

Shakespeare and the Popular Film Industry

From Allusion and Adaptation to Successful Crossovers

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Abstract: Shakespeare's popularity on the big screen increased exponentially in the 1990s, largely thanks to Kenneth Branagh's and Baz Luhrmann's films and Shakespeare in Love (1998), co-written by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, which became the highest grossing Shakespeare film. In the recent two decades, the popular film industry has also rediscovered the marketing value and crowd-tickling element in Shakespeare allusions, and several box office success genres, like superhero films, relied on "Easter egg" inclusion of well-known Shakespearean quotes or motifs. This paper offers a bird's eye view of several tendencies characterising the attitude of the popular film industry to Shakespeare in the last 30 years. Arguing that success relies on some form of a crossover effect, it also presents brief case studies with a focus on what makes or unmakes a "Shakespeare film" at the box office and in critical opinion. The films in focus are Baz Luhrmann's Romeo+Juliet, Shakespeare in Love, Joss Whedon's film noiresque Much Ado About Nothing (2012), and Richard Eyre's King Lear (2018).

QUESTIONS OF POPULARITY: FROM THE 1990S TO OUR DAYS

The concept and measurement of popularity within the Western film industry, as well as what defines a product as a "Shakespeare film" are two questions not easily answered. This brief study cannot hope to give definite answers to either; however, pointing out some major tendencies in the last decades, then focusing

on two high-grossing films from the second half of the 1990s and two less popular ones from the 2010s, it attempts to offer some answers and comes to a tentative conclusion regarding the role of crossover elements in securing success. For the purposes of this study, the term, “Shakespeare film,” is confined to those adaptations that are either based on a famous play and/or boast “Shakespeare” as a clearly recognisable brand.

As Douglas Lanier and others confirm, “Shakespeare” has served as a business brand since, at least, the nineteenth century and became a commodified product with high advertising value. “Shakespeare” signifies an identity myth masses of people recognise and measure themselves up to, and thus, according to Douglas B. Holt’s definition of brands, it achieves an almost iconic status (qtd in Lanier, “Shakespeare™” 112). Even more importantly, “Shakespeare”—both the man and the works—became popular culture’s favourite “Other,” though their relationship has always been characterised by a certain ambivalence, appearing in differing forms of appreciation, anxiety, and appropriation:

Behind the various re-brandings of Shakespeare in the last century lies a fundamental continuity—Shakespeare as pop’s Other. Within pop culture Shakespeare’s face remains the sign of that culture which pop proclaims it isn’t, old-fashioned, elitist, artisanal, intellectual, moralistic “proper” art, promoted by official educational and cultural institutions, but it also remains the sign of pop’s desire, its desire for the kind of cultural authority, quality, legitimacy, and upward mobility that Shakespeare continues to symbolise. (Lanier, “Shakespeare™” 99)

The 1990s, however, signalled a paradigm shift in the long and complicated relationship between popular culture and “Shakespeare” in modern times, fostering a more playful, relaxed, and less respectful or anxious approach. Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) became the icebreaker in Hollywood since it proved that the previously opposing concepts of “Shakespeare film” and “box-office success” were no longer irreconcilable, which was re-affirmed by numerous other films following Branagh’s in the 1990s. As John Blakely summarises, Hollywood cast off Shakespeare’s “residual cultural superiority ... finally and unequivocally taking Shakespeare into its loving embrace,” with films like Oliver Parker’s *Othello*

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(1995), Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995), Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996), Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996), with the "biggest impact" made by Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* in 1996 and *Shakespeare in Love* in 1998 (Blakely 251). Besides such easily recognisable Shakespeare films, looser adaptations of Shakespearean plays into a contemporary milieu and popular film genres also abounded and became commercial successes from *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) to *Warm Bodies* (2013), as Kinga Földvary traces in the second part of her monograph, *Cowboy Hamlets and Zombiomeos*. Shakespeare—at large and in part—became a possibility for success in the popular film industry.

Concerning the money-making capacity of Shakespeare films, Alicia Adamczyk's figures are quite informative. Even though her 2016 table may be severely criticised from a Shakespeare scholar's viewpoint, since she does not recognise *Romeo and Juliet* in *Shakespeare in Love* and does not distinguish between oblique and straight adaptations, the numbers make it quite clear: two of the highest-grossing Shakespeare films ever were made in the 1990s. If she had factored in the hugely successful musical theatrical afterlife of the film *Shakespeare in Love* (starting in 2014), as a clear sign of long-lasting popularity with audiences, the numbers may have been even bigger (see Table 1).

After this laudable upsurge of popular Shakespeare films in the 1990s, the following decades predominantly continued in the ambiguous, partly reverent, partly irreverent cinematographic attitude towards Shakespeare, which characterised both Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* and *Shakespeare in Love*. By now, we can safely say that the 1990s proved a golden decade for cinema in general, with many memorable films produced then which are still popular and re-watched today. However, it is impossible to prove objectively whether this larger context contributed to the popularity of these two Shakespeare films, or these two productions contributed to the long-lasting success of Hollywood cinema of the 1990s, even though I personally adhere to the latter view.

Nevertheless, it is evident that later products of the popular film industry have tended to allude to Shakespeare as a well-known myth, employing double-edged allusions to him or his works in upcoming hugely popular genres, like superhero films and networked TV series, such as *Westworld*. Since the beginning of the 2010s, Hollywood has been swamped by superhero films, and their attitude to Shakespeare illustrates pop culture's changing perspectives to a fault. One of the first great Marvel hits, *Avengers* (dir. Joss Whedon, 2012) has a scene when Thor (Chris Hemsworth)

arrives on Earth in shiny body armour and a red cape, landing in Central Park, New York, and the following witty banter ensues between Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.) and Thor, the new superhero recruit:

Thor: You have no idea what you're dealing with...

Iron Man: Shakespeare in the Park? ... Doth mother know thou weareth her drapes?

Although, purportedly, Iron Man's line was improvised by the actor, Robert Downey Jr., the director Joss Whedon, a Shakespeare enthusiast himself, did not cut it, and since then it has become one of the most quoted scenes of *Avengers*. The wittiness and comprehension of Iron Man's line relies on what I term "double cultural literacy" (Lanier calls it "dual cultural literacy" and Jostein Gripsrud "double access," see Lanier, "Shakespeare™" 97), and this concept goes back to Peter Burke's famous concept of "amphibious" consumers/producers, well-versed in both elite and popular cultures (Burke 9). Iron Man's line is a multi-layered allusion, juxtaposing *faux*-Elizabethan English as a Shakespearean signifier to an oblique reference to Thor as Hamlet (a prince with a troubled relationship to his mother) and the famous free Shakespeare theatrical productions at the open-air Delacorte Theater in Central Park, started by Joseph Papp in the 1950s. Another characteristic feature of this allusion is the playful mixture of English and American cultural traditions, blissfully free of the anxiety of Shakespeare's cultural superiority and its residual Englishness.¹ For these American superheroes, Shakespeare has become a household name. However, the question of how many spectators actually identify and understand all the layers and intertextual references remains an open one. The recognisability and the intended target audience of such fragmented and multi-layered allusions deserve to be discussed separately in each and every individual case, not disregarding other factors like genre, as Földvály emphasises throughout her monograph. This allusion also exemplifies new forms of adaptation, which are called "rhizomatic" in recent adaptation studies. Based on Deleuze's concept of the rhizome, Lanier suggests that such adaptations do not appear in an arbo-real form (tree trunk/source and branches/adaptations), which prioritises fidelity

1 This anxiety is a central issue in Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996), a documentary (meta)film about the staging of *Richard III* by American theatre-makers, showing many different attitudes to Shakespeare from scholars to actors and even a homeless person.

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or one source text (“the original Shakespearean”) above others but rather work in a horizontally linked and decentralised fashion, connecting several “texts”/manifestations, many of which are already offshoots of the historical Shakespearean phenomenon (Lanier, “Afterword” 295, 297).

Other superhero films have variously more direct or indirect relationships with Shakespeare: when making the first *Thor* film (2011), Kenneth Branagh was happy to point out the Shakespearean roots of the story, referring to the similarity between Thor and Prince Hal/Henry V (Wilkins), and later, *Thor: Ragnarök* (2017), directed by Taika Waititi, included an open-air theatrical production within the film. This scene presents Thor and Loki’s former struggles as a mock-Shakespearean play in performance, rewriting history from Loki’s viewpoint. In an open-air, very nineteenth-century looking theatre, complete with red curtains and a picturesquely painted backcloth, “The Tragedy of Loki of Asgaard” is performed in traditional Shakespearean theatrical style, with Asgaardian “groundlings,” and King Odin (Anthony Hopkins) watching (and enjoying) it from a dais. In the *finale* of the performance, we see the dying Loki being mourned by a repentant Thor and the stage-Odin breaks out in rhymed mock-Elizabethan lines in his epilogue, with a blue-skinned boy-Loki appearing as the future saviour of the people. Both the language and theatrical style, as well as stage-Loki’s demand to “build a statue for me,” and the play-within-the-play/film recall Shakespeare with a tongue-in-cheek attitude. Especially since it finally turns out that the performance has been conceived, directed and enjoyed by Loki (Tom Hiddleston) himself—in their father’s, Odin’s disguise.

The popularity of cheeky Shakespeare allusions in recent mainstream Hollywood films, however, does not help us in defining what popularity really means in filmic terms. The most important film database of our days, *The Internet Movie Database* (IMDb) shows several, often opposing factors for measuring popularity, which, unfortunately, offers more questions than answers. Table 2 is based on the IMDb data of the four films which are considered in the second part of this study. These four productions were chosen, as they signal (potential) trends and different (potential) reasons for popularity. Besides the widely distributed, internationally acclaimed, and undoubtedly popular 1990s mainstream films, Branagh’s *Much Ado*, Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet*, and Madden’s *Shakespeare in Love*, two Shakespeare films from the 2010s were selected as a counterpoint, which had a potential for popularity but failed to achieve it. In the 2010s, Joss Whedon was a rising star in Hollywood with a huge fan base, thanks to his several original TV series on the small screen,

and many hoped that his *Much Ado* might prove another success. Even if it was produced as an indie film, with limited distribution, this fact alone might not have hindered the film from becoming popular with audiences, thanks to the by then widespread practice of downloading films, which ensured easy (though illegal) access to any filmed product. By the 2010s, any filmed production could become hugely popular and successful disregarding its origins, be they small screen or big screen, mainstream or non-mainstream. Downloading films and emerging streaming platforms became the vogue and often a source of unexpected success and popularity (see Netflix's *Stranger Things*, or BBC's *Sherlock*). Therefore, when the acclaimed English theatre and film director Richard Eyre, who has also worked for the small screen since the 1980s, was invited by BBC and Amazon to produce a *King Lear* film of two hours with many actors of celebrity status, again many people hoped for success with large-scale audiences, besides critical attention.²

In one sense, measuring popularity remains as hopeless as measuring love in *King Lear*. Nevertheless, databases and their numbers might offer some useful information if treated critically. As seen in Table 2, based on IMDb, nominations and wins signal critical acclaim, which often stands in contrast to both IMDb ratings and users' reviews, rather representing mass acceptance and favour for the film. It appears that Branagh's *Much Ado* has been a little more popular with spectators than *Shakespeare in Love*, which otherwise excels in all numbers, including gross income (see Table 1), whereas the IMDb rating of Luhrmann's film is much lower than expected. Whedon's *Much Ado*, however, has a higher rating than would be normal, considering that its IMDb rating number is the same as that of *Shakespeare in Love*, which has had much higher visibility than Whedon's. In addition, Whedon's film was an absolute flop at the box office, and many reviews show a following that is fewer in number but very enthusiastic (quite typical in the case of Whedon's productions, see later). Eyre's *King Lear* fares the worst, however, which only partially might be chalked up to the fact that it appeared on Amazon Prime.

2 This study focuses on a narrow concept of "Shakespeare films," excluding animated cartoons, like *Gnomeo and Juliet* (dir. Kelly Asbury, 2011), and clear adaptations. In addition, we have too little time elapsed from the screening of very recent productions like Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story* (2021) or Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2021) to assess popularity with any certainty. In addition, this study cannot hope to cover all the Shakespeare films of the 2000s and 2010s, so, for instance, Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015) falls outside the scope of analysis—especially since it did not prove very popular with either audiences or critics despite the fact that it was a big-screen production and enjoyed international distribution.

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In conclusion, the question remains an open one: what endows a Shakespeare film with lasting popularity?

CAPTIVATING CROWD-TICKLERS OF THE LATE 1990s AND PARTIAL SUCCESSES OF THE 2010s

The problem with contemporaneous cultural products is that we usually do not have sufficient temporal distance to make claims about long-lasting success with audiences. Nevertheless, the popularity of both *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* and *Shakespeare in Love* appears to have remained constant with spectators even in the early 2020s, whereas these films are also faithful mirrors to their specific temporal context of the later 1990s, as shown in the following analysis. Not only has *Shakespeare in Love* enjoyed a successful theatrical revival globally in the 2010s, starting with Declan Donnellan's West End production in 2014, reaching even Hungary in 2017, but both films appear to enjoy an almost iconic status, spawning further Shakespearean offshoots and allusions, or, as Földvary emphasises, further genre-specific Shakespeare adaptations. For instance, Luhrmann's film is credited by many to have launched a series of Shakespeare teen films, even if they are more oblique adaptations of Shakespearean stories and motifs (Földvary 171). Nevertheless, my contention is that, in both films, a very fortunate multi-crossover effect contributes to lasting value, besides other potential triggers for success.

First, both films have a double-edged, both reverent and irreverent attitude to the Shakespeare phenomenon. They clearly indicate their indebtedness to Shakespeare in their titles, however, the full title of Luhrmann's film, *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* only appears after two and a half minutes of having heard and shown the Prologue in three different versions, and after the *faux*-opening credits, which introduce the main characters in character (e.g. "Ted Montague, Romeo's father"). Luhrmann deftly plays with the significance of Shakespeare's name, both upholding and refreshing its evocative power,³ promising and teasing audiences at the same time. What Shakespeare's name calls forth in general (a reverent attitude to well-known, therefore, boring tradition) is counterbalanced by the aggressively

3 This corresponds to Lanier's claims about the significance of an iconic author's name: "attaching an author's name (and image) to a text (or product) predisposes us to interpret it in a certain manner, to classify it with certain texts (or products), and not with others, to expect it to have certain qualities, themes, ideas, or formal traits" ("The Shakespeare™" 93).

quick sequence of direct cuts, sped up zoom-ins from long shots to close-ups, and typical gangster film frames, like the distressed but elegant Montague parents shown in the open doors of a luxurious black limousine, or the police chopper hovering above a metropolitan city, and TV and newspaper headlines repeating the Prologue's words about the "ancient grudge." Although what the audience hears is Shakespeare's Elizabethan language, the visuals emphasise that we are thrown into a filmed world, from TV screens to the big screen. This establishing sequence defines the major characteristics of Luhrmann's Shakespeare film: its aggressively quick momentum (which only slows down in the intimate scenes between Romeo and Juliet), the jump-cuts and extreme close-ups (eyes, half-faces) that do not allow for maintaining an emotional distance from what is happening on screen, and the almost parodistic excess characterising religion and on-screen emotions. Luhrmann is able to keep a fine line between kitschy and expressive metaphors, translating into filmic devices what is poetry in Shakespeare.⁴ The best example for this is the use of water imagery for the young lovers' pure love in their first meeting and the so-called balcony (or here: pool) scene. Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* captivates and pulls in the spectator with its garish, over-the-top visuality, the strong musical core, and the many extreme close-ups of Romeo's and others' faces, and ensures that no one can remain neutral emotionally in the auditorium. Strong emotions are counter-balanced by highly comic moments, also expressed by filmic devices: the artificial speeding up of the Nurse's and Lady Capulet's movements before the ball recalls early film burlesques, while the Nurse's thick accent, her excessive facial expressions and gestures (sometimes shown as a shadow image) are solidly set in the mood of *opera buffa*. Even Romeo appears comic in the first part of the film: in his haste, he often stumbles, slips, and falls, adding to the physical comedy of the Nurse.

As a "teen pic," the role of music is extremely significant: Földvály and others emphasise that it is almost "carbon dating" the film as a 1990s film for an MTV generation (French qtd. in Földvály 155), well-versed in similar music videos (its soundtrack had a high selling rate as well). The music is often frantic and only switches to silence or hushed tones in the intimate scenes between Romeo and Juliet. However, this time-specific nature of the music does not exclude its strong emotional impact even after more than twenty years. Flawless editing ensures that

4 Marcell Gellért mourns the fact that almost one-third of the Shakespearean text is cut: "a 'movie' of action and visual design would not bear the burden of too many words" (Gellért 83); however, I would rather say that Shakespeare's words are translated into filmic devices and metaphors.

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the rhythm and pacing of songs, music, and visuals are synchronous and work together to achieve the same pulling-in effect. *Romeo and Juliet* becoming a teen pic is based on its teenage main characters; however, the crime or gangster film element appears to be Luhrmann's own. Many critics have commented upon the mixture of popular genres in the film, from music videos to western, gangster, and teen films; however, they did not really comment upon this multi-crossover effect in detail.⁵

Besides easily recognisable references to westerns from boots to pistol duels, the film's strongest adherence is to American gangster films. The question whether the Capulet and Montague boys' appearances are based on Mexican or Italian-American gangster stereotypes is less relevant, although the latter is reaffirmed by Romeo being played by Leonardo di Caprio, himself an Italian-American actor. More importantly, typical gangster-film stylistic features are seen in the boys' rivalry and their attire: bare chests and Hawaii shirts for the Montagues, and leather jackets, western boots, and tattoos for the Capulets, with Tybalt visually also recalling James Dean in *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955), an older teen pic. Even the spiritual leader, Friar Lawrence boasts a huge, tattooed crucifix, emphasising the exaggerated and often kitschy religiousness of both Hispanic and Italian communities in the States. Guns and bleeding wounds abound everywhere as well as hearty meals. This mood is reaffirmed in the final scenes when Romeo, chased by police cars, takes an innocent bystander hostage (not Paris, which would be more faithful to the storyline of Shakespeare's play) before entering the Capulet's crypt with the words "Tempt not a desperate man," brandishing his pistol. Luhrmann's daring combination of seemingly irreconcilable genres (romantic teen pic and gangster film), boosted by references to other popular forms (western, music videos), created a winning mixture, which does not seem to lose its power even after more than twenty years.

The locales of the film point to another successfully popularising element present in both *Romeo+Juliet* and *Shakespeare in Love*: shot in Mexico City and Veracruz, Luhrmann's film creates a (pan-)American feeling,⁶ similarly to the ending of *Shakespeare in Love*, when the "foreign shore" the Elizabethan heroine, Viola, arrives at (played by the American actress Gwyneth Paltrow), signals a new, American beginning for Shakespeare. In one of the discarded cuts, this long shot even showed

5 For instance, Loehlin's detailed analysis places Luhrmann's film securely in the category of "millennial teen films," even though he mentions other generic features as well (121ff).

6 Gellért calls it "dystopian nowhere-land" (84); however, I rather agree with Blakeley, since the visuals always remain identifiably metropolitan and American.

an obscured Manhattan skyline in the distance (Blakeley 250, Nadel 421). Since Hollywood film history has conditioned viewers throughout the world to think in terms of “global/us” when showing “American,” this attitude signals a new, anxiety-free approach to Shakespeare: the familiarisation of the Swan of Stratford, the “Star of Poets” is shown as completed.⁷

Blakeley’s article informatively maps out this Americanisation/decolonisation process in the film, from casting to other features. Interestingly, *Shakespeare in Love*, one of the highest-grossing Shakespeare films ever, had very uncertain beginnings and definitely no sure sign of success then. Ira Nadel discusses the many pre-production problems, from casting to several re-writings,⁸ switching studios, producers and directors which characterised the process from 1991 on, when Tom Stoppard first became involved with the script, to review Marc Norman’s version (416–422). Although Norman already had contacts with Stephen Greenblatt, the preeminent Shakespeare scholar of the day when writing his script, I argue that without Stoppard’s own research and expertise in combining the Elizabethan and the postmodern, the film would not have become an international success. Besides the Anglo-American cast, also successfully used in Branagh’s *Much Ado*, the authenticity of the film was partly ensured by moving principal photography to England and building a replica Elizabethan theatre for the Rose. This way a successful combination of different genres and approaches emerged: 1. heritage films, with historical authenticity supported by elaborate visuals, and by Greenblatt’s and Stoppard’s help; 2. Marc Norman’s original romcom-biopic combination; and 3. the typical Stoppardian postmodern tongue-in-cheek play with authenticity, history, and with Roland Barthes’s idea of the “death of the author.” As Philip Henslowe (Geoffrey Rush) aptly comments about Will, when people barge in on a rehearsal in the Rose and inquire about everyone’s role: “who is that?” the answer is: “Nobody. The author.” As Nadel comments, without Stoppard’s ingenious solution of the riddle of having a romcom without the boy and girl’s final happy union, *Shakespeare in Love* could never have fared so well (421). Stoppard fused romantic passion for a lover and passion for writing

7 Al Pacino’s *Looking for Richard* (1996) also elaborates on the ambiguity of such cultural appropriation of Shakespeare in America but rather presents it as an unresolved source of anxiety.

8 Before they chose Gwyneth Paltrow, the American actress with a distinctly English look, and by then already a star of a Jane Austen film, Julia Roberts, Winona Ryder, Jodie Foster, and Meg Ryan had also been considered. For “Will,” a number of actors’ names emerged as well, from Ralph Fiennes, Colin Firth, even Mel Gibson, and Ben Affleck had to be “written into” the script at Paltrow’s request (Nadel 419–420).

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successfully, and this was combined with the partly *faux*-Merry Old England feel of the film, deliberately shot not in historically accurate, that is, often dark and sombre lighting and gritty realistic detail, but, as Nadel sums up, director John Madden required a simple and movable, flexible camera combined with shots in widescreen “to capture the appropriate depth and yet maintain low light levels” (422). The film shows destitute people in period clothing, and mud and urine in the streets, however, only as a comic backdrop to Henslowe’s hasty retreat to his playhouse, shaking mud off his boots. The visual details were historically accurate for the most part (thanks to Greenblatt), but never as realistic as to be offending, and often presented with a Stoppardian humorous-parodical twist. For instance, the playbill that we see in the establishing shot, lying on the sawdust-strewn floor of the Rose playhouse in the groundlings’ area, shows an actual period woodcut and typesetting with the words “September 1st and 8th [numbers in handwriting] at noon / Mr EDWARD ALLEYN and the LORD ADMIRALL’s MEN / in the Rose Theatre [empty space] Bankside / [woodcut] / The Lamentable Tragedie of the / MONEYLENDER REVENG’D.” Although, unfortunately, we do not have an extant playbill from Elizabethan times, both the phrasing, the woodcut, and the partly damaged look of the bill imitates a real, historical one, as described in Tiffany Stern’s *Documents of Performance* (36–62), and evokes a feeling of historical accuracy for a non-existent play, the title of which prepares the audience to the next scene in the tiring house, where the Lord Admiral’s Men’s theatrical producer Henslowe’s boots are put on fire as part of Mr. Fennyman’s, the moneylender’s revenge. The same, simultaneously irreverent, subversive and historically authentic approach characterises the presentation of Will Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes), the film both meeting and mocking the audience’s expectation regarding a live “Shakespeare” on screen: we first see his ink-stained fingers in the opening credits, and as the film title is “being handwritten” in *faux*-Elizabethan ink and quill style (not the authentic secretarial hand, which would be unreadable for the general audience), we expect him to be penning one of his masterpieces. However, it turns out that Will is only practising his autograph, in the true fashion of a young, ambitious author hungry for success, so the joke is turned on him as well as on the audience: he is not yet *the* Shakespeare but a young, handsome man we instantly sympathise with, being “one of us.” Nevertheless, the signatures are the actual historical signings of Shakespeare from his legal documents. With this witty combination of historically accurate and wittily inaccurate, as well as through the multi-crossover effect recalling several film genres, *Shakespeare in Love*

targets the widest possible audience, entertaining scholars and Shakespeare buffs as well as people simply loving romcoms or beautiful heritage settings and costumes.

This “postmodern bricolage,” as Fedderson and Richardson call it, remains authentically Shakespearean both in treating the past not as a relic but a source of free play, besides combining the erotic with the poetic. As they argue in 2000, the film is firmly set in the late 1990s: “Fiennes’s Will Shakespeare is very much a creature for our time—MTV-handsome, gender-conflicted, entrepreneurial, adolescent, obsessed with notoriety; Paltrow’s Viola is similarly timely, she is a conflicted feminist, an impulsive disobedient child, an exhibitionistic and sentimental debutante” (Fedderson-Richardson). More than twenty years past, although this time-specific feature of the film appears more troubling for new viewers, who are well-versed in LGBTQI+ issues,⁹ the popular appeal of the film itself does not seem to fade, and my contention is that this multi-crossover combination of heritage film, biopic, romcom and Stoppardian postmodern play with historical authenticity plays a significant role in its lasting success besides a certain “safe” nostalgia, the simplified and subtly beautified look of “Merry Old England” and “Good Queen Bess” (Judi Dench).¹⁰ The allure of nostalgia is buttressed with the voyeuristic appeal of an “inside look” into the Bard’s study and love life, so that the idea of the “genius” of Shakespeare and Elizabethan theatre is upheld even in parody.¹¹ The same refers to the cult of Elizabeth I and the Elizabethan “Golden Age,” presenting her as a just ruler, at a time of triumphant colonisation, within a fantasy of culture at peace with power. Marc Norman’s filmic clichés combined with Stoppard’s theatrical expertise and John Madden’s cinematic crossover attitude created a popular mixture that still calls out to many.

Although the 2010s were a very different cinematic era, it is still striking to see that this decade could not offer Shakespeare films straightforward popularity, even if several projects started out as promising, with a high potential for success. For

9 I have been teaching this film for several years now for BA students at the film specialisation track in the class, “Film Icons” (co-taught with Vera Benczik), and the reaction of students appears to remain constant: even if they do not all agree with the predominantly heteronormative representation of the gender play of Will and Viola (see Klett), they love the film in general.

10 I do not have time here to dilate on whether this rather belongs to Svetlana Boym’s restorative or reflective nostalgia, for such an approach to early modern plays, see Hargitai. *Shakespeare in Love* has been a favourite with scholars, too, see Földvály (251–257), and many others.

11 Annamária Fábíán emphasises the same significance of simultaneous deconstruction/reconstruction in present-day Hungarian theatrical adaptations of Shakespeare (85).

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instance, American popular daredevil director Joss Whedon's Shakespeare film was a much-awaited project, and many expected famous theatre and film director Richard Eyre's *King Lear* to become an instant hit in 2018. In 2012, Joss Whedon scripted and filmed his version of *Much Ado About Nothing* as a personal pet project. The film was shot in black and white, at his own resort in Santa Monica in twelve days, with his favourite actors from previous Whedon projects. By that time his name had already become synonymous with a distinctive style and narration in TV series, which created a devout base of fans even though he did not always achieve commercial success. The so-called "Whedonverse" between 1997 and 2010 consisted of 7 seasons of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, 5 seasons of its male vampire-focused spin-off, *Angel*, a broken season of the space western, *Firefly*, with 11 episodes, to which the full-length feature film, *Serenity*, was added later thanks to the devoted fanbase, and a full season of *Dollhouse*. In all these popular series, he sketched out his own mythologies in full, where imagery, music, and story aligned to create a recognisably Whedonesque mood, featuring relatable "misfits" and their emotional problems, action sequences mixed with moral questions of friendship, love, betrayal, courage, and responsibility, successfully targeting and captivating a teenage (and older) audience. Still, the film proved a commercial flop, both in the US and globally, and was never screened in cinemas in most countries. It received several independent film awards and some critical praise, but somehow Whedon's crossover of the Shakespearean play as a romcom in a *film-noiresque* atmosphere did not produce a widely palatable film.

Although the definition of *film noir* as a genre or only a set of convergent visual and narrative features is still a contested field (see Neale), Whedon's indebtedness to its cinematographic and other markers appears clearly: the sunshine glare of an American luxurious resort is shot in black and white, in clear opposition to Branagh's *Much Ado*, filmed in buoyant colours in an idyllic summer landscape in Tuscany, Italy. Whedon's interior shots often show the main characters in claustrophobic positions; for instance, Beatrice is hiding under the table of a kitchen island in a vulnerable position, knees and arms drawn up close to her body in protection, when overhearing Hero and Margaret's ruse concerning Benedick. Mirror images, typical of *noirs*, also abound, as well as *noirs'* frequent subversion of gender norms. The Shakespearean questioning of male and female social roles in Benedick and Beatrice's dialogue is reaffirmed by a gender switch: Don John's helper, Conrad becomes Conrade, his lover, who, in Riki Lindhome's representation, recalls

the *femme fatale* of *film noir*. The flashback to Benedick and Beatrice's previous, pre-action love affair in the opening shot, exposing their mutual vulnerability and despair, is another potentially *noiresque* addition by Whedon.

Even though both Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and *film noir* thrive on anxiety regarding sexual and gender questions, and share a cynical attitude to love, this specific combination apparently lacked the persuasive energy to win over the general audience. Nevertheless, the question why the film never became popular remains open and only tentative answers may be offered. Present-day audiences seem to favour black-and-white films only when either the subject matter or a necessary emotional distance calls for it (see *The Artist* and *Schindler's List*), and only appear to appreciate *film noir* as a short insert (like in *Casino Royale*, launching a new, grittier Bond with Daniel Craig in 2006). In addition, a full-length black-and-white love comedy appears to many as a thing of the past, belonging to old Hollywood and, therefore, potentially obsolete. Finally, Whedon's distinctively individual approach to films might also account for the lack of general success: inhabiting someone else's, that is, Shakespeare's mythology instead of his own might have proven too foreign a territory for him, despite his personal appreciation for the Bard.

Richard Eyre's *King Lear* for BBC2 and Amazon Prime continued in the vein of celebrity casting, with Anthony Hopkins in the title role, supported by emerging young British talent (Florence Pugh as Cordelia), well-established actors (Emma Thompson as Goneril, Andrew Scott as Edgar), and a black actor playing Edmund (John Mcmillan). According to Eyre, the play is "the ultimate family drama: a monstrous, tragic tale of a family destroying itself" (Hogan), so his direction foregrounds close-ups and interiors, in a rather theatrical fashion. He found apt visual contexts for modernising the milieu as a twenty-first-century military dictatorship, with the Tower at its centre, the heath scenes set in a refugee camp and showing mad Lear as a deranged homeless man in the run-down parking lot of a superstore. Despite excellent acting and a thorough understanding of Shakespeare's play, Eyre's film appears to please only the connoisseur and highbrow audiences. Even if the running time had to be cut down to two hours at Amazon's request, the pace of the story is never rushed but remains even, and the film is firmly set in a solidly reverent attitude to the play and Shakespearean language, lacking any suggestion of being more than an intelligently conceived modern film for TV.

Besides a cleverly chosen and applied multi-crossover effect, the popularity of Shakespeare films also appears to rely on the language aspect: Luhrmann

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deftly reflected on the use of early modern English and blank verse, “explaining” them to general audiences with different filmic devices (the guns carry the brand names “Sword 9mm” and “Longsword,” visual triggers help to understand difficult Shakespearean phrasings, etc.). Stoppard, on the other hand, combined modern and Elizabethan language with a practised ease, keeping most of the dialogue in an easily graspable modern-day lingo, interspersed with early modern or Shakespearean phrasings, even wittily reflecting on this combined language use. However, neither Whedon’s *Much Ado* nor Eyre’s *King Lear* in the 2010s have tackled this problem directly, and—perhaps mostly out of reverence—they do nothing with the problem in filmic terms but rely on their actors’ skills to transmit the general message of the Shakespearean text (similarly to traditional Shakespeare productions in English-speaking theatres). It appears that a more daring and less reverent take on the Shakespearean material results in potentially more popular Shakespeare films.

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TABLES

Film	Starring	Shakespeare Play	Box Office Gross
<i>The Lion King</i> (1994)	Jonathan Taylor Thomas, James Earl Jones, Jeremy Irons	<i>Hamlet</i>	\$987.5 million
<i>Romeo+Juliet</i> (1996)	Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	\$147.6 million
<i>Shakespeare in Love</i> (1998)	Gwyneth Paltrow and Joseph Fiennes	<i>N/A</i>	\$100.3 million
<i>She's the Man</i> (2006)	Amanda Bynes and Channing Tatum	<i>Twelfth Night</i>	\$57 million
<i>10 Things I Hate About You</i> (1999)	Julia Stiles and Heath Ledger	<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	\$53.5 million

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Film	Starring	Shakespeare Play	Box Office Gross
<i>West Side Story</i> (1961)	Natalie Wood, Richard Beymer	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	\$43.7 million
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (1968)	Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	\$38.9 million
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> (1993)	Emma Thompson, Kate Beckinsale, Denzel Washington, Keanu Reeves, Michael Keaton	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	\$36 million
<i>Deliver Us from Eva</i> (2003)	Gabrielle Union and LL Cool J	<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	\$22.5 million
<i>Hamlet</i> (1990)	Mel Gibson, Glenn Close, Helena Bonham Carter	<i>Hamlet</i>	\$22.3 million

Table 1. Alicia Adamczyk, “Shakespeare Has Pulled In Over \$1 Billion at the Box Office.”

	Directors (Scriptwriters)	Nominations/Wins	Reviews (User/Critic)	Popularity Rate—IMDb Rating (Reliability?)
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> (1993)	Kenneth Branagh	11/5	191/46	7.3
<i>Romeo+Juliet</i> (1996)	Baz Luhrmann	29/15	584/84	6.7

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	Directors (Scriptwriters)	Nominations/ Wins	Reviews (User/Critic)	Popularity Rate—IMDb Rating (Reli- ability?)
<i>Shakespeare in Love</i> (1998)	John Madden (Marc Norman, Tom Stoppard)	87/64	799/137	7.1
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> (2012)	Joss Whedon	8/1	101/230	7.1
<i>King Lear</i> (2018) Amazon Prime	Richard Eyre	17/1 (Emmy)	42/11	6.2

Table 2. IMDb data as of 17 Sept 2021.

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