Teaching Shakespeare with Film and Television

A Guide

H. R. COURSEN

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Preface

This book is designed for all teachers—from high school through college—who use film and television in the teaching of Shakespeare. Students too will find the book useful since it suggests ways of using the many available and newly arriving cassettes, and lists materials that supplement the use of film and television in teaching the plays. The book not only suggests how to write and do research in a rapidly expanding and exciting field of inquiry but provides examples of such writing and research, from the review of a single production to the comparison of several versions of the same character or scene as depicted in productions emerging from different decades.

The book makes distinctions about the media that must be understood before any evaluation of a specific production can be attempted. In spite of their conflation on cassette, film and television are not the same medium, either physically or conceptually. The concept of script is discussed, that is, the words that are to be interpreted by actors and directors and placed in a context that becomes the world of the production.

That world is to a large extent defined by the *space* available in which to construct it. Kenneth Branagh's 70-mm film of *Hamlet* occupies a wide screen in the cinema and is therefore able to fill the frame with detail. Laertes's rebellion, for example, is a full-scale military attack in what looks like regimental strength. The Nunnery Scene occurs in a huge hall of mirrored doors, with Claudius and Polonius lurking behind one of the doors, a two-way mirror. The scale is huge and would be totally inappropriate to the restricted field of depth of a television screen, where close-ups, two-shots, and the occasional three-shot are the norm.

The book suggests ways of using weaker productions—and there are many—for teaching purposes. Too often teachers have been stuck with bad productions that make Shakespeare seem like far less than the exciting playwright he continues to be. How do we translate that disadvantage into effective teaching strategies?

One of the most difficult tasks for any teacher of English is to elicit good writing from students. The approach through film and television will produce good writing, and this book suggests how to encourage it by showing how to talk about production. It covers defining a director's approach to a given script, looking at ways of framing the action, using some of the newer critical paradigms, and dealing with camera technique. The goal here is to give the teacher and the student mastery over material that otherwise becomes coercive and controlling.

Since Shakespeare pervades the English-speaking culture, the book looks briefly at some of the many offshoots from Shakespeare into popular films, including *Star Trek, LA Story,* and *The Last Action Hero.* Other examples abound, of course. This book also looks at an approach to Shakespeare that many teachers have begun to use: the trial format. Since a trial of Hamlet exists on cassette, it is examined in detail.

The book lists major resources available: film and television productions and books that will inform the approach in ways that go beyond this effort.

Part I ends with an evaluation of recent work in the area of Shakespeare on film. This field is rapidly expanding as new films come into being, and it includes the popular press as it responds to new films. It follows, then, that teachers must be alert to the influx of material into the discourse. One useful student assignment, for example, is to gather the reviews of a particular film and write a paper on critical response to it. The student learns not just about what was said but about the criteria for judgment. Is a new Shakespeare film, for example, being judged against other films emerging at a particular moment, or against other Shakespeare films? In other words, is a court of critical appeal apparent, and, if so, what is it?

Part II provides examples of critical inquiry. Is Malvolio a subject of comedy? The generic approach is still useful even if seemingly obsolete in today's critical armories. What is the effect of editing on the finished film? The recent *Othello* makes Othello not just Iago's victim but the editor's as well. What of allusion to a prior work, as in the case of Branagh's charming little film, *A Midwinter's Tale*? How does setting dictate what can happen there? Edzard's *As You Like It* and Loncraine's *Richard III* are cases in point. How does a film's opening sequence dictate what follows? Over seventy years of *Hamlet* films provide some responses, and the approach of another *Hamlet* in December 1996 leaves the question open-ended. How does history itself, or the passage of time, affect content? Several different Pistols, from film and television versions of *Henry V,* suggest some answers.

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In each case—genre, editing, allusion, setting, opening, and historicist—the examples provided in the book do not exhaust the almost infinite number of areas for exploration that open out from this basic approach to teaching Shakespeare. The field is vast and growing. This book shows how to make it one's own and thus how to participate fully in an exciting adventure that becomes central to teaching and learning, and our imaginative lives as well.

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I

THEORIES, TECHNIQUES, AND RESOURCES

As I write, in mid-1996, several films based on Shakespearean scripts have already appeared, and several more are on the way. A front-page story in *Variety* earlier this year reports "H'wood Going Over-Bard in Quest for Will Power" (Cox 1996, 22–28). Kenneth Branagh, one of the chief agents behind the explosion of Shakespeare films, reports that "around the world now, when people are studying Shakespeare, they pull out the latest video version. That's confirmed by my mailbag" (Cox 1996, 115).

As gratifying as this sudden influx of new material is to those of us who have worked in the area of Shakespeare on film, it is a mixed blessing. Unless the materials are used intelligently, they will become just a few rounds of the media bombardment to which we and our students are being subjected. When the films become cassettes, as they are all destined to be, they can all too easily become part of the "culture" that Bill Moyers describes: "You can turn off your own television set, but you cannot turn off the environment of television. It goes on without you. It's not just the networks, it's the music video, the movie, the trailer—it's the culture that mediates between us and the world" (PBS, 10 January 1995).

People set a problem and then proclaim themselves experts and say, "I can solve it for you!" Much of the cold war emerged from the simultaneous creation of and solution to a problem. Vietnam remains an example.

But a problem does exist: not just the media but our understanding of them and the uses we put them to. To use "*film* as a blanket term for all formats," says Hardy Cook, as Jo McMurtry does in her very useful *Shakespeare Films in the Classroom*, is to mislead the student by "leveling . . . the distinctions . . . between productions conceived for the 'big' screen and for television, or between productions that interpret the plays visually, eliminating much of the language in the interest of images and productions that essentially record stage performances. . . . These are distinctions that I find very useful" (Cook 1994, 77). So do I.

In a recent book on teaching Shakespeare, we are told that "for [the execution of Cawdor] the Roman Polanski film is the best because the camera shows many full-body shots so students can see where actors move—it even shows Cawdor hanging. The Royal Shakespeare Company and the BBC productions . . . show more closeups" (Renino 1993, 211). But the latter two are television productions, not films. The Royal Shakespeare version uses intense close-ups, even a chiaroscuro tonality. The Polanski film uses a field of depth and location shooting unavailable to television, which is largely studio bound. In the Polanski film we see Cawdor. We do not in the script. We even hear him cry, "God save the King!" before he plunges, neck locked to a chain, from a precipice. We watch the chain snap taut. This scene, like the murder of Duncan, the nakedness of Lady Macbeth, and Donalbain's seeking out of the Weird Sisters at the end, are added by Polanski or, in the case of Lady Macbeth's nightgown, subtracted.

To conflate film and television, not to ask students to make distinctions between the media, to ignore the ways in which a given production deviates, by addition or subtraction, from an inherited script, to neglect to ask what a script *is* is to smudge distinctions just when they should be explored and to deny students a crucial aspect of their education: that is, an understanding of how the media work. And what happens when Shakespeare is translated to television or film? We are told that "video is excellent for teaching Shakespeare . . . because . . . students come to us with thousands of hours of TV and movie watching under their belts" (LoMonico 1994, 219–20). Perhaps it is under their belts, but can they describe the experience analytically, explain the difference between a light-sensitive medium and a cathode ray tube being bombarded with electrons, begin to explore the differences between what can happen on a large movie screen and a much smaller television set, talk intelligently about the differences in expectation between watching a show at home on television and going to a cinema complex to see a film? Being a frequent flyer does not mean that one knows how to fly the airplane, and one can drown without knowing the formula H_2O.

Teachers are encouraged to permit students to see four different *Othello*s "on film" (Newlin and Poole 1995, 178). The productions suggested are the Suzman, the BBC, the Bard, and the Welles. Only one of these is a film. The Suzman is a tape of an actual stage production, the Bard a version of stage production designed for television, and the BBC a studio television production. The Welles is a film that uses a lot of black-and-white texture in the sets, as Anthony Davies (1988) and Jack Jorgens (1977) demonstrate. It employs deep-field work that is likely to be lost on cassette. If we do not permit students to question the material and technical means whereby Shakespeare is translated and transmitted or if we assume that they already know, we rob them of a central segment of their ongoing education. Here the teacher is told to "ask one or two people to follow along, in the text to see what lines have been cut" (Newlin and Poole 1995, 178). That is hardly a valid response to the issue of editing, particularly when it comes to shaping a film script.

What we observe on the screen—film or television—and not on a printed page is a relationship between word and image. Stephen Hearst observes of television that

> a written text on the right-hand side of any script page which makes complete sense in itself is a bad text. What are the pictures there for? . . . The words, except in exceptional circumstances, need to follow the pictures. . . . Pictures have their own grammar, their own logic . . . and cannot easily be kept waiting. . . . To such a picture you could speak no more than about 25 words. . . . [L]anguage seems to play a secondary role in television. (1978, 4–5)

As Peter Hall suggests, in Shakespeare, "what is meant is said. Even his stage action is verbalized before or after the event. This is bad screen writing. A good film script relies on contrasting visual images. What is spoken is of secondary importance. And so potent is the camera in convincing us that we are peering at reality, that dialogue is best underwritten or elliptical" (1969). The great Russian filmmaker Grigori Kozintsev agrees, calling "half of the text of any play a diffused remark that the author wrote in order to acquaint actors as thoroughly as possible with the heart of the action to be played" (1966, 215). In other words, actors and directors collaborate with the original work. This is particularly true of film.

All of us spend time with film and television, so it is not a foreign world (as "Shakespeare" tends to be for many students). Working with film and television is challenging, partly because film asks for some critical vocabulary, partly because television tries to hide from objective analysis, and partly because the scripts themselves do not meet student demand that they be taught only from inside their own cultural experience, which sometimes means that students be "taught" what they already know. Still, education should involve challenges, for student and teacher, and this field is interesting and not difficult.

George W. Slover (1990), using Paul Ricoeur's idea that reading aims at ownership of a text and always involves extensions of self-understanding, argues for vigorous revival of a pedagogy in which students speak and act Shakespeare's text—to reverse the growing dependency on videos. Assisted by informed teaching, speaking and acting foster personal engagement with Shakespeare's language and its power to enliven the body and the imagination, a process subverted by ready-made video images. Slover's teaching model uses *Romeo and Juliet* 1.1.1–75 for illustration and shows that enactments become

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the points of departure for debate on interpretation, for writing and formal language study. As opposed to video-centered teaching, enactment contributes importantly to gains in literacy but presupposes radical reform in teaching teachers Shakespeare.

Slover would counter or slow the trend noted by biopsychologist Sherry Dingman of Marist College, who suggests that

> children today are developing awesome capabilities in their right cerebral hemispheres at the expense of left-hemisphere skills. The left cerebral cortex is specialized to process language and abstract functions such as translating a narrative from a book into a visual image in the mind. The right cerebral cortex is specialized to process visual imagery, such as video. The faster and more intense the visual information, the more work and practice the right brain gets. The result is a generation of children who may be deficient in left-hemisphere skills, and who can become addicted to the fast-action visual feast. By contrast, the "camera angle" in a classroom or a book never changes. This helps explain why children seem to pay more attention to videogames and electronic media than they do when they read or listen to a lecture. . . . Does this mean the brain is changing in an evolutionary sense? Not that obviously. The genetic blueprint takes thousands of years to vary significantly. But for all practical purposes our culture has changed the way the brain develops. (Schwartz 1995, 28)

Slover is absolutely right to oppose plopping students down in front of, say, the BBC *Romeo and Juliet* (Zeffirelli, we must remember, included "brief nudity," and still does, and students, if they see that film at all, often get a further edited version in their classrooms) and pretending that we are doing anything but avoiding our responsibilities. "Shakespeare's plays," Brian Gibbons says, "are designed deliberately to expand the mind—to generate a sense of concentrated vigorous life in emotions and ideas, to promote as multiple an awareness as possible of differing facts of a story; and that this aim, already discernible in Shakespeare's earliest work, is at the core of his development, and of his power and distinctiveness as an artist" (1993). Gibbons gives us a major reason that we do not want to base our pedagogy on a single interpretation of any given script.

Slover nicely defines the irony "that television should furnish the remedy for the condition [students' lack of understanding of their language and lack of skill in using it] of which it is, at least in part, the cause" (1990). Peter Reynolds argues, "Systematic incorporation of television and videotape into our teaching should be used to *reinforce* verbal literacy, not as a substitution for, or distraction from, reading and writing skills" (1991). But is not production the goal of a script? Are not the words on the page intended for translation into formats that once included only stage, and only a very specific stage at one point, but that now include many different stages and media undreamed of in Shakespeare's dramaturgy? In other words, performance is the goal. Must that mean only student performance? To have students look at productions other than their own can be an extension of what they have worked out with the script. To encourage students to make their own tapes or, if copyright is a problem, to cue up excerpts for presentation to a seminar, tapes or excerpts based on something in a script that has attracted the students can give the students mastery over the material and show them how many valid options exist within the script: "*If* you have tears" (where have they been until now?). "If *you* have tears" (the way the line scans, suggesting, *I* have wept, can you?). "If you *have* tears" (are you totally devoid of compassion?). "If you have *tears*" (along with the other manifestations of grief). Charlton Heston, in a very undistinguished version of *Julius Caesar,* says, "You gentle Romans," cynically as he picks up the voices of the crowd, not as part of his opening appeal to the crowd that he will transform into a mob. We are unlikely to accept that reading as an option unless we hear an actor make the choice.

Furthermore, while most Fortinbras's say, "Take up the bodies," Q2 has him say, "Take up the body." Presumably Fortinbras means Hamlet's body and is using that body and the funeral he will give it as transitional elements in his own elevation. That makes sense of his conjectural "coronation" of Hamlet ("He was likely, had he been put on . . .") and shows Fortinbras as a skillful politician, aware that he is moving from "body natural" (I) to "body politic" (we) and that Hamlet's "voice," which Horatio has promised, is important in Fortinbras's gaining "the election." The textual difference gives students a choice to make and permits teachers to show how Fortinbras cleverly contains and redirects the violence of "the field [which] here shows much amiss" to his own advantage and within the premises defined by Kantorowitz in his seminal *The King's Two Bodies.*

Those of us who are interested in film and video should teach from that expertise while admitting its limitations. One of the strengths of the approach through video is that it allows for working outward from the image on the screen to other approaches, even including the textual. The two basic reasons for using video are that (1) plays with more than one version on cassette can be contrasted in style, scenic emphasis, characterization, and interpretation of lines and (2) television and other media (film, and stage, and types of stage) must be examined. The alternative is the tube as baby-sitter for all ages, as opposed to the good audience for Shakespeare that will encourage more good Shakespeare into being. When students recognize, for example, that television is a "fourth-wall" medium, they begin to understand that the medium, if not totally the message, defines what can occur within it. They also begin to recognize that our own expectations condition what can occur within the space of performance.

Comparing and contrasting the same scene in two or more versions of the same script teaches the student to look for detail. Suddenly his or her writing moves out of the wallow of adolescent generalization and into a mature exploration and evaluation of distinctions that directors and actors are making—and that students are also making. The often sudden crystallization of a student's prose can be remarkable when the topic is his or hers: the chalice in *Hamlet,* the Third Murderer, battle scenes in Olivier's *Henry V* and *Richard III,* Jane Howell's *Henry VI* and *Richard III,* and Branagh's *Henry V,* the depiction of Caliban and of Ariel, the use of animation for a Shakespearean script, and so on.

The recent debate in Great Britain over standardized testing for all students focuses many of the issues in teaching Shakespeare. Shakespeare in Great Britain is a function of "the sensitive reader apprehending the meaning of the isolated play," says John Collick. "The pupil's response is carefully engineered, and very definite distinctions are created between correct and incorrect interpretations. Not surprisingly the 'correct' response tends to endorse the ideology of a capitalist economy" (1989, 4). "Teaching Shakespeare is not," asserts Jane Coles, "about studying character-theme-and-plot in individual plays. This view simply invites thoughtless rehashes of Bradleyan analysis and willfully ignores all literary theory post-Leavis" (1992). The process works, according to James Wood, this way:

> Cultural materialism does not believe in radical texts; it believes in radical readers. To sit in a theatre, inspired, surrounded by people similarly moved, people asked by Shakespeare to reinvent their lives, to "take upon us the mystery of things, / as if we were god's spies," is to know that Shakespeare's meanings are not static, not fixed, but radical, stealthy and searing. (1993)

Rosalind King, however, delivers a denunciation of newer critical modes for political impotence:

> The greatest indictment of the various schools and "isms" that form the more prominent faces of contemporary literary criticism is that, despite the avowed political stance that most of them adopt, none is actually capable of responding to the greatest political challenge that the subject "literary criticism" has yet had to face, at least in this country—namely the British Government's attempt to control it through the use of testing based on particular limited interpretations of an equally limited range of select texts. (1993)

John Major, a Tory politician, chimes in with a bracing list: "People say there is too much jargon in education. So let me give you some of my own. Knowledge. Discipline. Tables. Sums. Dates. Shakespeare. British history. Standard English. Grammar. Spelling. Marks. Tests" (Gibson 1993, 2). The problem may be that such items are seen as a goal, or end product, as opposed to elements that lead to further learning. "Shakespeare," at least, is not something we "have" and seems to be on the wrong list for more reasons than can be briefly adduced.

A recent article makes the sweeping statement that "researchers have concluded that watching any TV show is a meaninglessly passive activity"

(Tashman 1994, 21). Any TV show? Yes, says Paul Robinson. "It can't" educate, he says. "Complete ignorance really would be preferable, because ignorance at least preserves a mental space that might someday be filled with real knowledge, or some approximation of it" (1978, 14). What about television as an element in the educational process, as opposed to "educator"? "On a recent Sunday, Joanna Cleveland made sure she had a supply of chips and soda at home because her daughter, Meghan, was expecting friends. The teenagers, sophomores at South Portland [Maine] High, spent the afternoon talking, joking and having a marvelous time—all over a video of 'Julius Caesar' " (Lau 1994, 1A). TV as static medium induces passivity. Like any other machine, it has to have a purpose, and in most cases the content of the machine does not provide purpose, even on a cathode tube. A radar screen showing a line of thunder storms, for example, does not recommend response. Response is dictated by the observer. Watching *Julius Caesar* as part of a course on Shakespeare is not a meaninglessly passive activity. As David Hale argues, "Reading video instead of watching television becomes a vital supplement to reading Shakespeare" (1995, 22).

One goal in having students look at Shakespeare on different media is to get them to examine the nature of the media themselves. As one who remembers World War II vividly, I am haunted by the possibility that the German people might have understood how they were being manipulated—by Leni Reifenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, for example—if they had had a grasp of how the media work. This is probably an ongoing fear, and a growing one, since we seem to be educating the manipulators, the people with a stake in the system of indoctrination, as Noam Chomsky would say, and making sure that the proliferating underclass lacks any vestiges of formal education. "Political pitchmen," says Russell Baker, "turned politics into television 40 years ago." It follows, as Baker suggests, that "candidates are merely products being marketed to gullible masses" and that "a candidate cannot be elected unless he stops acting human and starts behaving like a product" (1996, A19). It follows that those who watch television are consumers and no more than that.

When students recognize that television is an outgrowth of radio, they can begin to understand some of the assumptions and limitations of TV. If they know that films come from the silent screen, they can answer other questions. Special effects, so important to recent films, from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to *Frankenstein*, are a product of the silent screen, though techniques have become more sophisticated since 1925. But elaborate special effects, so powerful in the darkened auditorium that faces a huge screen, are diminished on television, where the field of depth is shallow. Television has a normalizing tendency, so that the supernatural tends to become, on television, the product of a single disturbed psyche, as opposed to an aberration in the cosmos. Television should be a good medium for Shakespeare because, coming from radio as it does and having a small screen, it can and must contain more words than film. Television, however, unlike film, cannot contain the larger scenes of a Shakespearean script or suggest the supernatural, as film obviously can. The shots in television are simpler and tend, with the development of standard techniques, to incorporate a close-up, a reaction shot, and a two-shot in their three-camera format. Films made for television tend toward televisual values—their camera techniques, "naturalism," and shallow field. All of these considerations impinge on the question of Shakespeare on film or on television and on the complicated issue of televised live performance of a Shakespeare play, of which many examples are available. Does the fact of an audience help recreate a sense of live performance? Does stage performance, with its tendency toward exaggeration and projection, translate to a medium where "microacting" tends to be the rule? Can the three-camera format work with a stage production? We cannot begin to evaluate the production until we examine the medium in which the script is transmitted. These may seem like very sophisticated questions, but they can elicit enthusiasm and intelligent response from students. Film and TV are, after all, the media they claim for their own. Teachers can enlist that claim and energize it within agendas that help students deconstruct effectively as opposed to self-destructing.

Many teachers in the late 1970s and early 1980s did sit their students down to stare at some very bad BBC-TV productions. The students were bored, and the teachers were in the false position of trying to defend, say, that terrible *Romeo and Juliet* or that cramped *Julius Caesar.* But the quality of the productions was not the only issue. Television as static medium induces passivity; like any other machine, it has to have a purpose. Purpose is a function of interpretation. When the purpose becomes mindless consumption, television has become a version of the invention of the mad scientist that turns on him and becomes his master.

I advocate an involvement of student and teacher in an examination of an art form—a production of Shakespeare—and an implication of student and teacher in history, his or her own—since individual subjectivity is a major factor in response to performance—and that of the moment at which a specific film or television version may have been created, since time and place determine what the result can be, as both product and interpretation. Instead of merely seating students in front of the tube, we can unashamedly make what appears there the focus of our study. If we help students to understand the media, we empower them.

We teach what we enjoy, what we feel comfortable doing. The trick is to empower ourselves. This power then can become available to students. One option is to have students pick an aspect of a play—a character or scene—and contrast that element as it occurs in different productions. As they work, students notice differences and begin to describe them. Their writing takes a leap toward maturity, an inevitable consequence of their suddenly strengthened powers of observation. If they present their contrasting versions on cassette to the class—a good approach in a small seminar—the class itself contributes to the process of perception, so that a "corporate mind" is energized, as opposed to the single student struggling at the eleventh hour with a paper he or she is not interested in, based on a topic only dimly defined at best or selected from a list of the instructor's devising and therefore in no way enlisting a student's commitment.

Since some of the chapters in this part are self-contained, they do not require the thrust of an ongoing thesis for their comprehension. Self-containment does, however, require some reiteration of basic points, that is, ways of discerning and phrasing what is observed.

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