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MOVIES

All the World's a Stage, Ruled by Guess Who; Why Shakespeare Resonates With the Modern Age

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI MARCH 18, 1999

Only two years ago, a report that two-thirds of leading American universities had dropped the Shakespeare requirement for English majors in favor of courses on popular culture and gender studies prompted worries that the playwright -- regarded by many left-wing ideologues as the quintessential Dead White Male -- was becoming a has-been, a victim of the commissars of political correctness and willfully watered-down curriculums.

Today, happily, it's clear that such reports of Shakespeare's demise were vastly exaggerated. Shakespeare is still the most produced playwright in 1990's America, and in England he was recently voted in one BBC poll "the Briton of the Millennium." There are replicas of the Globe Theater in London and Tokyo, and in Germany his birthday prompts an annual celebration. As the scholar Jonathan Bate ("The Genius of Shakespeare") points out, the Bard has become "a world genius" with a "cross-cultural appeal" that defies both the debunking of academic radicals and the stuffy canonization of traditionalists.

"Shakespeare in Love" -- a witty new movie that works an improvisation on the playwright's life -- was nominated for 13 Academy Awards and shares a nomination for best picture with "Elizabeth," another film (with seven nominations) set against the backdrop of Elizabethan England. These pictures are only the tip of the Shakespeare iceberg. Coming soon are a slew of movies based on his plays, including

Julie Taymor's version of "Titus Andronicus" (with Anthony Hopkins, Alan Cumming and Jessica Lange) and a film adaptation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," starring Calista Flockhart, Michelle Pfeiffer and Kevin Kline. Alicia Silverstone will soon star in Kenneth Branagh's new musical adaptation of "Love's Labour's Lost," while Ethan Hawke will tackle a "Hamlet" set in the corporate world of the 90's.

Certainly the fact that Shakespeare is a brand name, one who neither demands royalties nor contests rewrites, has something to do with his current revival. Yet at the same time there is a latent power to his work that has allowed successive generations of directors, critics and actors to reinvent him continually in their own image and to find new ways (some profound, some forced, some obviously silly) of pointing up his relevance. Restoration critics emphasized his role as a dramatic playwright who addressed public and political issues. Romantics portrayed him, romantically, as the poet of melancholy and love. And modernists have stressed the difficulty of his work, its layered, contradictory meanings.

How fitting that in our own age of adolescence (and box office demographics driven by teen-age tastes), filmmakers are busy depicting him as the poet of youth and youthful confusion. Baz Luhrmann started this wave in 1996 with his hip, music-video-like adaptation of "Romeo and Juliet," starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. Now there is a ridiculously dumbed-down high school version of "The Taming of the Shrew" on the way ("10 Things I Hate About You"), as well as a "Macbeth" set on the high school football gridiron and an "Othello" set in the world of college basketball. "Shakespeare in Love" depicts the playwright himself as a lovelorn youth suffering from writer's block, while "Elizabeth" portrays his sovereign as a young woman struggling to grow into her role as Queen.

Just what is it about Shakespeare's work that accounts for his enduring ability to engage the popular imagination, his accessibility to so many eras and cultures? The usual reasons offered for his greatness -- the richness of his language, the range and depth of his characterizations, the fecundity of his imagination -- do not explain why he, rather than, say, Dante or Chaucer has become and remained a household name. Nor do paeans to his storytelling gifts: after all, he lifted most of his plots from pre-existing works.

History's Accidents Played Their Role

In his controversial book, "Reinventing Shakespeare," Gary Taylor, an editor of an Oxford University Press edition of the playwright's works, suggested that the Bard owed much of his success to happy accidents of history. "If France had won its wars against England, if England like other countries had been culturally transformed by the upheavals of the late 18th century," he wrote, "then Shakespeare would almost certainly not have achieved or retained the dominance he now enjoys." Shakespeare's current international reputation, in Mr. Taylor's view, was at least partly "the fruit not of his genius but of the virility of British imperialism, which propagated the English language on every continent."

There is something to the argument that the "myriad-minded Shakespeare," as Coleridge called him, has gradually been institutionalized, and that in becoming part of the English-language canon -- taught in schools, cited in dictionaries, studied by scholars and laymen alike -- he has insidiously become our familiar. We daily use phrases popularized by Shakespeare like "brave new world," "the primrose path" and "sound and fury," and even those of us who have never seen a play associate Romeo and Juliet with doomed love and Hamlet with existential indecision. When we see a screwball comedy on the big screen, we are seeing updated variations on "A Midsummer Night's Dream." And when we are made privy to the thoughts of characters on "Ally McBeal," we are being given a jump-cut, MTV version of the old Shakespearean soliloquy. As Jane Austen once remarked of Shakespeare, "one gets acquainted" with him "without knowing how."

In fact, his influence on other writers has been so pervasive that he has become part of the very literary air we breathe. Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Baudelaire, Ibsen, Strindberg, Pirandello -- to name just a few of the authors and thinkers indelibly shaped by Shakespeare is to rattle off a litany of the makers of modern Western culture. Nineteenth-century nihilism and 20th-century psychology, French existentialism and Emersonian self-reliance -- all could be said to have seeds in Shakespeare's art.

The fact that such crucial writers and philosophers responded so ardently to Shakespeare, however, suggests that there was something in the playwright's work

itself that was in tune with the modern Zeitgeist. The very style and structure of his work -- mixing and remaking genres, fusing highbrow art and popular entertainment, breaking the fourth wall of the stage -- prefigure our post-modernist outlook, just as his work's ambiguity and pursuit of plural truths resonate, as Mr. Bate argues, with our age of relativity.

The game-playing of Shakespeare's characters, their gender confusion, their romantic and familial disputes, their efforts to grapple with the contingency of reason and love, all seem peculiarly modern. Such spirited, independent heroines as Beatrice and Rosalind appear to have more in common with today's feminists than the circumscribed women of Elizabethan England, while his questioning heroes like Hamlet, so skilled in irony and self-dramatization, reflect the preoccupation with the self manifested by both the Reformation and contemporary America.

In his best seller, "Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human," the scholar Harold Bloom argues that the playwright was the first writer to give us portraits of human beings capable of change and growth. He brought psychology to the fore, Mr. Bloom suggests, while laying out an unsentimental, even nihilistic vision of a world of loss and flux.

Dark Violence Of the 20th Century

The latter observation echoes the pioneering work of the Polish critic Jan Kott, whose famous 1964 book "Shakespeare Our Contemporary" illuminated the modernity of the Bard. Mr. Kott not only demonstrated how Shakespeare's tragedies and histories anticipated the violence and cruelty of 20th-century history -- and more particularly Eastern Europe's suffering at the hands of Hitler and Stalin -- but he also underscored the affinities between Shakespeare and such avatars of the Theater of the Absurd as Beckett, Ionesco and Genet. In plays like "Hamlet" and "King Lear," Mr. Kott discerned a dark, uncompromising and very modern view of the world as an irrational place, ruled by violence and chance, a place in which "it is the clowns who tell the truth."

Although the Renaissance is often described as the era that saw the beginnings of modern science and the flowering of the arts, Mr. Kott sees its later stages as an

age of disillusion and contradictions, an age in which it became clear that "the great dreams of the humanists about a happy era had not been fulfilled."

Indeed the Elizabethan era was marked not only by economic expansion and the unification of Britain, but by the unsettling effects of progress. Thanks to the printing press, literacy was spreading, and traditional divisions between the classes were dissolving. Explorers were opening up the world, and astronomers were on the verge of discoveries that would shatter people's sense of cosmic order. A new global market was offering enterprising merchants the promise of vast riches. And the growing secularization of the arts had exacerbated worries that the world was becoming a godless and dangerous place.

The waning years of Elizabeth's reign and the ascension of James I to the throne after her death in 1603 seem to have exacerbated a sense of uncertainty for Shakespeare. Despite his professional success, his plays took a darker turn with "Troilus and Cressida," "Measure for Measure" and the great tragedies, "Othello," "King Lear," "Macbeth" and "Antony and Cleopatra." Although James was an affable, politically astute king, he was also regarded as an uncouth and undisciplined man, and the public image of his court would suffer from a series of sexual scandals. In the view of some critics, plays like "Coriolanus" and "Timon of Athens," both dating from 1607-8, reflected the decline in values and factionalization of the aristocracy that lay beneath the domestic peace of James's reign.

Bridging the medieval and the modern, the age of Shakespeare was a time, as Joseph Papp and Elizabeth Kirkland observed in their 1988 book, "Shakespeare Alive!," when "nothing seemed stable or reliable anymore; the old ways were disappearing fast, and the search for a fixed point of moral reference was a futile one -- everything depended on your point of view, for as Hamlet says, 'there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.' "

It was an age, in Jan Kott's words, when people were forced to grapple with "the divergence between the greatness of the human mind" and "the frailty of the moral order," an age of melancholy and Machiavellianism, an age marked by a taste for violent entertainment and anxiety about the accelerating pace of social and cultural change. In short, an age oddly in sync with our own.

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