Brush Up Your Shakespeare

Since 2005 the BUFVC Shakespeare project has been creating an online resource devoted to film, radio, television and web adaptations derived from the dramatist’s work. 

The project team gives an overview of its achievements thus far and provides a guide to the latest Shakespeare-related publications and home video releases.

In 2005 the BUFVC was awarded a three-year Resource Enhancement grant from the Arts & Humanities Research Council, to create an International Database of Shakespeare on Film, Television and Radio. The project aims to deliver an authoritative online database of Shakespeare-related content in film, television, radio and video recordings, international in scope and dating from 1898 to the present day. The database will be published in summer 2008, but an interim version, with half the number of planned records and limited functionality, is already available at www.bufvc.ac.uk/shakespeare.

The first objective has been to collect information on the production details, credits, location and availability of all known Shakespeare productions on film, television and radio, using filmographies, archive catalogues, trade journals, and historic programme listings. Such information is being entered into a database that will, in its finished web form, allow registered contributors to add comments, links, and even new records. The project has a minimum target of 4,000 titles (which it has already exceeded), a figure double the number of any previous audiovisual Shakespeare filmography. The database, based on the Dublin Core metadata schema, has been built out of the BUFVC’s HERMES database of films in distribution, with added functionality based on a knowledge of Shakespeare researchers’ needs. The interpretation of audio-visual Shakespeare is broad, and encompasses parodies, plot borrowings and significant allusions to the plays, as well as documentaries and news broadcasts. A key target, Shakespeare on radio, has been limited for practical reasons to Britain, Germany and America.

The project is also tracing video recordings of stage performances. Online audiovisual Shakespeare is a particular challenge, owing to the ephemeral nature of many of the titles, and the sheer numbers involved. When the project began, YouTube did not exist. Now there are over 7,000 Shakespeare-related titles on that site alone, albeit with much repetition. Online video raises many practical and conceptual issues, from a quality threshold (how many high school student spoofs of Macbeth do we need?) to copyright (we frequently cannot point users to YouTube as a legitimate video source, yet so much material can be easily found there, and nowhere else). We have to tackle online video, but our solution will necessarily involve selection, and we are still trying to evolve the right criteria.

The project is also conducting research into the history of radio Shakespeare and the commercial history of audio-visual Shakespeare with an emphasis on demonstrating how the database can be utilised to raise and answer research questions. Various written outputs are planned, including the publication by the BUFVC of a Researcher’s Guide to Shakespeare on Film, Television and Radio in 2008, to coincide with the publication of the finished form of the database.

Once the project is completed, in August 2008, it will be necessary to sustain the database. The BUFVC has guaranteed to continue hosting the database long-term, and to add to the records as well as amending distribution details. One feature of the web version of the database will be a form for registered users to submit Shakespearean titles that they come across. We have been building up a community of users through the project discussion list, and we are hopeful that a dedicated band will be able to assist us in keeping the resource up-to-date and sensitive to the needs of researchers.

Nevertheless, the issue of sustainability for such resources is a serious one. The AHRC and other research councils have helped fund many such databases which have become important research tools, but no database can remain static. Information, and the kinds of information needs we have, is always changing. The academic community needs to do more to raise the issue of the long-term maintenance of such resources, the value of whose investment will inevitably diminish if they are not sustained and keep continually sensitive to the changing needs to the research community. We are in something of a boom period for audiovisual Shakespeare studies, which is a direct result of a boom in audio-visual Shakespeare production. The more we discover about Shakespeare on film, television, radio and new media, the more we need seriously to consider how it is that we are to keep up their essential, scholarly documentation.

Luke McKernan
BUFVC Head of Information

NEW BOOKS & PUBLICATIONS

2007 has already seen the publication of several books on Shakespeare on screen. In addition to the titles reviewed below, this year Maurice Hindle’s Studying Shakespeare on Screen, a second edition of The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film edited by Russell Jackson, Mark Thornton Burnett’s Filming Shakespeare in the Global Marketplace and New Wave Shakespeare on Screen by Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe have all reached the shelves. These titles have focused on Shakespeare experienced in the cinema while Shakespeare on television and radio (in Britain and overseas) continues to remain a neglected area of research.

The Shakespeare project at BUFVC gives equal attention to radio, television and film. For example, research emerging from of the project discovered a little known television production of Hamlet from 1956, the first Shakespeare play to be shown on ITV. Peter Brook directed the production from his acclaimed Phoenix Theatre stage production with Paul Scofield in the title role. ‘The Forgotten Hamlet’, an article by Olwen Terris on the programme, which discusses the cultural and political implications of this early clash between culture and advertising, alongside revealing contemporary reviews, is published in Shakespeare Bulletin (Vol. 25, no. 2, Summer 2007).
100 Shakespeare Films (BFI Screen Guides)
By Daniel Rosenthal

The book, aimed at film studies students, offers an introductory companion to a study of Shakespeare on film. The author, rejecting the more familiar chronological survey, looks at performance (including how a film 'performs' at the box office), adaptation in different cultures and languages, cinematic style including mise-en-scène, editing and sound and popularisation, embracing marketing and globalisation. Moving from Mélies to Baz Luhrmann through Olivier and Welles, the author deftly embraces a hundred years of cinematic history in 100 pages. The breadth and conciseness of coverage is impressive, drawing together issues discussed in many other books on filmed Shakespeare. The back cover promises an examination of Polanski's MACBETH (1971), which the book does not include; and the significance of the misquotation in the book's subtitle, if intentional, escaped this reviewer.

Olwen Terris
Senior Researcher, BUFVC Shakespeare project

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO SHAKESPEARE AND POPULAR CULTURE
Edited by Robert Shaughnessy

Whereas other recent studies have catalogued Shakespeare's raucous presence in genre TV, manga and even pornography – not to mention the plays' political appropriation by post-colonial cinema – Robert Shaughnessy's engrossing Cambridge Companion works out from a position in traditional English studies. He aims to extend our understanding of the 'popular' historically. Such pre-eminent scholars as Peter Holland, Barbara Hodgdon, W.B. Worthen and Stephen Orgel provide informative, elegant surveys of the Shakespeare myth's evolution and dissemination through print culture, theatre and the visual arts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (Garrick, Shakespeare's PA and apostle, features in four chapters.) They then discuss the Shakespearean tourist industry, the star system, the electronic media, and finally the mind-blowing challenges of digital and internet culture.

Revisiting Shakespeare's own career, Diana E. Henderson usefully tests it against several academic definitions of the 'popular' in early modern Britain, including the oppositional, the local, the demotic, and the non-literary traditions of revels, commedia and clowning. The book's refusal to tie itself up in theoretical debates, its focus on historical evidence, works well. However it does mean there are as many implicit attitudes to cultural politics here as there are writers, and the shape-shifting middle classes easily hold sway. An indispensable essay Douglas Lanier provides the most supple and provocative intellectual perspectives.

Elsewhere 'popular' comes to mean virtually anything post-Shakespeare, from Edward Gordon Craig's illustrated Hamlet ('a strictly limited edition on handmade paper, with a few copies also on vellum', p.88) to philosophical metadramas on Radio 3. However the treatment of Shakespeare on television is seriously disappointing – there is only a (good) analysis of of 'serialising' strategies within the BBC's groundbreaking Histories sequence, AN AGE OF KINGS (1960). Cinema is justifiably bypassed (Russell Jackson's Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film is in its second edition), but Shakespeare on British radio is brilliantly served by Suzanne Greenhalgh's survey. She encapsulates seven decades of broadcasting with impressive clarity, pointing future researchers towards a wealth of Shakespeare-themed documentaries and audio drama. She sketches the debates between those for whom sound was the ideal medium for dramatic poetry and those who dismissed it as 'impovertyed'. And she shows that, 'the BBC's self-association with Shakespeare' (p. 184) has taken very diverse forms, defying pat ideological labels.

Finally, two packed bravura essays open up the relationship between Shakespeare and pop music (Stephen M. Buhtler) and explore the Stratford theatres' changing strategies of graphic design (Carol Chillington Rutter). Both show that our 'commercial' and 'creative' responses to Shakespeare have always been inseparable. And they prove that scholarship at its finest is also a creative act.

Tony Howard
Tony Howard is the author of Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Fiction (Cambridge University Press, 2007)
NEW DVD RELEASES

How much Shakespeare do you keep amongst your DVD collection? Probably more than you think. As the number and variety of Shakespeare-related releases for this year alone proves, the Bard has lost none of his capacity for infinite screen variety. A source of inspiration for everything from big budget Chinese cinema (Zhang Yimou’s 2006 epic CURSE OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER) to British cult TV series DR. WHO, there is no telling on which ‘forbidden planet’ you will encounter Shakespeare next.

No film collection would be complete without Olivier, that foremost of twentieth-century Shakespearean interpreters whose Technicolor vision of Henry V changed the grammar of Shakespeare moviemaking. Marking the centenary of his birth, Olivier’s screen achievements have been commemorated by a variety of DVD releases. Shakespeareans, however, are best served with ITV’s LAURENCE OLIVIER SHAKESPEARE COLLECTION: the handsomely designed seven-disc set not only features Granada stunning High Definition restorations of Olivier’s three landmark productions, HENRY V (1944), HAMLET (1948), and RICHARD III (1955), it also commemorates the actor’s work for the small screen with John Sichel’s THE MERCHANT OF VENICE (1974) — previously unavailable on home video in the UK — and his haunting farewell to the Bard in Michael Elliott’s KING LEAR (1983), a powerful production that remains underrated. The set also includes Paul Czinner’s YOU LIKE IT (1936), a quaintly charming production just as notoriuous for its variety of livestock as its heroine (Elisabeth Bergner) hampered by coy mannerisms and an outlandish accent. Despite the uneven picture and sound quality of the television productions and the paucity of extras, this set offers a fine testament to Olivier’s emerging mastery of Shakespeare in a medium that he came to appreciate only relatively late in his career.

Shakespeare on screen, more often than not, means Shakespeare translated. Fans of Robby the Robot, 1970s American new wave cinema or the jazz impressions of Dave Brubeck are all catered for in some of the more adventurrous DVD releases based on the work of the Bard. Loosely based on The Tempest, MGM’s cult classic FORBIDDEN PLANET (1956) not only offers a hugely enjoyable as well as inventive take on Shakespeare’s late play, it is also an enduring SF favourite. Its importance in the genre is effectively conveyed in the impressive range of quality supplements on Warner’s 50th Anniversary 2-Disc special edition release. Those who prefer their Tempest adaptations without spaceships and ray guns might consider Paul Mazurky’s TEMPEST (1982). Unjustly neglected, this smartly modernised off-spin relocates Prospero’s magic abode to a Greek island and includes one of John Cassavetes’ last great performances alongside his wife Gena Rowlands. Released on DVD for the first time, the Sony Pictures USA Region 1 anamorphically enhanced transfer has no special features but is a welcome rescue from obscurity.

A keep-case for music aficionados, Basil Dearden’s ALL NIGHT LONG (1961) offers a rare piece of entertainment, a jazz-themed reworking of Othello. Network’s recent DVD release of the British classic not only does credit to the all-important moody score (performed by jazz greats such as Dave Brubeck, Charlie Mingus and Tubb Hayes), it supplements the tightly constructed film (held together by Patrick McGoohan’s edgy performance as ambitious drummer Johnny Cousin(lago) with an excellent trailer introduced, in character, by a suave Richard Attenborough.

The future is certainly looking bright, with Branagh’s fifth directorial Shakespeare film, a Japanese transplantation of As You Like It (recently aired on HBO in the USA) due for release on Region 2 DVD in September. Best keep one’s eyes and ears peeled for that next Shakespeare anniversary edition — Olivier’s heir apparent will be celebrating his 50th birthday on December 10, 2010…

Eve-Marie Oosterlen
Broadcast Researcher, BUFVC Shakespeare project

MACBETH

2007. Italy. TDK. DVD (Region 0 PAL). 156 minutes. £24.99

This DVD of Giuseppe Verdi’s opera Macbeth was recorded live at the Teatro Regio di Palma in 2006 with the resident orchestra and chorus conducted by Bruno Bartoletti. The cast, led by baritone Leo Nucci, is predominantly Italian apart from the French soprano Sylvie Valayre who sings the role of Lady Macbeth. The production was directed by Liliana Cavani, known mainly in the UK for her controversial film THE NIGHT PORTER (1974), and designed by Dante Ferretti who won an Oscar for his work on Martin Scorsese’s THE AVIATOR (2004). Piave’s libretto pares down the original play and concentrates on key dramatic moments such as the witches prophecies and Lady Macbeth’s letter, banquet and mad scenes, and includes key arias for Banquo (bass) and Macduff (tenor), interspersed with fine solos for Macbeth. The Act 1 opening scene bizarrely portrays the witches as busy washerwomen. This obviates any potential feeling for the sinister and supernatural. Their Act 3 cavorting adds nothing to the dramatic tension either. Costumes seem to range across the 16th and 17th centuries. However, the production is sensitively filmed. The camera varies the shots from tactful facial close-ups to full figure shots to views of the whole scene, and the English sub-titles are easy to read. Why buy this particular DVD? There is after all strong competition from elsewhere: a vintage recording from 1987 with Renato Bruson in the title role, a David Pountney 2001 production with Thomas Hampson or more recently Phyllida Lloyd’s version with Carlos Alvarez. But if you are a Nucci nut, and he has quite a following in Italy where he recently celebrated 30 years of performance at La Scala, this DVD could be the one for you.

Ann Aungle
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FEATURE

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