Branagh made peace with this internal cultural conflict when he finally reached international success with *Henry V* (1989), his first venture as a film director.

*Henry V* was produced as an offshoot of his Renaissance Theater Company. Made on a shoestring production budget of six million US dollars, it was nominated for three Academy Awards. It won for best costume design, but more significantly Branagh was nominated for best director and actor. His film was more accepted and embraced by the international community than in his own adopted country. The British press had already been hypercritical about him since joining the RSC. The unexpected success of *Henry V*, especially in America "...opened up a Pandora's box of complaints about his acting, directing, writing, ambition—even his appearance" (White 74).

The film was in direct contrast to Olivier's version. The 1944 film set up Henry as an infallible hero. Branagh's performance showed an insecure side to being a Monarch. Branagh biographer Mark White comments on this:

In Olivier's film Henry came across as dashing, fearless, and inspirational—in short, a flawless hero...Branagh's aim was to produce something more nuanced. He wanted to play Henry [with] the qualities of introspection, fear, doubt and anger... (60)

The Olivier comparisons were no longer just being made in England. Hollywood and Shakespeare scholars around the world began doing the same thing. An Irishman had crossed the line with British cultural elitists. White also writes:

[The] comparison with Olivier invited by the new film contributed to the backlash against Branagh. In part this was because Olivier's *Henry V* had acquired a special and political significance in Britain...Olivier's version became no less an important strand in the tapestry of British patriotism. Challenging it, as Branagh appeared to do by making it his own, thus appeared unpatriotic, equivalent to throwing eggs at the Queen or burning the Union Jack. (87)

*Henry V* made its way into American movie theatres and was praised highly by audiences and critics. Branagh directly acknowledged that popular films influenced him just as much as theater. He was making mass entertainment from the very beginning. Sarah Hatchuel notes:

In the critical response to Branagh's 1989 *Henry V*, the whole film or some specific moments from it were commented on in references to other films. With its muddy ground, transcended plains and manly friendships, the film recalls Vietnam war movies such as Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). (117)

By using specific cinematic techniques he used the language of film to open up Shakespeare to a larger audience. "[He] was the first film director to extensively appropriate slow-motion in Shakespeare adaptations...In *Henry V*, the use of slow-motion turns the battle of Agincourt into a dream-like sequence verging on nightmare" (Hatchuel 63).

From 1990 to 1992 Branagh made the transition to Hollywood with his second feature *Dead Again* (1991) for Paramount. This film was heavily influenced by Hitchcock and noted

by critics for being so. This was followed by *Peter's Friends* (1992) which was an ensemble comedy influenced by such large cast films such as *The Big Chill* (1983).

On the Shakespeare front Branagh was invited to return to the RSC to play the lead in *Hamlet*. For a classically trained actor this role is considered the pinnacle achievement. By 1992 Branagh had already played the role twice, as well as the supporting role of Laertes for the RSC. Mark White comments on this:

Playing Hamlet for the RSC was in many ways the ultimate challenge for Branagh, the equivalent of a World Cup Final for David Beckham or Everest for a mountaineer...Prior to opening night it was reported that takings had exceeded [one million pounds], the greatest box-office advance for a Shakespeare play in the history of the Royal Shakespeare Company. (155)

In 1993 Branagh produced his second Shakespeare film adaptation, *Much Ado About Nothing*. Until this point, a film version in English had not yet been attempted. The director cast big name American actors, such as Denzel Washington, Michael Keaton, and Keanu Reeves along with British actors who were more comfortable with Shakespeare. This was no accident: "He wanted people who had not spent a lifetime going to productions by the Royal Shakespeare Company to see his movie" (White 143). The end result was box office success. Branagh had proven that Shakespeare adaptations could be critically successful and profitable. White writes:

[People] in Britain and in America [were] going to the cinema and paying around \$30 million in total to see a work by an Elizabethan playwright. For some of them it would have been their first exposure to the Bard. The divide between elitist diversion and mass entertainment was actually being crossed. (162)

Samuel Cowl, who has written extensively on Shakespeare in film and three books specifically on Branagh, has gone as far as decreeing that this version of *Much Ado* is the best executed Shakespearean comedy ever put on film (78). Film reviewer Jay Scott comments: "It is a date movie for couples who read" ("Film Review: Much Ado").

However, many scholars do not concur with Cowl and Jay Scott and tend to note what is missing and what unforgivable artistic licenses are taken. Richard Ryan is especially harsh:

In his high-camp retelling, what is solemn, lovely, and deep in the original text has largely been obscured, if not all together excluded...Although he has avowed that he wants to give us "an uncluttered Shakespeare," what this movie is remarkably uncluttered by is things Shakespearean. (52)

What Ryan failed to realize in this review is that this film was not targeted for film critics or Shakespeare scholars. Branagh knew that most of his international audience would more than likely have never read or seen the play. The director's handling of the female character Hero is especially demonized. Ryan continues:

For the members of the audience, however, who know that Hero lives, who never had any doubts about her purity, and who in any case are unlikely to be particularly relieved by her "intact" condition, this revelatory moment is less than cathartic. (53)

The number of audience members that know Hero lives would be minimal at best. The "revelatory moment" would be ruined for only a few textual purists, not Branagh's target audience. Ryan writes:

[How] much talent [does] Branagh actually [have?] The answer is: a lot, but even at the appearance of *Henry V*, it was clear that critics were overstating his

originality, and now it appears from the strenuously “original” *Much Ado* that when he sets off in pursuit of that elusive quality he does so at the cost not only of necessarily self-discipline but also of his real strength, which is precisely, a feel for “traditional” Shakespeare. (55)

Ryan misses the mark again as Branagh had no intention of ever producing “traditional” Shakespeare. He knows that “traditional” Shakespeare, whatever that is supposed to exactly mean, is reserved for those paying extraordinarily high prices for a Broadway show or the RSC.

In 1994 Branagh directed and starred in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, which was produced by Francis Ford Coppola. It was the director's first foray into a large scale Hollywood production. Despite the extensive negative criticism of the film, it was not the financial disaster that most automatically assume. The forty-five million dollar production made over one hundred million world wide (White 180). Disappointing from the perspective of a major studio, it did not slow Branagh down as a director. Once again class issues and Branagh's background surfaced in the British press. In an article for the British paper *The Daily Mirror* reporter Garth Pearce wrote on the supposed financial failure of *Frankenstein*: “The critics are gloating, because Branagh is a working-class guy who dared to succeed in a business littered with sneering theater snobs” (White 185).

After experiencing constant hostility from press and critics for nearly a decade, Branagh wrote and directed the low budget *A Midwinter's Tale*, released in the UK under the title *In The Bleak Midwinter* in 1995 (White 188). The plot is centered on a group of misfit actors who travel to a small town in the English countryside and stage a production of *Hamlet*. It is an interesting insight into the theatrical life with its ups, downs, and eccentric personalities. It

is highly influenced by the films of Woody Allen with its use of black and white photography, neurotic characters, and direct addresses to the camera. The end product is a look into the artistic process itself. It is a piece of meta-cinema focusing on actors who are involved in a piece of meta-theater. *Midwinter* was used as a piece of therapy for Branagh. He financed it completely himself and for the first time did not appear on screen in a film that he was directing. Financially the film was not a huge box office success, but it did help to cement Branagh's relationship with Castle Rock Entertainment. It would be this company that would finance Branagh's largest achievement to date, a four-hour "uncut" version of *Hamlet* (1996).

*Hamlet* was produced for around eighteen million dollars and grossed roughly four and a half million between December 1996 and April 1997 in the U.S. Branagh was given mixed reviews for his ambition. Mark Thornton Burnett comments: "...Branagh, with typical audacity, sets himself up as another epic filmmaker, as a bardic interpreter with impeccable credentials..." (94). Terrence Rafferty wrote:

Viewers who consider themselves sophisticated may be put off by...the director's obvious eagerness to please every segment of the audience; they may even mistake Branagh's intelligent showmanship for vulgarity. ("Solid Flesh")

Rafferty, in a high culture state of mind, expects Branagh to cater to the smaller audience base that would normally attend a Shakespeare play. Rick Groen, in review for the Toronto version of *The Globe and Mail*, praises the filmmaker for his attempt to bridge the gap of high and low culture: "Branagh [attempts to bring] the warring factions of high-brow and low. He almost brings it off. This *Hamlet* may not be perfect, but it is perfectly engrossing." Branagh attempted to please multiple audiences by casting famous screen stars, such as

Robin Williams and Billy Crystal. By staging sweeping action sequences, the final sword duel and the Fortinbras invasion, he focused on engaging the larger movie-going public's tastes and preferences. Samuel Crowl commends Branagh for this:

The destruction wrought by Hamlet and Fortinbras at the film's climax reveals Branagh exploding those powerful ghosts in the tradition of filmed Shakespeare, even as he echoes their achievements...[He has] contributed to the commercial film's embrace of Shakespearean material for an international audience. (154)

The scale and scope of Branagh's *Hamlet* has yet to be repeated in any Shakespeare film adaptation since 1996. The length of the film, roughly four hours, was a large gamble on Castle Rock's part. The emphasis on an "uncut" version was one of the movie's selling points. In the short term it seemed to have backfired. Emma French writes: "Unfortunately, the unique selling point of Branagh's *Hamlet* was not packaged in a manner appealing to a mass audience...an emphasis on the film as spectacle...an event" (89). Attending a film in 1996, and in 2009 as well, is no longer seen as an event. Cinema is accessible in multiple forms and it is rare for any release to be seen as something unique, unless the end product cannot be replicated inside a consumer's home.

By 2006 Branagh's *Hamlet* was not yet available on DVD and was out of print in the VHS format. However, evidence of the film's cultural impact and Branagh's ability to move forward into the digital age was shown. According to the audio commentary on Branagh's *Hamlet*, the film became the number one video download from amazon.com for several months. This phenomenon led to a write-in campaign to Warner Home Video to officially release it on DVD, which finally happened in August of 2007. On the audio commentary for the DVD Branagh thanked his supporters and commented on how the film had eventually

found its audience. By the time Branagh had directed *Hamlet*, he had played the lead role four times, three on stage and once in a radio production. The choice to use the full text had been influenced by his work with theater and film director Trevor Nunn:

Having used the full text for the Renaissance radio production in 1992 and then on stage for the RSC, he became convinced that this was how to present the play in a fresh way to a cinema audience. In arguing for use of the full text, Branagh was pushing the envelope with Shakespeare on the big screen. (White 197-198)

By 1997 Branagh's box office numbers were considered fairly respectable. He had directed seven features in nine years. The director's name became a selling point of its own, a brand name such as Coppola or Scorsese. Emma French writes:

Branagh grew to be constructed as a marker of a particular version of Shakespeare, himself becoming a brand name associated with a potent blend of Hollywood multiplex entertainment and fidelity to standards of quality and authenticity. (63)

Branagh signed a three Shakespeare picture deal with Miramax films (White 245). Only one film was made from this contract, *Love's Labour's Lost* (2000). Produced for thirteen million dollars, it grossed only 350,000 pounds in UK and less than \$300,000 in the US (Burnett 101). The film was a bold attempt to reinvent the Shakespeare adaptation once again. The play was reset in pre-World War II Europe, and the screenplay used only a quarter of the original text. In addition to this the songs found in the original play were removed and replaced with musical standards from the earlier part of the twentieth century. Gayle Holste called the *Love's Labour's Lost*: "[The] DeLorean of film: something that looked good on the drawing board, but just didn't work in the execution" (228). Branagh's film was a multi-



million dollar cinematic experiment that did not easily fit into a specific genre, making it a difficult sell for Miramax's marketing department. Friedman notes:

I believe that this failure is simply due to the fact that many aspects of the American film musical imported by Branagh into *Love's Labour's Lost* clash with basic elements of the play's construction, rendering the final product an artistically flawed piece of cinema. (134)

It was a failed experiment that caused a major setback for Branagh's career as a film director. *Love's Labour's Lost* contained song and dance numbers from performers who were not proficient in the genre, with the exception of Broadway veteran Nathan Lane. A.O. Scott comments about the quality of the performances: "If the cast were a sixth-grade class, and you were one of their parents, you'd burst out of your seat applauding madly, and rush backstage after the show, exclaiming: 'But you were wonderful! Really, really great!'" ("What Say You"). Performers of musical theater are often placed in that genre and rarely engage in non-musical theater. Branagh placed actors with non-musical backgrounds within a musical. Kaufman writes:

[Actors] who are not singers and dancers are asked to do a great deal of singing and dancing. Some of the singing may have been dubbed, but it is still unconvincing...The dancing is worse. There wouldn't have been any point in improving the trite choreography; these people can just about do what they were given. What is the point in asking an audience to watch long dance numbers executed by people who are not, so far as we can see, dancers? (33)

Despite being considered an artistic miscalculation on Branagh's part, the film strived to combine complex Shakespearean language with an increasingly disappearing cinematic genre--the movie musical.

It was at this point in Branagh's career that he began to be more directly compared with Orson Welles. The financial disappointment of *Love's Labour's Lost*, along with the supposed financial disappointment of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, led to the cancellation of Branagh's contract with Miramax and put his career as a director on hold until 2005. Scholars and critics began to overcriticize the artist who single handedly revived an entire genre: "Branagh might well be considered the heir to not only Laurence Olivier but even more so to Orson Welles, Branagh being yet another box-office loser unable consistently to reconcile high art and low mass media" (Burt 15).

Between 2005 and 2007 he returned to directing but once again received little to no recognition for his work. His adaptation of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* was only released theatrically in Italy and England in 2006, earning roughly \$442,000. The film eventually had its American television debut in August 2007. The end result is an adaptation that is smaller in scope, due to the low budget, but returns the emphasis back to the play's language. As an adaptation it is less radical and experimental than *Love's Labour's Lost* but it is just as accessible as *Much Ado About Nothing*. *As You Like It* could very well find future audiences through home video, digital downloads and multiple cable television airings in the years to come, not unlike how *Hamlet* eventually found its audience.

*As You Like It* is a good starting point for someone who is not familiar with Branagh's work. He opens up new possibilities for audiences by eliminating preconceived notions of what traditional Shakespeare is. The film contains many of the cinematic signatures seen in

his four other Shakespeare adaptations. In academic journals and other publications, little has been written about the film at this point in history. This will surely change as more scholars discover the film. The following paragraphs will look at some of Branagh's cinematic signatures found within *As You Like It*.

The film version of *As You Like It* opens with a shot of Japanese block prints. A Haiku poem then appears: "Arden of Japan. Love and nature in disguise. All the world's a stage." By combining an ancient poetical form with one of the most famous lines in Shakespeare, Branagh prepares the viewer for an experience that is influenced by both east and west. The film's beginning is similar to the opening sequence of *Much Ado About Nothing* with the "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more" sequence. Branagh resets the time period in *As You Like It* to Japan at the end of the nineteenth century amongst a community of British expatriot merchants. This resetting of time period and location is also done in *Hamlet* and *Love's Labour's Lost*. Vehicles, weapons, music, and costumes are not limited to the time period in which Shakespeare originally set them.

Large scale action sequences are often found in Branagh's films. In the opening scene of *As You Like It* the main characters are enjoying a piece of Japanese Noh theater. This is quickly interrupted by ninjas. This sequence goes on for five minutes without one line of dialogue being spoken. It is not unlike the larger scale action sequences found in *Henry V* and *Hamlet*. *As You Like It*, as well as *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet*, have a number of long shots with no edits that place emphasis on the actors. For a Shakespearean beginner this artistic choice can be compared somewhat to a live performance. Branagh does this on purpose and believes that "...action filmed in one unbroken shot allows the characters to interact [and audiences] to retain a certain idea of theater" (Hatchuel 60). A steadicam is used

to follow the performers and let the scene play out. *As You Like It* has a number of these sequences between the romantic leads, played by David Oyelowo and Dallas Bryce Howard. These uninterrupted shots range from two to three minutes in length.

*As You Like It* also contains mixed race romantic relationships, also seen in *Love's Labour's Lost*. A large combined wedding for four couples at the end of the film includes two interracial marriages. *As You Like It* has had a limited audience since its initial release. However, the overall quality of the performances, clever use of visuals, and excellent clarity of language certainly raises the possibility that this film will eventually find its audience, not unlike Branagh's *Hamlet*, through cable television, Internet downloads, and academic institutions.

Branagh makes no apologies for his attempt to expand Shakespeare's accessibility to a mass audience. In reviewing the various scholarly materials written about him it is interesting to note how he receives credit for revitalizing the genre of filmed Shakespeare but is also hypercriticized. Crowl writes: "Branagh's unique contribution to the Shakespeare film genre is [producing] Hollywood movies that [allow] Shakespeare to break free from the elite art-house audience to find a broader public, especially among the young" (12).

It is Branagh's attempt to reach a mass audience that makes him a target. However, in the film business, especially the Hollywood system, his unpredictable box office receipts have kept him on the sidelines for almost a decade. Michael Billington, in the London newspaper *The Guardian*, predicts that Branagh will eventually receive the praise he deserves in the long run when the stigma surrounding his unwanted title of "The New Olivier" finally fades away. He writes:

Branagh has set new standards in Shakespearian filmmaking, which makes it all the more puzzling that Branagh-bashing is a popular British media sport. But I suspect his achievement in Shakespearian cinema...in directorial terms, [will eventually outshine Olivier]. ("Kenneth Branagh's Screen")

Branagh may eventually get a second chance with Hollywood. He has been hired to direct a film version of the Marvel comic book series *Thor* (Fleming 1). While most comic book films are often almost guaranteed box office success, this may be Branagh's last chance with Hollywood. If *Thor* does not show a healthy profit he will more than likely be compared to Orson Welles once again. Branagh has also been planning his own adaptation of *Macbeth* set on Wall Street for several years. Since he has put his own money in projects in the past, just as Orson Welles did, the success or failure of *Thor* may determine the future of Branagh's Shakespeare films.

**Chapter Four: Branagh's Children--Luhrman's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* and Madden's *Shakespeare In Love***

*"Love and a bit with a dog, that's what they like."* The Character of Philip Henslowe from *Shakespeare in Love*.

The financial success of Branagh's *Henry V* and *Much Ado About Nothing* convinced Hollywood and the British Film industry that there was money to be made in Shakespeare adaptations. During the second half of the 1990s, dozens of Shakespeare films emerged, including Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995), Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* (1996), Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999), and Michael Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999). Along with the straightforward adaptations, two sub-genres of the Shakespeare film emerged: the teen centered Shakespeare film and the Shakespeare hybrid film. The teen centered genre was launched due to the financial success of Baz Luhrman's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996), and eventually led to adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew*, *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), and *Othello, O* (2001). The teen versions often kept the main themes, characters, and storylines but rewrote the dialogue extensively.

The Shakespeare hybrid film sub-genre uses some of the original Shakespearean dialogue or scenes, but then often branches out into their own storylines. They should not be considered as straightforward Shakespeare adaptations. However, they can certainly show their audiences some of the creative processes that go into any staging or filming of one of the original texts. Strong examples of the hybrid genre from the 1990s include: Gus Van Zant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996), and John

Madden's *Shakespeare In Love* (1998). This chapter will look at the two films that benefited the most from Branagh's earlier success: the teen film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* and the hybrid film *Shakespeare In Love* and their embrace of the rules established by popular culture, allowing Shakespeare to reach a larger audience.

In the current incarnation of the Hollywood system a film no longer stands on its own. Other items are directly connected to the main event. Soundtrack albums, fast food meals, book adaptations, clothing, and video games are just a few of the products connected to a piece of cinema. This merchandizing is not just a common occurrence; the public as a whole expects it. Academics often resist this phenomenon and see it as crass. However, these are the new cultural rules that a Shakespearean film adaptation must adhere to. Emma French writes:

New 1990s technology, for example film web sites and DVD special features, also provides essential sources of primary marketing material...the inclusion of such devices as Director commentary on DVD editions of films, and such texts as...Kenneth Branagh's [introduction] to [his screenplay], are useful tools... The film itself, is also part of the marketing... Film sequels form the most evident example of such auto-marketing, and arguably all Shakespeare films take the form of a sequel, drawing upon an already established brand name, one reason why Shakespeare is an attractive [proposition] for marketers. (9-10)

While some wish to keep Shakespeare away from the realm of popular culture, the larger consuming public has no problem with the plays being sold to them as a packaged product. Simon During writes:

Modern popular culture has also developed tones and moods unique to itself partly because its consumers know that it is profit-oriented business and that they are being, to some degree, exploited, but generally don't care! The enjoyment and the meaning of the music, the fashion, the movie or the record exist, not despite commercialization but because of it. To enjoy and consume it, whatever else it is, to participate in the present. Hence some popular culture is enjoyed in this spirit—It's rubbish, but I like it—and there is often a sense of solidarity between producers and consumers in that they share the joke. (200)

Baz Luhrman's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) is proof that the popular culture economic formula can work for a Shakespeare adaptation. Critical responses of the film were mixed, but its embrace of fast editing and music video cinematic techniques, along with the use of young and attractive actors, made it a highly profitable film. It even spawned various co-products which included two soundtrack CDs. As academic enterprises are rarely, if ever, motivated by profit, the notion of Shakespeare becoming a lucrative economic entity automatically offends the sensibilities of the cultural elite. Leah Guenther writes:

Luhrman's *Romeo and Juliet* angered critics because it delighted audiences. It was cultural capital effortlessly acquired outside of the institution...The Bard is no longer safely stowed in a dusty, wilted volume commemorating the dead; he is not gracing the stage of a respectable theater where predetermined consumption is a mandate. He is in the local shopping center or strip mall, where the kids who are not making out are throwing Gummy Bears at the screen, rolling Lemonheads down the incline...Moreover, as the Billboard lists boldly proclaim, *William*



*Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* is the newest hit album. Gasp. Shakespeare has left the building. (17-19)

Luhrman embraced the cinematic trends of MTV-style music video camera techniques, reset the film in Verona Beach, and cast attractive actors who were not necessarily classically trained. The word *Shakespeare* in the title was used to recruit one type of audience, the minority of individuals who are familiar with the original text. Luhrman's choices in cinematography and editing enticed an unfamiliar audience with ever-decreasing attention span. The end product is a movie that targeted an unproved demographic with Shakespeare, the adolescent teen with disposable income. James Loehlin writes:

The film reels with dizzying hand-held shots, slam zooms and swish pans, as well as the changing of films speeds, jump cuts, and lush, unnatural saturation of [color] that made Luhrman's one previous picture, *Strictly Ballroom*, so visually distinctive. (123)

This music video approach is especially evident within the film's marketing. Emma French describes how the film's trailer was specifically crafted for its intended audience:

*William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet...*[was] the first filmed Shakespeare adaptation that positions itself towards the teen market in such an exclusive manner in its marketing campaign. The trailer's narrative is carefully crafted to make it easily comprehensible and to ensure that Shakespearean language is not deployed at the expense of audience understanding. With teenagers as the prime target, the film marketers appear to have considered it particularly important to avoid daunting them with difficult language when selling the film, and the trailer hence emphasizes action over words. (33)

It is the emphasis of visuals over language that irritated Lührman's critics.

Twentieth Century Fox embraced various emerging technologies in 1996, including the ever-expanding public access to the Internet. At the time it was an unproven marketing technique for cinema, but as the film was fairly experimental in nature to begin with, an alternative marketing campaign made sense. Loehlin writes:

Unlike previous Shakespeare films, *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* relates not only to an authorizing text but forward and outward to a whole network of cultural and commercial enterprises: merchandizing tie-ins, two soundtrack albums, a screenplay/text edition and an interactive CD-ROM. The official Twentieth-Century Fox website features a [Verona Beach Visitor's Guide] instructing users on [what to wear, what to buy, and what to drive], as well as a pop-psychology characters biographies condemning the older generation. (130-131)

Roughly sixty-percent of the original text was jettisoned, and the film focused on Romeo's story. The visual components were first and Shakespeare's dialogue was second. Jim Welsh in one review notes that "...the film's spectacle constantly overpowers and overwhelms the poetry" (152). Whether or not the language was upstaged, the overall plan of reaching a mass audience and blurring the line between high and low culture had finally occurred. Lührman's \$14.5 million production, low cost by Hollywood standards, made \$147 million worldwide and launched the teen-centered Shakespeare film subgenre. French writes: "The box office success of *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* confirms that Shakespeare in the [original] language can find a large teen audience, perhaps even more so than modernized adaptations..." (113).

John Madden's *Shakespeare In Love* was the second major Shakespeare film success story of the 1990s. The movie should not to be considered a straightforward adaptation, but as an overall introduction to Shakespeare's work as well as the peek behind the scenes of how a play may have been staged during the English Renaissance. *Shakespeare In Love* borrows from several of the original Shakespeare texts including *Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, *Titus Andronicus*, and shows the process behind the writing of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night*. It also borrows many of the themes from the original texts including forbidden love, missed identities, class divisions, gender bending, sex, and violence. The film gives an insight into the creative process and shows Shakespeare as a flawed individual, and not as the literary icon the public knows today. The screenwriters also take full advantage of the missing historical evidence about Shakespeare's early life and bypass some of the modern debates about the playwright. Towards the end of the film, twelve minutes are taken directly out of *Romeo and Juliet*, highlighting a play within a film.

The elements of meta-theater and the re-arranging of famous stories are not new concepts to one of *Shakespeare In Love*'s screenwriters. Tom Stoppard is well known in the theater for his 1966 play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a comic reworking of *Hamlet* shown through the eyes of two minor characters. The play, like *Shakespeare In Love*, includes whole scenes from the Shakespeare originals. The last scene in *Shakespeare in Love* depicts the playwright starting work on *Twelfth Night* and reenacts the opening sequence of the play with a shipwreck and the character Viola walking onto a strange land. It creates an interesting effect as a combined piece of meta-theater and meta-cinema. Mary Nichols writes:

John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love*, in fact, illustrates the potential of works of popular culture to make accessible the best of the past to contemporary audiences.

*Shakespeare in Love* may not be Shakespeare, but it is a serious movie about art and life, a reflection of themes from the work of the most renowned artist of all time. *Shakespeare in Love* not only incorporates scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* but offers us a modern version of that tragic love story. (74)

*Shakespeare In Love* won seven Academy Awards including best picture for Miramax Films, beating Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). It also won for best screenplay, best actress, and best supporting actress. In the end, the film with a production budget of roughly \$30 million, made \$289 million worldwide and became the pinnacle of financial success for any Shakespeare connected film. Baz Luhrman and John Madden proved that the genre could be a part of the larger popular culture.

Between 2001 and 2008 there have been only two feature film adaptations of Shakespeare's works produced by a Hollywood studio: Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004) with Al Pacino as Shylock, and Branagh's *As You Like It*. The robust Shakespeare film revival that Branagh started stalled after the financial disappointment of *Love's Labour's Lost* in 2000. Emma French writes:

Convincing the money that a Shakespeare film might be a good investment has become more and more difficult, and the upsurge in optimism occasioned by Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* and *Much Ado About Nothing* seems to have, well, downsurged. (x)

The financial success of Shakespeare films motivate studios to produce more adaptations. The end result is that sophisticated language makes its way into popular culture and improves the sophistication of the overall vernacular found in western society.

## Chapter Five: Epilogue

*"[Peter] Hall spoke of attending a conference on verse-speaking sponsored by the Royal National Theatre the previous year, 1999, in which it was generally agreed we are perhaps the last generation for whom Shakespearean speech will be immediately intelligible at all..."*  
Theater director Peter Hall on the future of Shakespeare into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Rosenbaum 233).

In the previous chapters I have highlighted the complex and puzzling phenomenon of Shakespeare's status as high art and Kenneth Branagh's attempt to bridge the gaps between high and low culture. I have demonstrated that through the medium of film Shakespeare can reenter the realm of popular culture. It is a situation not unlike when the plays were first performed during the English Renaissance. Shakespeare's plays were enjoyed by the full spectrum of society, from the royals to the groundlings. Robert Hume writes:

[For] seventeenth and eighteenth century audiences playgoing was closer to our notions of moviegoing than to the solemn rituals of attending performances by the Royal Shakespeare Company. People came and went; gossiped with friends; ogled the whores; bought refreshments. What is sacred Shakespeare to us was merely part of daily popular entertainment for them. (46)

However, the source texts, the ones existing from the surviving quartos and folios, have an elevated status with academia. The printed versions of the plays, during Shakespeare's lifetime, were not the main focus of his artistic endeavor. Shakespeare scholar and dramaturg Andrew Hartley comments: "Shakespeare had no particular interest in the printing of his plays...[The] early quartos which seem to contain [good] texts were printed because the

company needed to raise money quick” (37). The Elizabethan theater was a business as well as an artistic endeavor. It was the popular culture of its time and did not seek approval from textual scholars. Success was determined by theater box office profits just as film receipts are tracked and scrutinized today.

Shakespeare was a popular playwright while he was still alive but not considered the literary icon that he is today. One theory of how the playwright was elevated to a higher cultural status is addressed in Hume’s article. He concludes that the phenomenon/person known today as “Shakespeare” was a conscious creation in England during the early eighteenth century. He argues that the cultural elite needed a symbol to signify England’s coming out into the world. Hume writes:

English writers [aspired] to be independent, to establish themselves as *English*. If Shakespeare had not existed he would have had to be invented—as, in a sense, he was... The playwright-hero needed to be (a) English (b) long dead and (c) ideologically acceptable. Only three candidates had been enshrined in folio memorials: Ben Jonson (who crowned himself), Shakespeare, and John Fletcher... British writers needed a nationalist hero, and Shakespeare filled the role better than Jonson or Fletcher. His historical and often British subjects were handy... The Bard (whoever he might have turned out to be) needed not only to be effective on stage but to appeal to the growing reading public that would be buying the cheap reprints that were made available in the 1730s. (62-67)

Was the intellectual Titan known as Shakespeare a planned cultural creation or did his legacy develop organically? It often depends on which scholar one asks. However, it is difficult not to acknowledge the tremendous intimidation that the word “Shakespeare” has on a modern

audience, whether or not they have experienced anything other than the line: "To be or not to be." Marjorie Garber writes: "Shakespearean is now an all-purpose adjective, meaning great, tragic, or resonant: it's applied to events, people, and emotions, whether or not they have any relevance to Shakespeare" (xiv).

What is the most effective way to keep Shakespeare as part of the culture at large? It can be downright intimidating to see the amount of footnotes, sentence clarifications, and essays on historical considerations that can accompany modern editions. A cultural studies perspective is one option as it attempts to do away with the notions of high and low culture (Culler 43). The plays could certainly obtain a larger audience once again by embracing the current cultural landscape's emphasis on popular entertainment. Richard Burt writes:

[One] could attempt to defend the study of arcane examples on the same political grounds many progressive cultural critics have defended the study of popular culture in relation to and in terms of print culture...and high culture, Shakespeare's presence in mass culture could be regarded as a key site for critical [intervention] and pedagogy. (Burt 7)

The divisions create a type of intellectual class system that continues to hinder the growth of Shakespeare as mass entertainment. Simon During defends the field of popular culture:

[Relations] between academic disciplines and popular culture remain contentious. To begin with, academic writing about popular culture risks pompousness, especially when it claims progressive clout for the popular...The reason for this is not, of course, that academic work is too rigorous and profound, and popular culture too trivial for the two ever to be compatible. [In] most of its forms,

popular culture is committed to immediate pleasure, it wraps its seriousness in entertainment. (193)

It is highly unlikely that William Shakespeare would have ever entertained the notion that an entire field of study would be debating his work four centuries after his death. The fact that the textual versions of his plays still exist is an astounding stroke of luck. As technology advances textual scholars and theater professionals must evolve as well. Modern audiences expect that media will find them and be easily accessible, not the other way around. This electronic immediacy is undoubtedly contributing to shorter attention spans, but this is the cultural landscape that scholars currently find themselves in. They can either adapt to the situation or continue to be pushed into the margins. Shakespeare's plays have survived for four hundred years in their original forms and over a century on film. In the current lull of Shakespeare cinematic offerings, a cultural backslide, not unlike the eighteen year drought in the 1970s and 80s, has begun.

Has Shakespeare's cultural dominance come to an end in the twenty-first century? Will a person have the option of obtaining a specialty in Renaissance studies in fifty to hundred years from now at a major university? It will depend on how Shakespeare's plays adapt to the new emerging digital cultural landscape. Consumers will probably experience their Shakespeare downloaded and then projected into their living room instead of going to a live performance. Does this diminish the text's power and cultural impact? It depends on which scholar one asks. Whether or not a text evolves into higher or lower culture is often determined by longevity or sanctioning by an academic institution. In an age where language is changing into faster and more digestible chunks, the preservation of Shakespeare's plays



remains a strong argument for advocates who wish to keep intellectual and sophisticated language as part of the cultural landscape. Baines writes:

Shakespeare is one of the last refuges of sophisticated language in the secondary curriculum. When students translate and manipulate Shakespeare's language, they expand their vocabularies and learn to appreciate the aesthetics of the well-placed word. (194)

Shakespeare's biggest strength is often its biggest weakness in the current modern cultural landscape. As technology becomes quicker and more accessible, visual and interactive technology will continue to decrease attention spans. Simply reading Shakespeare, which was never the playwright's mission to begin with, will become a victim of its own linguistic complexity as western culture quickly moves from a reading culture to a visual one. Renaissance scholar Russ McDonald notes: "Shakespeare's own vocabulary seems to have been exceptionally large—about 29,000 words, nearly twice that of the average American college student" (40). This in itself is a valuable educational tool as well as mass entertainment repellent. Many academics, myself included, believe that the pursuit to understand the poetic verse and linguistic complexity is worth the effort. Spreading the popularity and accessibility of the plays helps to maintain, or even expand, the overall linguistic abilities of the society. The confidence created by understanding a Shakespearean text leads to a larger ambition to expand knowledge, thereby creating more cultural value in educational and cultural institutions.

### Appendix I: A Selected Filmography of Director Kenneth Branagh

1) *Henry V* (1989): The film is an adaptation of Shakespeare's play of the same name. It was Branagh's directorial debut. He was nominated for two Academy awards for acting and directing. Branagh was awarded the BAFTA and the New York Film Critics Circle Awards for best director.

2) *Dead Again* (1991): This film was Branagh's first for a Hollywood studio. It is a Los Angeles detective thriller that is heavily influenced by the work of Alfred Hitchcock. The film introduced Emma Thompson to a wider American audience before she won the Academy Award for *Howard's End* (1992).

3) *Swan Song* (1992): The piece is one of two short films directed by Branagh; the other is called *Listening* (2003). *Swan Song* is specifically noted in this filmography because it was nominated for an Academy Award in the short subject category. It is an adaptation of a play by Anton Chekhov and stars John Gielgud.

4) *Peter's Friends* (1992): The film is an ensemble British comedy based on the experiences of co-stars Emma Thompson, Hugh Laurie, and Stephen Fry. It showcases Branagh's versatility in various genres of cinema, not just Shakespeare adaptations.

5) *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993): The film was the first financially successful Shakespeare adaptation since Zeffirelli's *Romero and Juliet* (1968). It is set in the Tuscan countryside and uses both American movie stars and classically trained British actors. The film was nominated for the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film festival.

6) *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994): The film was Branagh's second major Hollywood production. It was the second of a planned series of horror classic adaptations after the financial success of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992). The piece is perceived by many as a failure but made over \$100 million worldwide.

7) *In The Bleak Midwinter/A Midwinter's Tale* (1995): The film is Branagh's second comedy. It is the story of a group of actors staging a low budget production of *Hamlet* in the English countryside. The film is heavily influenced by the cinematic style of Woody Allen. *Midwinter* is considered by many to be a companion piece to Branagh's full length *Hamlet*. It won the Golden Osella for best director at the Venice film Festival.

8) *Hamlet* (1996): This adaptation is the most ambitious Shakespeare film to date. It features both British and American acting icons including Derek Jacobi, John Gielgud, Judi Dench, Charleston Heston, and Jack Lemmon. The film is reset in nineteenth-century Scandinavia. Branagh was nominated for an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay.

- 9) *Love's Labour's Lost* (2000): The film was a hybrid of Shakespearean adaptation and classical Hollywood musical, reset in pre-World War II Europe. Branagh's technique of mixing American actors and classically trained British performers backfires for the first time. The film was a financial failure and is often credited with the slowing down of the Shakespeare cinema renaissance begun by Branagh in 1989.
- 10) *The Magic Flute* (2006): The film is a full length adaptation of Mozart's opera. It is a \$25 million adaptation that remains unreleased in the U.S.
- 11) *As You Like It* (2006): The film is a Shakespearean comic adaptation reset in nineteenth-century Japan. Branagh once again uses American and British actors. Dallas Bryce Howard, daughter of film director Ron Howard, stars as Rosalind and noted Shakespearean Kevin Kline plays Jaques.
- 12) *Sleuth* (2007): The film is an adaptation of the play by Anthony Schaffer, the screenplay rewritten by noted dramatist Harold Pinter. It is also a remake of a 1972 film with Laurence Olivier. Michael Caine appears in both the 1972 and 2007 versions.
- 13) *Thor* (2011): The film is currently in pre-production. It will be a large budget comic book adaptation for Marvel Productions.

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### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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