

Shakespeare: Alive & Well

Shakespeare In Love Review

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Published: July 13, 2004 *Useless Knowledge Magazine* (useless-knowledge.com)

The packed theater was quiet. Everybody sat in their seats and watched the credits. Hardly a person got up to leave. The movie was *Shakespeare in Love*, and all of us had come out on a snowy, icy Saturday night to see it.

Because I have been immersed in the world of literature all of my life, and professionally, the past fifteen years, I thought I had a reason to be entranced. And I was for the rest of the evening, and years later. When I got home, I pulled my mother's frayed 1942 Riverside Shakespeare – complete with her scribbled margin notes and mine – off the shelf.

I noted all of the plays I had read, perused favorite or famous lines I had underlined, and noticed the unmarked plays, primarily history plays, that I had not yet read. Although I could not remember all of my Shakespeare, it did not matter. I was looking at his words with new, appreciative eyes. I, like my students, often viewed Shakespeare as a fussy, boring icon, not as the renegade iconoclast depicted in the film. *Shakespeare in Love* transformed Shakespeare's image for me. He now was Joseph Fiennes – sexy, handsome, and romantic.

And why not?

Shakespeare was a popular writer in his day, appealing to all classes. The movie, in many ways, brought Shakespeare back to where he was in the first place - a popular entertainer. It was only when we in the Ivory Tower whisked him away to Academe, analyzed him, wrote exhausting books about him, that his work was regarded as "high art," largely untouchable or unreadable without a scholar's help.

And why this lofty role for such a poet who left his wife his "second best bed" in his will? *Shakespeare in Love*, worthy of its multiple Oscars, has brought The Bard back where he needs to be: within the reach of the masses.

As Stephanie Cowell, author of the novel, *The Players*, states, "Best of all, those people who find this great and long dead writer too scary to open the pages of his books, may be convinced to open them now, as even the highly erroneous portrait of the proud little Mozart in the film *Amadeus* brought new friends to his music." I agree. *Amadeus* had people running out to buy Mozart CD's, just as *Shakespeare in Love* has people "brushing up" on their Shakespeare.

Some experts on Shakespeare find all this hoopla appalling. They complain the film is not an accurate, historical depiction, only a fix, a fleeting shot of Shakespeare and nothing more. But, we know very little about Shakespeare's life, so what's the problem? Or, they claim, a Hollywood film can not do justice to the genius of Shakespeare's work. I believe this film has done wonders for Shakespeare, and has given teachers another venue to help make Shakespeare a fun read in the classroom. As Cincinnati Post film critic Craig Kopp wrote, "This film is cool, fun, and exciting – words English teachers have been trying to get students to say about Shakespeare for years" (12-24-98). *Shakespeare in Love* can shatter students' dry academic idea of what Shakespeare is. The movie brought his works back to life.

Following my trip to the movie I noticed that Shakespeare, The Bard, was everywhere in local and national newspapers: quotations were featured from his plays, and applied to modern life; innuendoes, puns, and nuances that only Shakespeare connoisseurs or experts could have caught in the film were explained.

Indeed, 15th to 17th C. literature and history has become popularized in newspapers and film in recent years. As director John Madden notes: "We have ended up with one foot in the 16th century and one in the 20th, which is perfect."

In particular, I am delighted by all this attention to a literary figure that I thought was "dead" in this country. Among some academics, Shakespeare is said to have a better marketing plan than other major poets, such as Milton. To see the theater packed for a movie about Shakespeare, to hear the audience laugh at jokes about Christopher Marlowe, and other literary allusions and puns, was immensely gratifying.

Stoppard, the scriptwriter, also made wonderful puns on the language, and cleverly employed clichés, ("the show must...go on?"), which is exactly in the spirit of Shakespeare. We do not readily understand today a great many of the puns and word play in Shakespeare's plays, unfortunately, because of how the English language and certain word uses have changed. The footnotes to his plays show the changes, although some of the word play transcends cultural context anyway. I have had students read Hamlet without the footnotes, and they were pleasantly surprised at how much they understood.

The film's high attendance also shows there's a real desire in our culture for myth, romance, and poetry. Those longing for real art in the theater flocked to the film. Shakespeare in Love beautifully inter-mingles past and present, art and life. We see these brilliant intersections in such moments in the film as during the performance of Romeo and Juliet. After Viola is married, she and Will meet and he says "You are married," then the camera swings around and we realize they are in front of an audience. This was truly exquisite. It perfectly portrayed Shakespeare's ability (and great art's ability) to capture and convey the rapture and pain of real life.

That scene gripped my heart. In many ways, Stoppard's movie is a defense of art—not ideological expression or temporarily stimulating novelty—but real art, a defense we desperately need in this day and age. Perhaps my students, as I did, will see this intersection that will spark their curiosity, and leave them starry-eyed, running off to read Romeo and Juliet.

A friend of mine told me he came home from the movie so excited about Shakespeare that he ran to his basement, dug around, and pulled out all the Shakespeare essays he'd written in college. And he read them all. A man in the theater sitting next to me started a conversation. Did I know what Twelfth Night was about? He had never heard of it. Did it really entail – as Shakespeare in Love told us -- a shipwreck and a character named Viola? Yes and yes. I gave him a brief synopsis of the play. So, I'm convinced Stoppard is a genius. Not a Shakespeare, necessarily, but pretty darn good. He's learned a great deal from the master, and he's paid real and respectful attention, as the film displays, which is a lot more than you can say for just about any playwright/filmmaker these days.

Stoppard, like Shakespeare, shows us how art and life mirror each other: how music, poetry, and exquisite words (as Hamlet said, "Words, words, words") are essential to life, to love and passion, that makes the movie rich and meaningful. Will and Viola are playful; they tease and laugh with each other in and out of bed, on and off stage. The music of the dance, the

drama, the nightingale, and the lark connected them. Life can be a romantic adventure, and not separate from what might be termed, "real" life. We can see, through the film, that we too can be on an imaginative journey. When you are with someone who can create magic in life with you, that's irreplaceable.

Loving someone is also about responsibility-- hardship and death do intervene. Indeed, as the film expresses, the knowledge of these facts, these darker realities, mean we need deeper, creative connections with each other. I have always known the importance of living it, but experiencing and holding onto wonder in daily life is not an easy feat. We are distracted by other mundane events so that magic seems like a trick to get us off track.

Shakespeare in Love makes us believe in the power of art and life, that Shakespeare's words are not cobwebbed, but fresh and transformative.

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