Small-Screen Shakespeare

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This book is dedicated to my teachers, Mr Hewett, Mr Salmon, Mr Roberts, and Mr Mitchell; also to my former pupils (and casts) at the Margaret Dane School, Bishop's Stortford, 1978-82, and at the Hertfordshire and Essex High School, Bishop's Stortford, 1982-2003.

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Part Three: Shakespeare Adaptations

INTRODUCTION

The English are the most philistine race on earth, cursed with Shakespeare, the greatest and most popular artist in any language or medium ever. An accidental illustration of this was provided in the 2012 Olympic Games opening ceremony, when the absence of one actor left no-one to say Caliban's speech "The isle is full of noises". This was the only Shakespearean moment in the whole mammoth show: it's a quiet and sensitive passage, uttered by a wondering, half-human monster, the characteristically complex creation of a writer who hadn't, actually, written anything at all suitable for the opening of a huge international sporting event.[1] Owing to the sudden absence of the actor who'd been cast, it wasn't said quietly by an actor as Caliban, but shouted at the top of his voice by Sir Kenneth Branagh, in the stovepipe hat of Isambard Kingdom Brunel – engineer, industrial designer, utilitarian, a man with little or no room in his library or life for poetry or plays. Thus what had been intended as a short, dutiful genuflection ("We've got to get bloody Shakespeare in somehow") became an unintentional, but apt, travesty – seen by millions around the world.

Faced with a choice between *Cymbeline* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, you can bet without risk on how the English reader will choose. If it's a question of whether to watch Patrick Stewart as Macbeth, or *The X-Factor*, your English TV audience can be relied on to get its priorities right.

"We may be a small country", says Hugh Grant, the Prime Minister in *Love Actually*, angered to have found the American President chatting up his favourite secretary: "but we're a great one, too – the country of Shakespeare, Churchill, the Beatles, Sean Connery, and Harry Potter … David Beckham's right foot … David Beckham's left foot come to that …" His descent into a quagmire of indiscriminate bathos says it all. Shakespeare floats about in a soup of pseudo-icons, unexamined, undifferentiated, and unknown.

1: "*Tennis* balls, my liege"; "Or tripped either, you base *football*-player"; "… *bowled* to death with turnips …"; "Dar'st thou now … / Leap in with me into this angry flood, and *swim* to yonder point?" "Yon *crickets* shall not hear it"; "… *jumping* o'er times"; "*riding* forth to air yourself"; "Nay, an you'll get it, you shall get it by *running*".

Shakespeare is English to the core – he's what makes England English – he's central to our heritage, a vital part of our national identity, like the Church of England, the monarchy, and Bill Turnbull – without him the most important aspect of our art and culture would vanish. England without Shakespeare is unthinkable.

Such is the rhetoric.

The problem is that the rest of the world feels the same. They deny the exclusivity of our right to him. One of the best stage productions reviewed in this book is from Peru, two of the best films are from Soviet Russia, and two more from Japan. Perhaps that's why, behind our fluttering theatre programmes, we secretly hate him. He exports too readily. He's a cosmopolitan whore. He's anybody's (as was proved at the Globe in 2012, when he was done in thirty-seven languages, including Signing).[2] He's not at all like Gilbert and Sullivan.

The English detestation of Shakespeare takes many forms. The first is obvious: kill him by teaching him in schools. Insist on his being a compulsory set text at G.C.S.E. and A Level, thus entrusting him, for generation after generation, to teachers who, being unable to read his works as plays, teach them (badly) as books. For every person who remembers being turned on to Shakespeare when "It provokes the desire, but takes away the performance" was explained, or "I would be loath to have you overflow with a honeybag",[3] there are nine who can't even remember the name of their English teacher, let alone which Shakespeare play they were taught. The nearest I've ever come (in my adult life) to hitting someone, was when one of my children's English teachers – responsible for her G.C.S.E. – said at Parents' Evening, "I've always felt diffident about teaching Shakespeare". He was Head of Department, too.

2: "65% of countries have Shakespeare as a named author on their curriculum. Countries where Shakespeare is studied by the majority of students in secondary schools include: Australia, Azerbaijan, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, Kuwait, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Sudan, Ukraine, USA, UK, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. Students around the world studying English at 16+ are highly likely to study Shakespeare in the original language"
(http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/rsc_british_council_research_summary_2012.pdf)

3: In the good old days of the Key Stage 3 Sats, I taught *The Dream* to a class of ambitious fourteen-year-old girls who were anxious to have every detail explained. I said what "I would be loath to have you overflow with a honeybag" meant, and they found it amusing that Bottom should think such a thing could happen to a fairy. Imagine their disappointment, on opening the Sats paper, keen to gloss this line, to find that that section had been cut.

The second form of covert detestation is, call Shakespeare "the Bard". He wasn't a bard, but who knows what a bard is anyway? The word keeps him invisible while pretending to genuflect.

The third form is equally obvious: write academic books about him. The strange displacement-urge which comes over people, not to stage Shakespeare, but to write about him, has brought shelves to near-collapse in many a library. The academic study of Shakespeare as a writer of performance-texts is a phenomenon of the last twenty years, and there's a huge swathe of writers and lecturers who have been left still high, dry and comfortable once its tsunami has come and gone. I was told recently by the English Faculty Head of a large university that they had one Shakespeare specialist, and he concentrated on Shakespeare's scatology – that is, his use of obscene and abusive language. Shakespeare for *actors*? No no, Shakespeare is for university intellectuals. There is a peculiar, solipsistic mind-set which says, "I don't need *other people* to help me understand Shakespeare – my own reading, learning, and imagination are enough". Such thinking concedes in a vague sort of way that actors, directors and designers may play their amusing games with him, but that, strictly speaking, they're irrelevant: Shakespeare is a private, not a public, event. As an example: at a recent conference we were told that F.R.Leavis didn't like Olivier, on the grounds that Olivier "imposed his voice and personality on the lines". In the absence of any tapes of Leavis's own rendition of "Once more unto the breach", we should therefore, logically, abandon the theatre, and acting Shakespeare, altogether. There are still plenty of academics with the same attitude. Going to see a Shakespeare production is for them an act of condescension, done to be polite, curious to see what the actors will do next. Their Shakespeare is like the Chopin of Eliot's Lady:

> 'So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul
> Should be resurrected only among friends
> Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom
> That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room.'[4]

… the problem being that, the more Shakespeare is "rubbed and questioned", the more he seems to radiate.

The fourth form of showing your contempt for Shakespeare, and for anyone who wants, as Eliot's Lady might, just to *read* him is – bring out a new edition!! Thus the old Cambridge Shakespeare gives way to the New Cambridge Shakespeare, the Old Arden to the New Arden and in turn to

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4: T.S.Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (Faber 1963), p.18.

yet another Arden, the old Penguin (the cheap one with the floppy white covers) gives way first to the New Penguin (the one with the smart pictures on the cover), which in turn gives way to the very latest Penguin, which comes with a recommendation from the RSC, and is edited by Jonathan Bate, and so must, at last, be definitive and unsurpassable!

Still more definitive and unsurpassable, however, is the single-volume Oxford Complete Works, which re-names Falstaff "Oldcastle" in emulation of King Canute, and which uses doubtful evidence[5] to show that parts of *Macbeth, Timon*, and *Measure for Measure* aren't by Shakespeare at all.

This non-stop exploitation of the public's gullibility is, at least, transparent: I'll confess that if I want to check a quotation, I go to my one-volume Alexander edition of 1952, even though it's in an advanced state of disintegration.

The fifth form of showing hatred is more subtle, and most treacherous: put his plays on, but reverentially. Several of the productions reviewed in this book (which is only now and then about Shakespeare, but is mainly about recorded performances of Shakespeare), seem motivated by a secret contempt, a covert rejection of what the script means in favour of something smug: that is, something English. This is especially true of many productions in the biggest institutional attempt ever at televising his complete works, the BBC TV Shakespeare of the seventies and eighties.[6]

The sixth way – the latest, cutting-edge, twenty-first century way – is to put his plays on badly, so that no-one will ever want to watch them again. This is seen at its most blatant in Peter Brook's charred-cadaver-*Hamlet* (see *Hamlet* chapter); but is palpable, too, in the decision made by Sir Richard Eyre in the 2012 BBC series *The Hollow Crown*, (see *Henry IV I* chapter) to deprive Falstaff of all his comical dimensions, lest we should laugh with him, and start to see the world through his jokes ("Lord, lord, how this world is given to lying!"). The approach isn't that new: the BBC TV Shakespeare contains a few productions (*Romeo and Juliet, The Taming of the Shrew*) which are so bad that hostility to Shakespeare is the only motive one can infer in the decision to broadcast them.

I've sometimes thought, preparing this book, that the very act of putting Shakespeare on television is a death-dealing error in itself, because it deprives him of what makes him work – an audience. We make allowances for films, because we know they're made out of sequence in different locations and studios, and then edited together with great labour:

5: For the doubtfulness, see M.X.Dahl, *Shakespeare, Middleton and Macbeth: A Re-Analysis* in *International Conference: 'Language, Culture and Society in Russian / English Studies'*, London 2010, pp.127-37.

6: For an excellent account of part of this series, see Bassett pp.229-36 and 387-9.

but we're so accustomed to hearing laughter on our TV comedy programmes that when we see a scene of Shakespearean comedy, done in a TV studio, which we know from our theatre experience to be hilarious – and there's no laughter – we feel a big void. Hence the huge difference when the play is recorded live: see for the best examples James Earl Jones's King Lear, Roger Allam's Falstaff, or Hume Cronyn's Polonius in the Richard Burton *Hamlet*, all below.

Drama is a social event. Without an audience it's not itself, and Shakespeare tailors his plays for an audience. This is the huge advantage the Globe Theatre DVDs possess – to watch a 2010 Globe production straight after a 1980s BBC TV Shakespeare production of the same text is to give oneself an immense lesson.

Shakespeare was in addition, after all, a bit of a dangerous leftie – something of a leveller. Where does someone say …

> Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;
> Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
> And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks:
> Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.

And doesn't someone else talk about …

> … man, proud man,
> Drest in a little brief authority,
> Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
> His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
> Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
> As make the angels weep …

… whatever that may mean? In so far as the English flourish on lies and humbug, and Shakespeare is the enemy of lies and humbug ("Out on thee, seeming! I will write against it!"), the two would seem to be natural enemies. People think of him as a patriot because of *Henry V*, and quote John of Gaunt ("this demi-paradise"), while ignoring Gaunt's conclusion:

> This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land,
> Dear for her reputation through the world,
> Is now leased out, I die pronouncing it,
> Like to a tenement or pelting farm:
> England, bound in with the triumphant sea
> Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
> Of watery Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
> With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds:

> That England, that was wont to conquer others,
> Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.

No hope for our out-sourcing establishment in these words.

A lot of Shakespeare's speeches are a bit long, too – as we see here. Untrustworthy in our culture of ratings-panic, dumbing-down, sound-bites, and channel-hopping.

And yet, despite, or even because of, these horrid thoughts, a tiny minority take perverse pleasure in putting Shakespeare's plays on, or in going to see his plays when they're put on.

This book is for that tiny minority.

The obvious objection to it is that whereas I praise Shakespeare as a public event, watching his plays on DVD or YouTube is only public if someone else is there in the front room with you. A number of points answer. Firstly, if you do need to see *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* or *Pericles* (to name but two), they come around in the theatre so rarely that a DVD is the only way you have by which to see them. Secondly and much more important: nothing is more unpleasant than returning home from a theatre event – especially if it's Shakespeare – where you've hated the production, have wasted your money, and have left before the end. Once this has happened four or five times, the urge to go and see the latest, talked-about Shakespeare gets easier and easier to resist.

Shows I Have Walked Out Of include the following. 1) Terry Hands' RSC *Coriolanus,* with Alan Howard: I watched with greater and greater coldness, and noticed, downstage O.P. in his confrontation with the plebs, a light trestle table. It was at once clear to me that he was going to pick it up and throw at them on the line "*I* banish *you*!" If I was right, I thought, the show wasn't working, and I was leaving. He did, and I left. 2) Trevor Nunn's second RSC *King Lear,* with Donald Sinden: I'd been in his first *Lear*, and saw he was just reproducing it, move for move, but with different designs. "In a minute," I thought, "someone's coming on from *there*, saying 'News, Madam – the British powers are marching hitherward!'" Sure enough, someone did. This show again held no magic: I couldn't suspend my disbelief, and was just watching them do it. A discreet exit, and an earlier train home, was the only solution. 3) Sam Mendes' Old Vic *Winter's Tale*: it's horrible to watch someone killing a part which you know by heart, and this was the case with Simon Russell Beale's Leontes, where he was unable to inhabit the role, and was trying to give a kind of walking lecture on it. My partly-conscious need to empathise with him was being thwarted with every word, and by Act

Three I was feeling faint and sick. As soon as I hit the Waterloo Road, I felt better.[7]

Shows out of which I would have walked, but couldn't because I was in charge of a school party, include Peter Hall's *Macbeth* at the National with Albert Finney, and Peter Brook's RSC *Antony and Cleopatra* with Alan Howard and Glenda Jackson. This book finishes with a part-review of another, very famous production, which I was also unable to sit through.

The problem doesn't exist with DVDs, which you can pause, fast-forward, or turn off and eject – a privilege of which, however, I've only availed myself once while writing this book.

Nothing's more pleasant, contrariwise, than watching, in the theatre, a Shakespeare where you know from the start that you're in safe hands. Shows I have seen twice include John Barton's *Dream*, with Patrick Stewart and Marjorie Bland, a production so beautiful that you didn't want to leave the wood. It was infinitely superior to the version by Peter Brook a couple of years before – which I also saw twice, trying without success to work out why everybody was raving about it. I also went twice to Barton's *Love's Labour's Lost*, with Michael Pennington and Jane Lapotaire; to Michael Bogdanov's *Shrew*, with Jonathan Pryce and Paola Dionisotti; and to Nicholas Hytner's *Henry IV* I and II, with Matthew MacFadyen and Michael Gambon.

It may be thought unfair to hold actors and directors to account for things they did up to half a century ago (over a century ago, in the case of some of the silent movies mentioned): but the results of their up-to-fifty-years-ago decisions are still to be seen, in the numerous DVDs currently on the market. Their work exists in a continuous, irredeemable present. One can, in one's front room, have Frank Pettingell's 1960 Falstaff and Simon Russell Beale's 2012 Falstaff playing simultaneously, and by judicious use of the pause-buttons, compare the two.

I've tried to write in normal, not academic, English. Academics often seem to inhabit their own wonderful world, writing books for one another in their own special language, a language which avoids the demotic with horror, "trembling lest it grow impure":

7: Someone whose judgement I trust had the same experience with Russell Beale's Hamlet, and someone else with his Timon, both at the National. I'd already had it with his Macbeth at the Almeida, but the absence of an interval and the fact that I was in the middle of a row made it harder to walk out. I was reliably told that my need to quit Mendes' *Winter's Tale* had spared me the ordeal of Ethan Hawke's Autolycus.

> This analysis offers a way of recognizing our particular, temporary engagement with the characters of Shakespeare's history plays, as the narrative of political power takes up specific protagonists and discards them. Unlike the more characterological trajectory of the genres of comedies and tragedies which depend on a consistent personnel and a developed sense of engagement with their narratives, therefore, history plays are already significantly serialized in the segmented forms of identification they mobilize. By offering us provisional, serial identification with a changing cast of characters, Shakespeare's history plays engage their audience through a dynamic articulated as a temporal, rather than an intersubjectve, relation. They are already prototypically televisual.[8]

I've tried to write without this, the jargon of pseudo-objectivity. Anyone who says they're reacting objectively to Shakespeare isn't reacting to him.

I know the word "actress" is taboo, on the grounds that one never says "doctress", but sometimes you have to make the distinction, and "female actor" is even more insulting.

I've also tried to keep a just balance in the question of Our American Cousins: while I may sneer sometimes at the question of the relationships between American puritanism and / or salaciousness and corporate funding, I hope my admiration for the American tradition of acting Shakespeare – seen in, for example, the *Lear* and *Much Ado* chapters – is clear also. The pity is that so few examples of this tradition are on DVD. It may be that Americans are too much in awe of the Laurence Oliviers and Kenneth Branaghs to value their own work in Shakespeare. What would one not give for a DVD of Meryl Streep and Raul Julia in *The Taming of the Shrew*?

A note on YouTube: there are more Shakespeare gobbets floating around on YouTube than one has thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What I include was there in December 2012, but the number may have shrunk or expanded by the time the book is published. Several excellent productions, the amazing Peruvian *King Lear* in the ruined theatre, for instance, only appear on YouTube. Other productions – like the James Earl Jones *King Lear* in Central Park – which were once on DVD, are now on YouTube: and there are numerous others, such as *Chimes at Midnight*, which I've written about from DVDs, which are now on YouTube, albeit in frustrating fragments.

For more and still more Shakespeares, in so many styles and languages that the mind boggles, try globalshakespeares.mit.edu: though I find

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8: Emma Smith, *Shakespeare serialized:* An Age of Kings, in Robert Shaughnessy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture* (CUP 2007), p.142.

reproduction on this site varies.[9] The National Video Archive at the Victoria and Albert Museum has numerous recordings of recent Shakespeare productions, which can, however, only be viewed at the V and A.[10]

Digitally-downloaded Shakespeare remains in its infancy.

For lists of most of the films and television productions I haven't included, see Appendix.

Glossary

D.S.M.: Deputy Stage Manager. FoH: Front of House. Frocks: costumes. IMDB: Internet Movie Database. OTT: over the top. WWI: World War One. WWII: World War II. Where two directors are credited, the first is the theatre director, and the second the television director.

Abbreviations

Bassett: Kate Bassett, *In Two Minds: A Biography of Jonathan Miller* (Oberon, 2012)

Dench I: John Miller, *Judi Dench: with a Crack in her Voice* (Orion, 1998)

Dench II: Judi Dench and John Miller. *Judi Dench: and furthermore* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2010)

Olivier: Laurence Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1982)

9: This site offers (January 2013), trailers for *The King's Speech* and *Tombstone*.

10: For the contents, see *Shakespeare and the National Video Archive*, in Malcolm, Gabrielle and Kelli Marshall (eds.) *Locating Shakespeare in the Twenty-First Century* (CSP, 2012), pp.59-61.

PART ONE:

DIRECTORS

THE THREE SHAKESPEARE FILMS OF ORSON WELLES: *MACBETH*, *OTHELLO*, *CHIMES AT MIDNIGHT*

Macbeth **(1948)**

To make any film, aware that there are plenty of people about who'd rather you weren't doing so, and will be quite happy if you fail, must be a strain. To make films of Shakespeare plays under the same constraint requires a nature driven and thick-skinned above and beyond the normal, but it's clear that Welles had it. His *Macbeth* was done cheaply in a studio in less than a month in 1948. His *Othello* was made over the years 1949-1952, on a variety of locations, and with huge gaps between shootings, as he sold himself as an actor to other film-makers so as to raise the money for the next sequence. I'm going to argue that the later movie shows evidence that he learned all kinds of lessons from the mistakes he made when shooting the first, and that there is a huge gain in quality as a consequence. *Othello* is a minor masterpiece: *Macbeth* is an almost unredeemed cock-up.

We all know that the opening shot of *Touch of Evil* is a virtuoso piece of camerawork: a single unedited crane-shot lasting over three minutes. What is not often stressed is that there's another continuous shot, less spectacular but no less well-crafted, in the middle of that film (it's when the henchmen of Quinlan, the corrupt cop, plant evidence in the fall-guy's hotel room). What is never mentioned is that there are two shots still longer in the middle of *Macbeth*. And they aren't just in any scene, either. One makes up the whole of the Daggers Scene, and the other the whole of the England Scene: the two most pivotal scenes in the whole play. However, where in *Touch of Evil* the acting is so good and the story so gripping that the second, unostentatious long take doesn't draw attention to itself, in *Macbeth* the acting is so bad in the first scene, and so sketchy and under-rehearsed in the second, that you are reduced to waiting clinically to see when Welles has to resort to an edit.

I imagine Welles decided to do the two scenes in single takes not just to allow the actors freedom, but to economise on time. If you get it right, not having to alter the lights and camera set-up over a nearly ten-minutes-

long sequence means hours saved in the studio. But you have to get it right. They had to do the *Touch of Evil* opening three times because the actor playing the policeman who says the film's first line ("You folks American citizens?") was so terrified by the responsibility that he dried twice. No-one dried, so far as I can see, when filming either of the two *Macbeth* takes – they got it right in that sense – but they got everything else wrong; which brings me to Welles' first big error.

He decided that all the characters should speak with Scots accents, which neither he nor any of his actors were able to manage (all the words were pre-recorded). Nearly all of his actors are American, and Americans don't hear Scots as often as they hear Irish. Its vowel-sounds and rhythms defeat them, and it doesn't sound natural when they try it. Like actors all over, they aren't always completely at home with Shakespeare, either – "For Shakespeare, you need a special kind of voice: more solemn" – so that to ask them to do Shakespeare with Scots accents is to put everything they say at two removes from the idiom in which they're used to act. The result is that this is a *Macbeth* Spoke In No Language, with a thick layer of damp sponge between you and the experience of the play. Sometimes they drop into Irish, or rather, Oirish. Welles' own vowels often slide into Oirish, and the Second Murderer speaks unalloyed Oirish. On the other hand Macduff (played by an Irishman) has one perfect Scots vowel-sound: hear him on "Is thy *mare*ster stirring?" For most of the rest of the cast, Scots simply means lots of rolled "r"s. This leads us to the second big error. Having decided on a Scots *sound*, Welles then either commissioned or borrowed Genghis Khan costumes and headgear, for a Mongol *look (*in fact they were hired as a single lot). Dan O'Herlihy as Macduff wears a furry helmet with a cross on a spike.

Sometimes Macbeth has a precariously-balanced box-shaped crown with bits sticking up at the corners, and his make-up emphasises his high cheek-bones.

In the last scenes, Roddy MacDowall as Malcolm wears a sort of high, holy helmet with what could easily become a cross on top.

For his third error, Welles decided that the play wasn't too well-written, and needed a lot of re-arranging and editing. In the case of *Macbeth*, the best-written play ever, this is serious overreaching, hubristic to the extent that you feel he deserves what he gets. Thus it's Macbeth who says "Leave all the rest to me" to his wife, not his wife to him; thus he doesn't write, but dictates, the intimate letter ("They met me in the day of success …") to an invented character, The Holy Man, with Banquo listening in. And thus the Daggers Scene (II ii) has, in this version, fragments of I vii and III i floating about in it. Shakespeare's rhythm and

psychological sequencing is cut to pieces, and the result is as confused as might have been predicted.

Before the first long take starts, Welles opens the Daggers soliloquy halfway through (at "Now o'er the one half-world nature seems dead") and *then* does its first line ("Is this a dagger which I see before me?") Lady Macbeth enters, the long take begins, and they play a bit of I vii ("We will proceed no further …" – "Was the hope drunk wherein you dressed yourself?"), then Welles does the *end* of the Daggers soliloquy, and at last he goes off to do the murder. The scene itself is given a passage ("Had I but died an hour before this chance …") from later on in II ii, which occurs in the original after Duncan's body has been discovered. Finally, "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more!'" is transposed until after II ii is finished.

Such a mish-mash might have worked in spite of itself. The lines are after all the most dramatic ever penned. Welles' aim, by keeping the camera low throughout the shot, is to make Macbeth and Lady Macbeth tower over us, figures of heroism and darkness. But it doesn't work. His own performance is slow and under-energised, as if wading knee-deep through syrup. Boredom and irritation is what he expresses, not guilt and horror. "I'll go no more," he groans, as if the prospect of seeing Duncan's body again is too dull to think about. And Jeannette Nolan as his Lady is a very ordinary artiste indeed (it was to have been Agnes Moorehead), as well as being lumbered with makeup heavier than anything since the close-up of Susan Alexander Kane on the opening night of the fake Bernard Hermann opera.

To add insult to injury, Welles himself voices-over the Porter, whose scene (also part of the long take) is reduced to "Who's there? Knock, knock! Never at quiet!" [*burps*] "A plague o'these pickled herrings …" Which, as any self-respecting schoolkid will tell you, is a line from *Twelfth Night.*

Othello (1952)

There are things wrong with Welles' *Othello*. Not to introduce Emilia until the moment after the handkerchief drops, and then to keep her in long shot as she picks it up, so we have no idea who she is, is bad. I assume Fay Compton, the Emilia, wasn't around for the shooting of the earlier scenes, and that they didn't have the money for a close-up. In fact she does appear in one shot when Othello arrives in Cyprus, looking over Iago's shoulder; but if you blink – literally – you miss her. Several important lines are cut away from just before they're said, "Oh beware, my lord, of jealousy!"

being one where we feel especially cheated at not seeing the expression on Iago's face as he says it. Desdemona is rarely allowed to get a complete sentence out before there's a cut away from her. Several lines are said with characters' backs to camera: particularly Othello's "Pontic Sea" speech, which is a very annoying loss.

These would be irritants if the errors I listed above as happening in *Macbeth* weren't avoided, and if a whole new set of imaginative ideas hadn't been produced out of the magician's hat to make us forget, or at least ignore them. No-one tries on funny accents – what accents could they use anyway, Venetian? – and the actors – particularly Micheàl MacLiammóir as Iago – speak Shakespeare as if it came normally. We hear the words without having to play them back through our heads to work out what they were. As Iago is the biggest part, to have as literate an actor as MacLiammóir playing him sets an example which is infectious. The costumes are convincing – down even to the towels in the bath-house during Roderigo's murder, the scantiness of which was forced on Welles when an unpaid bill caused a shipment of skips to be delayed.

The Mediterranean locations are used and photographed very skilfully (the film had four lighting cameramen), and become protagonists in the drama, which you can't say about the polystyrene walls and boulders of the studio-bound *Macbeth*.

Last but not least, Welles, though he cuts the text heavily, doesn't re-order it, except for "Oh, now forever farewell": this he places as a soliloquy, filming himself in solitary close-up against the sun, and speaking it very sadly and beautifully, in contrast to the extraordinary Laurence Olivier (see below), who does it in a strange series of whoops and layered shrieks.

The film's wordless opening is as impressive as the openings of *Kane*, or *Touch of Evil*. As monks and priests – black silhouettes against a white sky – carry the dead bodies of Othello and Desdemona from screen-left to screen-right, soldiers, black silhouettes also, drag Iago in chains from screen-right to screen-left, on his way to the cage in which he is going to be suspended until he starves to death. The music derives from the prelude to Otello's *Dio, mi potevi scagliar*, from the third act of Verdi's opera. As Iago is hauled aloft, hundreds of people line the battlements execrating him. The budget stretched, we can see, to at least one substantial crowd scene.

But the budget didn't stretch to having sound-equipment on location in Venice, as we can also see, from the rapid digest Welles next gives us of the play's first three scenes. Few if any shots last more than ten seconds; characters say their lines either in long-shot, to make lip-synching

redundant, or with their backs to camera, or when the camera's on someone else, for the same reason; Roderigo may be embodied by Robert Coote, but his words (those he has left) are throughout spoken in the recording-studio by Welles. "Put up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them" is spliced in over the edit between two shots, and because we don't know that the Senate is after Othello as well as Brabantio, it's deprived of its dramatic context. The Venetian locations, however, compensate; we aren't distracted by the tattiness of the art-direction, as we are in *Macbeth*; and these editing problems seems limited to the scenes filmed in Venice.

The interiors – spare, but beautiful – are designed by Alexander Trauner, who did the same for *Le Jour se Lève* at one end of his career, and for Bertrand Tavernier's *Round Midnight* at the other.

Welles delivers Othello's defence before the Senate in a single travelling shot, with reaction-shots edited in (at least two of them used twice). His Othello is at first a nervous-looking, even self-conscious kind of chap, aware that he's not used to this sort of public utterance; yet as he warms to his theme he relaxes and gains conviction.

Desdemona seems dubbed. Suzanne Cloutier was French-Canadian, which sorts ill with the beautiful Virginia McKenna-RADA tones in which she is made to speak. I believe that MacLiammóir dubs the Herald, who is filmed in extreme long shot: and I'm not certain that Cassio and Lodovico aren't spoken by the same actor. Bianca's voice may be the same as Desdemona's, except common.

The arrival of Othello's ship at Cyprus is a fine example of editorial bluffing, for it's clear that the ship existed only in cut-outs, and in small sections. Welles – or his second unit – got some good shots of waves crashing; but couldn't edit them in continuity with either the ship, or with the protagonists.

Rapid cutting facilitates the partying in the streets, and the drunken brawl, in Act II. Welles – avid here as elsewhere for strong locations – somehow manages to get the fight down into a flooded underground cistern, in which Roderigo's little white poodle (an objective correlative for his own feebleness) gets lost.

A strange omission in the brawl is that Montano is not injured. The thing might then have passed off as a foolish adjunct to a jolly celebration, and Cassio not have been cashiered at all. Cassio's punishment is disproportionate, for there has been no crime.

Now it's my opinion that Othello the general is a bit strange. In the play as written it's not clear that his marriage is consummated, and I often think that the ease with which he succumbs to Iago's lies is so that the

moment when his manhood is put to the test can be delayed indefinitely. Iago, it seems both to me and to the Freudian Ernest Jones, to whom Olivier went for advice when he played the role to Ralph Richardson's Othello, is gay for him. Watch the close-up Welles gives MacLiammóir as Desdemona and her husband kiss on "I will deny thee nothing" for the slightest suggestion that Welles and MacLiammóir have a similar suspicion. See the Trevor Nunn version with Willard White as Othello, and McKellen as the greatest and weirdest Iago of them all.

For Welles, the strangeness of it all is in Iago, never in Othello. This Othello and Desdemona go to bed together. Within the limits of what could be depicted the late 1940s (alarmed by the brawl, Othello jumps from his marital couch fully-clothed), their life in the bedroom is an active one, and the strength of Iago lies purely in his own cunning. In Act IV, as Othello says "The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up", he runs his hand lovingly down her leg, as if it's territory he's anguished at having to share with someone else.

Act III scene iii – known in cliché as the Temptation Scene – is also free from the last-ditch editorial and post-synching blips which worry us elsewhere.

It starts with a long tracking-shot along the battlements, but moves, as does the drunken brawl earlier, into a Chamber Within, where Othello keeps glimpsing both himself and his wife in mirrors, which distort their figures (this idea is pinched by Zeffirelli in his film of the Verdi opera). Another image which Welles either invents, or has suggested by Trauner and his locations, is a Hall of Columns, in which husband and wife become lost and bewildered. Within doors, with Desdemona, Othello is confused. Outside, with Iago, all seems to him clear. In one shot, the sun shines high in the sky from behind Iago, giving his words clarifying weight. The brighter the sky, the darker the deeds happening beneath it.

Very dramatic is the sequence "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore", which Welles shoots on a cliff-top, waves breaking far below, and Iago afraid that he'll soon go over into them. The metaphor is pinched from Hitchcock movies (*Rebecca, Suspicion*), and recurs in Olivier's controversial "To Be or Not To Be" sequence (his *Hamlet* was made in the same year as Welles started to shoot *Othello*.) As I noted above, "Like to the Pontic Sea" is said by Welles with his back to camera. He is in fact apostrophising a statue of the Virgin and Child, to which Iago crosses himself just before he says "I am your own for ever".

This he says looking up at Othello, who stares down at him from the top of a flight of steps: a common image in the film, where people are often separated from one another by wide spaces, one in a high place,

looking down at the other far below them. It's a metaphor at once for power, and for the failure of communication and comprehension. The theme climaxes when Iago towers over Roderigo and stabs down at him through the slats on the floor of the Turkish bath, where the unfortunate simpleton has just failed to kill Cassio; and when Othello speaks to Lodovico at the last, staring up at him from the marital bed as Lodovico stares down at him through a skylight.

There are in fact a multitude of vertiginous shots: as he recovers from his fit, Othello stares up at the seagulls, and at the people mocking him from the battlements – only to find when he gets up that the battlements are empty. Many shots are done at angles to the horizontal.

The final scenes of catastrophe are unbearably moving – especially the revelation and death of Emilia, which Faye Compton does superbly.

Chimes at Midnight (1965)

The urge to use Welles' work as a metaphor for and parallel to his own frustrated career is a temptation which, it seems, no-one can resist. In real life an illusionist and a phoney, a master of faking, in these two films he turns real life inside-out, and plays the innocent victim of fakes and con-artists: Macbeth is a victim of the witches, Othello a victim of Iago. In his third Shakespeare film, and, I think, his best, he plays the ultimate phoney – Sir John Falstaff – and shows how Falstaff is destroyed by a man cruel in his innocence and sincerity.

Chimes at Midnight is a combination of *Henry IV* I and *Henry IV* II, with bits of *Henry V* and *Richard II* (so they say – I've never found any lines in the last case) thrown in. Ralph Richardson does a narration derived from Holinshed. The film was a Spanish-Swiss co-production, shot in 1965 in Spain (under the pretence of making a film of *Treasure Island*), on a budget so limited there was only cash enough for one take of each shot. If you cocked it up, it didn't go in (I expect they rehearsed a lot). In some shots you can see that the line of soldiers on the horizon are wooden cut-outs.

The film is a rarity. I've only seen it in the cinema once, and that was in Switzerland shortly after it was released, with simultaneous French and German subtitles. I loved it at once: "It's Shakespeare", I said, "as if Eisenstein had directed him". It's only been on terrestrial TV twice; and has only just (2012) been put out on DVD, unlike the two tragedies, which are always cropping up (the new *Othello*, by the way, is a masterpiece of restoration). The film is now, just to confuse things, called *Falstaff.*