

## Backstage with the Bard: or, Building a Better Mousetrap

By John C. Tibbetts

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, pauses a moment, sword at the ready, and takes the measure of his opponent, Laertes. Suddenly, with a deft stroke, he slices off Laertes' arm. Blood spurts ten feet in the air as the severed limb falls to the stage. "A hit," declares Hamlet. "A palpable hit!" Laertes, in turn, ripostes with a lunge and cuts off Hamlet's arm. Another jet of blood arcs across the stage. With a second thrust Laertes stabs Hamlet through the throat. Blood is now gushing everywhere, splashing onto the stage and spilling out into the audience seats. Stunned and horrified, the audience is transfixed with horror.

Hamlet and Laertes, sans a few limbs and spouting fountains of blood, come down to the stage apron and cheerfully take their bow.

The perpetrators of this extraordinary *guignol* version of Shakespeare's play are none other than those wayward children of the notorious Addams Family, Wednesday and Puggli. They have just brought down the curtain on their school's kiddie talent pageant. More importantly, they have critiqued and deconstructed every sugar-sweet children's show that parents and kids have ever had to endure.

Surely the Bard would have been pleased.

This moment, this brief play-within-a-film, typifies just one of the many ways a Shakespearean "moment" may be sited within a motion picture to comment on its surrounding contexts. In the case of *The Addams Family*, it, like Hamlet's "mousetrap" play, creates seismic responses in the play's onlookers, each according to his and her particular disposition. It indeed outrages the hidebound stuffed shirts in the audience. But Wednesday's and Puggli's proud parents, Morticia and Gomez Addams rise to their feet, wildly cheering and applauding.

As Hamlet knew, it is all in how you look at it.

Not all Shakespearean films are theatrical adaptations. Others merely cite the Bard to reflect and/or comment on the film's primary narrative. Taking the play-within-a-play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as precedent, they employ Shakespearean allusions as "mousetraps" that "capture the conscience," as it were, of the action and the characters. All too often, unfortunately, films of this kind fall between the cracks and are neglected in standard studies of Shakespearean adaptations. But where would we be without masterpieces like, in chronological order, Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), which enlists Shakespeare in the Polish resistance against the invading Nazis; Marcel Carne's *Children of Paradise* (1945), where a performance of *Othello* precipitates real-life tragedies among the principal characters; George Cukor's *A Double Life* (1947), in which an actor's portrayal of the jealous Moor develops into a murderous obsession; Vincent Price's *Theatre of Blood* (1973), where a disgruntled actor mines the Bard's revenge dramas for suitably *guignol* inspirations for a series of bloody murders; Merchant-Ivory's *Shakespeare Wallah!* (1975), where the travails of a traveling Shakespearean troupe bespeak the larger tensions of a newly liberated India; Tom Stoppard's film version of his play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1990), which places a Mousetrap not *within* the Hamlet story, but *outside* it; Kenneth Branagh's *A Midwinter's Tale* (1996), where the transformative powers of a performance of *Hamlet* unify a motley group of second-rate players; Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1997), which seeks Shakespearean relevance in the modern world; and, of course, John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1997), which locates the inspiration of

*Romeo and Juliet* in a brief but torrid affair between the Bard and a beautiful aristocrat. These films do not adapt Shakespeare so much as they assimilate him into their primary texts. Their “backstage” view of the Bard throws their “onstage” actions into dramatic relief. “The theatre as a metaphor for life’s madness is hardly new,” says Kenneth Branagh, “and movies that use the stories of particular productions to provide a microcosmic view of human nature abound.”

### CURTAIN RAISERS

Many Shakespearean allusions function merely as brief skirmishes with the Bard. A few examples will suffice. In *Daydreams* (1922) Buster Keaton tries to impress his girl friend by imagining himself as an actor playing Hamlet. In *Morning Glory* (1933) Katharine Hepburn, as an aspiring actress, Eva Lovelace, stuns a bunch of stuffy party guests with the “To be or not to be” soliloquy. In *Renaissance Man* (1994) Danny DeVito conducts a crash course in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Henry V* to a bunch of misfit soldiers at a military base, reconfiguring the Melancholy Dane’s soliloquys as rap numbers, transforming them into marching cadences. In *The Goodbye Girl* impoverished aspiring actor Richard Dreyfuss launches into a hilarious, limp-wristed, lipping take on *Richard III*. Alan Mowbray is a drunken actor who recites Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy in a cowboy saloon in John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* (1946). When the speech is interrupted, that Doc Holliday (Victor Mature) completes it to the stunned amazement of the roughhouse crowd.

Indeed, Hollywood has been looking for Shakespeare ever since Fatty Arbuckle appeared in a Keystone comedy spoof in 1914 called *Robust Romeo*. With hit-and-run ambivalence, filmmakers even in the earliest days have either opted for straight-forward adaptations, like Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s *Macbeth* of 1916, or re-contextualizations, like the Arbuckle

pastiche. Having it both ways is a sequence in MGM’s splashy early talkie, *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*. Sandwiched between a gymnastic routine and the “Singing in the Rain” number, MGM’s biggest female and male stars, Norma Shearer and John Gilbert, declaim two very different versions of the Balcony Scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. The first is a “straight” reading, beginning with Juliet’s lines, “Oh, Gentle Romeo, if thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully. . . .”, as the music of Tchaikovsky dutifully wells up on the soundtrack. But no sooner has Juliet breathed her final lines, “Parting is such sweet sorrow,” than a rude “CUT!” is heard offstage. The director (Lionel Barrymore) emerges from behind the camera and comes forward with the sad news that the “New York office” has demanded changes in the play. Not only is a new title required, “The Neckers,” but also some radical alterations in the text. “Make it modern, pep it up,” Barrymore orders.

Back go our two actors to resume their respective places on yonder balcony. “Now listen, boyfriend,” begins Juliet (as the music shifts to a mildly jazzy tune), “you have a nice line of chatter. But how do I know you care for me in a big way?”

“Julie, baby,” responds Romeo. “I’m gaga about you. No kiddin’, honey, your teeth are like pearls, your eyes are like diamonds, and your lips are like rubies.”

“You talk like a pawnbroker,” says Juliet.

“No, on the level, honest. You’re the pansies in my garden, the cream in my mocha and java, the berries in my pie.

“You’re certainly playing a pretty symphony for my ears. I’ve had plenty of balcony bees buzzing about me. But you’re just about the cookies for me, boyfriend.”

“Well, then,” says Romeo, “let’s get organized. I’ve got the boulevard beetle all gassed up. . . .”

“You’d better ramble,” insists Juliet upon hearing a nocturnal bell. “It’s 2:00. Father will be coming home any time now.

And the old man's a bad hombre when he's loaded up with scotch. He's liable to shoot you in the garden!"

Swiftly Romeo descends from the balcony. He flings one last barrage of rhetoric at Juliet—in pig latin!"

### **BACKSTAGE WITH THE BARD**

Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) employs its own "mousetrap" device to foil Nazi tyranny in Poland. The film belongs to a select company of backstage theatrical films set in World War II that also include Istvan Szabo's *Mephisto* (1981) and Francois Truffaut's *The Last Metro* (1980). Whereas *Mephisto*, adapted from Klaus Mann's long-suppressed novel, is a devastating indictment of artistic compromise in the service of the Nazi party—the character of Hendrik was based on the opportunistic actor Gustaf Grundgens, who sold his soul, as it were (hence the title *Mephisto*) to curry the favor of Hermann Goering—the Lubitsch and Truffaut films are glorious tributes to the role theatre plays in the battle for personal and political freedom. The place and time of *To Be or Not to Be* is Poland in 1939. Jack Benny portrays the leader of a theatrical troupe, Josef Tura, "that great, great Polish actor," as he describes himself on several occasions. A running gag in the film is his declamation of the lines of Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy—which are continually interrupted by the departure from the audience of a handsome young Polish resistance flyer (Robert Stack as Lieutenant Sobinski). Tura misunderstands the action: He thinks it is a critique of his acting, when in reality, unbeknownst to him, those particular lines have been coded by his wife, Maria (Carole Lombard) as a pre-arranged signal to her lover for a backstage tryst. Those words, as it turns out, may also be construed as the burning question that will decide Poland's fate.

The movie opens with the figure of Adolph Hitler striding through the Polish

streets. But it is not Hitler. It is merely Bronski, an actor in Josef Tura's troupe, rehearsing an anti-Nazi play called *Gestapo*. Sent out into the streets to test the effectiveness of his impersonation, he "fails" when a little girl comes up to him and asks him by his stage name for an autograph. Unlike the child, we movie viewers—and, later, the Nazis—are fooled at the outset. Illusion and reality jostle for our attention. As Robert Willson has pointed out, this opening anecdote establishes at once not only the theme of the film but the essential parallel between the movie and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, i.e., the feared German tyrant proves to be "nothing more than a bad actor trying to convince us he is more powerful than he is." Hitler, like Claudius, "is little more than a player-king, incapable of ruling himself, let alone the kingdom." (76)

When it is learned that a presumed Polish patriot, Professor Siletsky (Stanley Ridges), is in reality a Nazi agent bent on turning over the names of loyal Poles to the Nazis, the Tura troupe springs into action to intercept him and, at the same time, effect the escape of a Polish aviator, Sobinski (Robert Stack). Josef Tura impersonates the Gestapo officer, Erhardt (Sig Rumann), and interviews Siletsky. Smelling a rat, Siletsky almost escapes before he is killed by Sobinski. (This moment is one of the highlights of the film: Siletsky flees to Tura's theatre, where he is shot dead in center stage, a spotlight full upon him.) Tura now turns to his next challenge, impersonating Siletsky ("I'm going to have to do the impossible; I'm going to have to surpass myself"). As Siletsky, he goes to the real Erhardt in order to procure a plane for the fleeing Sobinski. But Erhardt, too, sees through the disguise, although he is unsuccessful in preventing Tura-Siletsky from escaping. The problem remains—Sobinski still has to be spirited out of the country. Now the stage is set, as it were, for the last and most ambitious of the Tura impersonations.

Learning that the real Hitler is coming to Tura's theatre to witness a celebration performed in his honor, Tura contrives to use the occasion to effect Sobinski's escape. He may be motivated by more than just patriotism—after all, his troupe's Nazi satire, *Gestapo*, had been cancelled by the censors, and here was a chance at last to bring the play to the public. Using the uniforms from *Gestapo*, he and his actors invade the lobby *before* the arrival of the real Hitler. One of Tura's actors, Greenberg (Felix Bressart), has in the meantime been planted in the restroom in advance. He rushes out to confront "Hitler" (Bronski again) and commence Shylock's Rialto speech ("Hath not a Jew eyes?") from *The Merchant of Venice* (3.1.55-69). It is Greenberg's finest hour, and he recites the lines with poignant simplicity. If the "To be or not to be" lines reflect Poland's uncertain fate at the breakout of war, this speech may be construed as a comment on the Nazis' atrocities toward Jews. Meanwhile as the fake Hitler orders the man's arrest, Tura (also in disguise as an SS officer) uses the ruckus as a diversion to spirit away Sobinski along with the rest of the fake soldiers. As already noted, it is a subtle irony that while Bronski had not fooled the Poles with his Hitler impersonation, he is now able to fool the Germans.

That the machinations of an acting troupe deceive the villains and resolve the plot's conflicts underscores yet another link between *To Be or Not to Be* and *Hamlet*. Significantly, as Danny Peary points out, it takes ham-handed actors to "have the tremendous egos that can compete with those of the Nazis"; and it takes their skills in theatrical deception to compete with the spy Siletsky. (156)

The "To Be or Not to Be" lines are declaimed one last time at the end of the film. Tura and his troupe have come to England to perform *Hamlet*. To the astonishment of Tura—and of Sobinski seated in the audience—at the utterance of the famous lines, *another* serviceman rises

from his seat and heads for the exits! To be or not to be, indeed; just who *is* the new conspirator in Maria's affairs? It is the last stroke in a world full of illusions and deceptions. Or, as Willson suggests, perhaps this last exit is indeed a critical reaction to Tura's performance (his rendition of Hamlet had earlier been criticized as comparable to what the Nazis were doing to Poland). Thus, by extension, "Lubitsch also seems to be suggesting that such poor players or player-kings as Hitler and Mussolini will likewise be exposed and hooted off the world stage." (82)

It is worth noting that in Mel Brooks' remake in 1983 the play being performed by the Polish troupe is not *Hamlet*, but a series of excerpts from a collage play entitled *Highlights from Hamlet*. That in itself is perhaps a commentary upon our modern-day penchant for bowdlerizing Shakespeare and speeding him up for modern consumption.

George Cukor's *A Double Life* uses a performance of Shakespeare's *Othello* to reveal psychological truths about the particular characters involved. To digress a moment, other Shakespearean allusions have functioned in the same way in other films. In *The Dresser* (1983), for example, based on Ronald Harwood's 1980 play, a performance of *King Lear* salvages the wreckage of the unstable mental and emotional life of the actor known only as "Sir" (Albert Finney). With the support and urgings of his loyal dresser, Norman (Tom Courtenay), Sir, who had earlier confused his lines, is able to pull himself together to deliver the last and definitive performance of his life. Perhaps appropriately, at the curtain's fall, Sir dies. Clearly, the character of Lear is an extension, or reflection, of Sir himself. Thus, the film emerges as a commentary on the excessive degree to which an actor identifies with a role.

More germane to *A Double Life*, several films previously had selected Shakespeare's *Othello* to explore the darker implications of role identification. From the silent era comes *Carnival* (1921), which stars the

great Italian Shakespearean actor Silvio Steno who, during a performance of *Othello*, goes crazy with jealousy and nearly strangles his wife to death while she is playing Desdemona. Two films from Britain have similar plot lines. *Men Are Not Gods* (1936) features an actor playing Othello, Edmund Davey (Sebastian Shaw) and his Desdemona, his wife (Gertrude Lawrence) who find themselves in a real-life triangle that nearly results in her murder onstage.

The most famous entry in this list—and one of mainstream Hollywood’s finest treatments of Shakespeare—is undoubtedly *A Double Life* (1947), directed by George Cukor and scripted by Garson Kanin and Ruth Gordon. Shakespeare is dragged, all too willingly, one might suspect, into the world of late 1940s *film noir*. Ronald Colman (who won an Oscar for his performance) is Anthony John, an ageing actor Broadway stage star who is currently co-starring with his newly-divorced wife, Brita (Signe Hasso), in a drawing-room comedy called *A Gentleman’s Gentleman*. As a publicity stunt and a career boost, Tony considers mounting on Broadway a production of *Othello*, which will feature Brita as Desdemona. A gimmick will be that he will not smother Desdemona to death, but stifle her with a kiss. Ex-wife Brita is dubious about his taking on the role of Othello, since she knows all too well that Anthony has a tendency to identify too much with his roles. Sure enough, Tony immediately takes to the streets to ponder the new project, reciting lines from the play as he walks. Stopping at a café, he continues to recites lines to himself while chatting with a waitress named Pat Kroll (Shelley Winters). Throughout their exchange, Tony’s voice-over declaims lines like “We do call these delicate creatures ours. . . .” from *Othello*. More lines whirl through his brain as he goes to her apartment and discovers that her bed is partitioned from the rest of the room, just as in the play. “Have you prayed tonight, Desdemona? . . .”

The next morning Tony leaves Pat to begin rehearsals. Tony’s interior monologue continues throughout, as he says to himself, “Look within yourself to find the key—jealousy!”

A remarkable montage takes us through the months spanning pre-production preparations to the successful opening night. We catch swift glimpses of the preliminary blocking, the first run through, adjustments of the script, the costume tryouts, the glitches during technical rehearsals, and the night of the premiere. “The part begins to seep into your life and the battle begins,” says Tony’s interior monologue.

“Imagination against reality. Keep each in its place. That’s the job, if you can do it.”

Although the production is a success, Tony is increasingly plagued by these interior voices and by the jangling sounds of bells.

The play is now in its second successful year. But as Tony attempts to reconcile with Brita fail, his acting becomes more agitated, and his murder scenes with Desdemona become increasingly realistic. When Brita refuses Tony’s marriage proposal, he follows her to her rooms. “Yet she must die lest she betray more men,” intones his interior voice. “Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell. Oh, now, forever, farewell the tranquil mind.” In a deranged state, he staggers out into the night to Pat’s room and, after asking her repeatedly if she has had other lovers, murders her. “Put out the light, and then put out the light,” he intones. The newspapers are full of the scandal, reporting that the victim was dispatched by a “kiss of death.” It’s a press agent’s dream, aided by Tony’s publicist and rival for Brita’s affections, Bill Friend (Edmund O’Brien). But when Tony spots the story, he furiously rushes to Bill’s and unsuccessfully tries to strangle him, shouting lines from the play all the while. Suspicious of Tony’s complicity in the murder, Bill determines to set a trap for Tony, a “mousetrap” device. (Bill himself may be acting out of a combination of an

altruistic search for justice and jealousy over Tony's relations with Brita.) Bill "auditions" several prospective actresses to impersonate the dead Pat Kroll. After selecting one, he has her made up and dressed like Pat, down to wearing her earrings. He then positions her in a bar where he will contrive to have Tony run into her. Tony's guilty reactions convince Bill he is indeed guilty of Pat's murder. Meanwhile, Tony prepares for the evening's performance of *Othello*. He confesses to Brita that nightmares and distractions are plaguing him. He summons up his strength, however, and goes on. After the murder scene with Desdemona, he speaks the lines, "Speak of me as one who loved not wisely but too well. . . ." Before the police waiting in the wings can capture him, he produces Othello's knife, for which he has substituted a real blade, and fatally stabs himself. While the audience reacts in shock, Tony is dragged backstage and confesses his crime to Brita, Bill, and the police. At the moment of his death a shadow falls across his face, and in the next shot the curtain closes and the spotlight is extinguished.

Veteran stage actor-manager Walter Hampden supervised the generous helping of *Othello* sequences. Cinematographer Milton Krasner photographed many of the exterior scenes in the New York streets and the interior, theatrical sequences in a heavily cloaked chiaroscuro lighting. Miklos Rosza's music "doubles" as diegetic music for the play and as non-diegetic music to accompany and enhance the offstage action.

There are many levels of reality and illusion. Each "doubles" for the other. Indeed, the "double" motif permeates all aspects of the film and the play-within-the film (and Bill's little "mousetrap" device constitutes yet another level, *another* play-within-the film). Just as Shakespeare demonstrated that Othello was himself a divided soul, as capable of noble-hearted generosity as he was of lethal jealousy, Tony John is immediately depicted as a man possessed also of a double personality.

When we first see him, he is standing in the foyer of the Empire Theatre before a large painting of himself. Tony turns toward the camera; and before his face blocks out the painting we see two Tony's, the enormous painting towering above and behind him. Moments later he pauses and silently regards his bust, the two faces in a "two-shot," as it were. Later in the street he encounters two actresses. "What a darling," one says. "What a dinker," retorts the other. Clearly; there are *two* Tony Johns to consider. When he first seriously considers performing in *Othello* he shuffles through some drawings while the image of the bearded, dark-skinned Othello superimposes over his face. "Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy. It is the green-eyed monster," says a voice in his head. (It is our first encounter with another "double"—we realize that Tony has *two* voices. The interior one functions throughout as the equivalent of the Shakespearean soliloquy, i.e., it both enhances and comments upon the action.) When Tony first follows Pat to her apartment, he has difficulty telling her his name, his *real* name. Instead, he catalogues the names of many roles he has played. Finally, he shrugs in confusion: "As soon as I know it myself." Immediately thereafter as he turns to a mirror and tries on one of her earrings, declaiming Othello's lines, "the bawdy wind that kisses all it meets. . .", the camera pans from his face to the mirror image, positioning the two together in the shot.

Desdemona's death bed scene is also doubled, finding its real-life counterpart in Pat's bedroom. The scene is depicted four times. The first time we are on the Empire stage for opening night, and the scene is played virtually intact. "Yet I would not shed her blood, yet she must die," declaims Tony. At that same moment his interior voice comments: "You're two men now, grappling for control. You and Othello." He strangles Desdemona, then kisses her intently until her spasms cease. He then stabs himself, saying, "No way but this,

killing myself to die upon a kiss.” All is played strictly according to the book, but a disturbing moment, a discordant grace note, as it were, polishes off the scene: Tony remains in place, taking his curtain calls, even though the curtain has fallen and the audience departed. Having established the basic outline of the scene, Desdemona’s murder is played a second time in more truncated form. A series of views from the wings and backstage, along with several powerful close-ups give it a more intimate quality. Tony is now somewhat deranged and his strangling of Desdemona is frighteningly real—so real that she has to call for a doctor afterward. The third replay of the scene occurs in Pat’s apartment. Her bed, the curtain partition, even details of the décor echo the stage set. Her blonde hair has tumbled loose, and she is wearing a white nightgown, very much like Desdemona. As she brings him a cup of coffee, he interrogates her about other men in her life. Tony grows more agitated. Then, she asks him to “put out the light.” It’s a fatal mistake. Her remark reminds him of Desdemona’s line, and he responds, now wholly caught up in the play, “If I quench thee, thou flaming minister. . .” He strangles, then kisses her. Her clutching hand grips the partition curtain and draws it across the scene. For the fourth and final enactment of the scene we are back on the Empire stage. Distraught and anxious, Tony nervously awaits the scene. He is at the end of his rope, and the police are closing in. This time the action begins after the murder, when Othello is about to be taken away by his councilors. Instead of stabbing himself with the stage prop knife, he procures a real blade (another “double” motif). “Then must you speak of one who loved,” he intones brokenly, “not wisely but too well; of one not easily jealous but being wrought perplexed in the extreme.” As the interior noises rise in a crescendo in his head, he collapses.

Commentator Robert F. Willson argues persuasively that the role of Othello

functioned as an Iago-like device which precipitated Tony’s homicidal tendencies and his own death. “*A Double Life* represents Iago as a psychological demon that in the modern world has become internalized; relying on the device, the writers and director explore depths of character that the Freudian age has come to regard as determinate and psychopathic rather than ‘tragic.’” (92) Putting it another way, the play—indeed, the acting profession generally—functions as a kind of potion that can stimulate alternate personalities in an actor, just as the elixir of the noble Dr. Jekyll frees Hyde frees Mr. Hyde.

On a less exalted level, *Theater of Blood* (1973) trumps *A Double Life* several times over. An actor chooses not just one, but ten methods of Shakespearean-inspired homicide. In a brilliant stroke Vincent Price is cast as the vengeful Edward Lionheart, a most theatrically flamboyant, if ham-handed serial killer.

Setting the scene is a prologue containing clips of death scenes from several black-and-white Shakespearean silent films. The eerily mute succession of suffocations and stabbings takes on the elegantly *guignol* character of drawings by Edward Gorey. The story proper begins on March 15<sup>th</sup> (appropriately enough, as it turns out) with the savage stabbing death of theatre critic George Maxwell (Michael Hordern). After being lured to an abandoned building, Maxwell finds himself confronting a knife-wielding mob in a scene straight out of *Julius Caesar*. He is brutally attacked and hacked to pieces. Looking on is the costumed character of Mark Antony. “Pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,” Antony mocks, “that I am meek and gentle with these butchers.” Discarding the broken corpse, Antony turns to his bedraggled accomplices and intones his eulogy of the dead Caesar, “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears! . . .”

Edward Lionheart, once presumed dead, is very much alive. Assisted by his deranged daughter, Edwina (Diana Rigg),

and a motley crew of accomplices, he has begun his vendetta against the critics who savaged his performances. Each murder will be patterned after one of the Shakespearean plays that marked Lionheart's last season on the boards. Like Caesar himself, back from the dead, he is ready to "Cry 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war. . . ."

In *Troilus and Cressida* Achilles slays Hector and lashes his corpse to the tail of a wild horse. Lionheart's second victim, critic Hector Snipe (Dennis Price), suffers the same fate. "Look, Hector, how the sun begins to set, how ugly night comes breathing at his heels," declaims Lionheart, dressed in the armor of Achilles, as he thrusts his spear into Snipe's body. Even with the violent darkening of the sun to close the day up, Hector's life is done." Lionheart orders his accomplices, "Come tie his body to my tail, along the field I will the Trojan trail. . . ."

Just as in *Cymbeline* Imogen wakes up and finds the headless body of Cloten in the bed with her, so now does Lionheart arrange a like fate for his third victim, critic Horace Sprout (Arthur Lowe). Lionheart and his accomplice (Diana Rigg disguised as a man) invade Sprout's bed chamber, drug him and his wife with a hypodermic, lay out their surgical tools, and proceed to saw off Sprout's head. Jets of blood spurt upward while dreamy music is heard on the soundtrack. Beside her decapitated husband, Mrs. Sprout sleeps on. She is due for a rude awakening.

In *The Merchant of Venice* the vengeful Shylock wants to claim his pound of flesh from Antonio, but his daughter, Portia, dissuades him. Lionheart has worked out his own version of the play for his fourth victim, critic Trevor Dickman (Harry Andrews). Dickman protests that Antonio is spared in the play. "We have revised this script," retorts Lionheart, dressed in the robes of the Jew, as he cuts out his heart. "You spurned me such a day," recites Lionheart. "Another time you called me

dog. . . . But if I am a dog, beware my fangs." He weighs the bleeding tissue on the scales. Two ounces too heavy. He snips off a tiny piece. *Now* he has his pound of flesh. Later, viewing the remains, another critic quips, "Only Lionheart would have the temerity to rewrite Shakespeare."

In *Richard III* the scheming Richard has his henchmen murder George, the duke of Clarence by drowning him in a cask of wine. Lionheart duly lures his fifth victim, critic Oliver Larding (Robert Coote) to a fake wine tasting, where he is thrust upside down into a wine cask. "Now is the winter of our discontent," snarls Lionheart, wearing the wig and mincing the walk of Richard, "made glorious summer by this son of York. . . . As I am subtle, false, and treacherous, this day should Clarence be closely mewed up."

The sixth murder attempt is a curiously unfinished affair. Critic Peregrine Devlin (Ian Hendry) goes to his fencing school, where instead of his teacher, he confronts Lionheart, rapier in hand. Like Tybault and Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*, they go at it, hurdling barriers and bouncing on trampolines. But then, curiously, Lionheart lets him go, delaying the kill for another day.

Inspired by Othello's deadly jealousy, Lionheart contrives to stage-manage a scene where his sixth victim, critic Solomon Psaltery (Jack Hawkins), finds his wife in bed with a lover (Lionheart disguised as a masseur). Psaltery seizes a pillow and suffocates his wife. Lionheart may not killed Psaltery, observes a police detective, but he has managed to consign the poor man to prison for the rest of his life.

*Henry VI, Part I* has a grisly scene where Joan of Arc is burned at the stake. Lionheart's seventh victim, Critic Chloe Moon (Carol Browne), faces a similar fate when she goes to an appointment at a hair salon. Lionheart, affecting a limp-wristed persona, waits her. He hooks her hair curlers to the electricity and turns on the juice. "Bring forth that sorceress condemned to burn," he intones. "Break

thou in pieces and consume to ashes, thou foul, accursed minister of Hell.” Chloe is left in the chair, burnt to a cinder.

*Titus Andronicus* contains Shakespeare’s most notorious piece of *guignol* revenge as Titus feeds his arch enemy, Queen Tamara, a meat pie consisting of her two sons. This is the fate reserved for Lionheart’s eighth victim, critic Meredith Merridew (Robert Morley). Merridew loves his two poodle dogs with the same relish as a good gourmet meal. Lionheart contrives to combine both pleasures. He fakes a live performance of a popular television show, “This Is Your Dish,” where the delighted Merridew is treated to a succulent dish. But the meat pie that Merridew consumes with such pleasure turns out to be made from his two dogs. “I will grind your bones to dust and make two pasties of your shameful head,” quotes Lionheart as Titus, as he stuffs food down Merridew’s throat with a funnel. Moments later, Lionheart smirks, “Pity, he didn’t have the stomach for it.”

Lionheart reserves critic Peregrine Devlin for the fate of Gloucester in *King Lear*. Devlin is tied to a bench while two red-hot daggers slowly descend toward his eyes. Lionheart offers mercy if Devlin will admit that he is a great actor. Refusing, Devlin gazes at Edwina, who is all too willingly assisting her father. “What have you done to your daughter?” Devlin protests. Edwina, standing in for Lear’s loyal daughter, Cordelia, turns toward her father: “Good my lord you have begot me, bred me, loved me,” she says, assuming her own role. “I return those duties back as are right fit. Obey you, love you, most honor you.” Before Devlin’s eyes are put out, the police burst in. Edwina is injured and Lionheart, clasping her body to his breast, staggers off and sets the theatre on fire. “Come, fire,” he moans, “consume this petty world; and in its ashes let my memory lie.” He and Edwin exchange their last words. “How does my royal lord,” she whispers. “How fares your majesty?” He responds, “You did me wrong to take me out of the

grave. Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound upon a wheel of fire. Mine own tears do scald like molten lead.” She breathes her last, “We are not the first, who best meaning, have incurred the worst.”

Both perish in the fire. It remains for Devlin, the only surviving critic to have the last word: “Yes, it was a fascinating performance, but of course he was madly overacting, as usual. But you must admit, he did know how to make an exit.”

If Lionheart identifies with his Shakespearean characters, so surely does Vincent Price empathize with Lionheart. Both, near the end of their careers, suffered critical jibes for their broad-brush theatrics. And in this film both have the chance to wreak revenge most foul. *Theater of Blood* is the most erudite piece of *guignol* in film history; and Lionheart/Price is the most articulate of serial killers.

Merchant-Ivory’s *Shakespeare Wallah!* (the term “wallah” in Hindustani means a small-time operator—here, it refers to a small troupe of touring English players) is loosely based on the diaries of actor-manager Geoffrey Kendal, while touring India in 1947 with his “Shakesperiana” troupe. When filmmaker James Ivory read the diary, he showed it to novelist Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who collaborated with him on a screenplay. Kendal and his wife, Laura Liddel, portrayed their counterparts, the Buckingham. Their daughter Felicity was cast in the key role of Lizzie. Popular actor Shashi Kapoor portrayed Sanju, Lizzie’s romantic lead. And Madhur Jaffrey played Manjula, a popular Bollywood actress. The film was made on a shoestring budget of \$80,000 and shot on locations in the hill station of Kasauli, in the Punjab; in the Vice-Regal summer capital of Simla; in Alwar, in Rajasthan; in Lucknow; and in Bombay.

The story spins out against the background of the passing of British culture in post-independence India. Culturally speaking, it is a world too impatient for Shakespearean drama and too preoccupied

now with the novelties of musical films. The disasters that befall the Buckingham Players exemplify the schisms opening up between worlds old and new, between classical and popular entertainment. The Buckinghams are slow to adapt to these changes. "One is always conscious of [the Buckinghams] as being constrained by their theatrical calling," notes historian Patrice Sorace, "which has lost popularity to Indian films that represent the new, indigenous Indian culture." (26)

Indeed, the Buckingham's tour is marked by disasters of all kinds. At the film's beginning, when they are performing Sheridan's *The Critic* in front of a chateau near Lucknow, a runaway cow stampedes the actors and audience. Their next performance, of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, transpires in the renovated palace of the Maharaja of Betawar, who complains that current conditions have forced him to rent out half his palace as office space. Later, at a private school the troupe learns they will have to cut back on the usual number of performances. Mr. Buckingham protests: "But surely Shakespeare is still in your curriculum. I mean, our shows are very popular with schools and colleges. We do a kind of package—Hamlet, some comedy, some tragedy, a bit of *Twelfth Night*. . . ." But the Department Head only shakes him off citing the importance of allowing time for cricket: "I don't want to put undue stress on our sports activities, but they do take a lot of time. . . ." To Buckingham's dismay, the troupe is dismissed after just one performance. "It all changed, slowly, over these past years," he says bitterly. "I keep thinking about it. I can't help it. We should have gone home in '47 when the others went. But we were too sure of ourselves."

Tensions of a different sort arise when young Lizzie Buckingham (Felicity Kendal) meets and falls in love with Sanju (Shashi Kapoor), a wealthy young Indian playboy. Sanju conveys his admiration of the troupe's performance of *Hamlet* to his friend, the

celebrated Indian actress Manjula. In particular, he extols Lizzie's artistry: "She is a very fine artist. For such people one can have some respect." Manjula, who has no inkling of what classical drama is all about, retorts that she, too, has played "many great dramatic roles in my time." To which Sanju admits, "People don't care for the theatre so much these days. Only for films."

Ignoring Manjula's jealousy, Sanju follows Lizzie when the troupe takes to the road toward Simla. He watches her performance as Maria in *Twelfth Night* and as Desdemona in *Othello*. During the latter performance, Manjula unexpectedly burst in, and her ostentatious entrance literally stops the show. Mr. Buckingham advances to the footlights and requests silence. Unabashed, Manjula maintains her grand manner and signs autographs during the murder scene. In mock horror at the violence of Desdemona's death, Manjula departs with considerable commotion. "How can you like something like that?" she asks Sanju. "All that moaning and groaning, so bloodthirsty." Later, when Sanju tries to apologize to Buckingham, he shrugs, saying, "Let's just call it the victory of the moving pictures over the theatre." The final humiliation comes during the Buckinghams' performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. Lizzie's entrance onstage as Juliet is greeted with rude whistles and comments from the audience. As she declaims the lines, "But my true love is grown to such excess/ I cannot sum up half my wealth," a fight breaks out between Sanju and the offending toughs. A near riot ensues and the performance is halted. Minutes later, Sanja objects to Lizzie's choice of a lifestyle that constantly exposes her to the public. "It's a wonderful life," she replies defensively; "I wouldn't want to be anything else. Acting's my whole life." Yet, it is obvious she is prepared to give it up if Sanju would ask her to marry him. But it is just as obvious that Sanju will never understand her devotion to the theatre, and that he is not prepared to take that final step. The lovers part. In the

concluding scene, at the behest of her parents, a saddened Lizzie boards a ship bound for England.

Although the original source materials of the film, the Kendal diaries, had depicted the adventures of the troupe as a positive experience, it was decidedly the intention of Ivory and Jhabvala to negate that. The Buckingham's failure was designed to be emblematic of the larger failure of classical drama in the face of the culture of a New India—a culture at once rooted both in Eastern traditions and in the pop culture of Bollywood. Similarly, Lizzie's devotion to her craft was also out of place in the face of Sanju's traditionalist—some would say “sexist”—attitudes toward a woman's place in society. “The Kendals felt uncomfortable,” recalled James Ivory, “were hard put sometimes even to bring out their dialogue, which seemed to give utterance to thoughts which were at variance with everything they believed. It did not help that the stuff of their lives was being used in order to create a drama symbolic of a moment in history.” (88)

In *A Midwinter's Tale* (1995) the redoubtable Shakespearean Kenneth Branagh chronicles the glitches, twitches, and occasional glories of a theatrical troupe desperately trying to ready a performance of *Hamlet* for a Christmas Eve opening in an abandoned English country church. Fiction merges with reality in that the actors are drawn from Branagh's own troupe, the Renaissance Theatre Company. Thus, you can believe what you're seeing on screen is the real thing, drawn from their shared experiences. “It was the cumulative experience of this group that informed and changed the script,” recalled Branagh. “All the mad audition sequences come from life, as do many of the characters. The film itself was made in the spirit of the story. . . . The spirit of generous collaboration (not without the odd fit of temper) made for a shoot. . . which, as Hamlet would, held ‘the mirror up to nature’” (vi). Moreover, Branagh serves it up with quick wit, swift pacing, peppery

dialogue, and a no-nonsense camera style. “The more ‘serious’ the play the more likely rehearsals are to create amusement,” says Branagh, although the hijinks may not always be intentional and may not always be enjoyed by the people involved. . . . In Shakespeare particularly, the great tragedies tread such a fine line between laughter and tears, that any group working on them can find themselves in the grip of hysteria. . . . It's the very stuff of drama, inside the drama” (v). Critics of the film agreed. “[It] starts off as an amusing free-for-spoof of the acting profession,” wrote Stephen Holden, “and eventually turns into a comic valentine to diehard thespian dedication” (1).

Much of the film is frankly autobiographical, both of the adventures Branagh himself has experienced on the road, and of his childhood delight in watching Hollywood backstage musicals. In particular, Branagh wanted to emulate the cycle of backstage movies that teamed up director Busby Berkeley with Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney —*Babes in Arms* (1939), *Strike up the Band* (1940), *Babes on Broadway* (1942), and *Girl Crazy* (1943)—wherein the determination of a bunch of squabbling, disparate kids to “put on a show” transforms them into a solidly organized and creatively productive theatrical unit.

*A Midwinter's Tale* begins as Joe (Michael Maloney) holds auditions for an upcoming production of *Hamlet*: A dancer tap-dances the “To Be or Not to Be” soliloquy. A ventriloquist and his dummy proclaim the “Alas poor Yorick” lines. A mad woman enacts with hand puppets the characters of Mrs. And Mrs. Macbeth. A balding man belts out “Mule Train” while hitting himself on the head with an aluminum tray.

What a mis-matched assortment of players is finally brought together! As Kenneth Rothwell says, they are “losers, not glamorous stars, making pathetic efforts to interest the world in their Shakespearean tragedy” (224). There's Michael Maloney

as Joe, the intense producer rolling the dice on this production; Julia Sawalha as Nina, his Ophelia, a near-sighted klutz who can't even find a creek to drown in; Nicholas Farrell as Tom Newman, who plays Laertes, slips in and out of unlikely accents ("from another solar system") and motivations like a shopper trying on suits; Richard Briers as Henry Wakefield, a cynical old veteran who sees in this production his last chance to play Claudius; John Sessions as Terry Du Bois, a campy gay man who takes on Gertrude (and who will supply his own frocks and breasts for the role); Richard Briers as Henry Wakefield, the company's Claudius (who starchily declares, "The English theatre is dominated by the class system and a bunch of Oxbridge homos"); and Celia Imrie as Fadge, the production designer with singularly inventive ideas, including populating the empty auditorium seats with cardboard cutouts of spectators "just to keep the actors company," she confides to Joe (the sight of these bizarre, stiff forms mixed in with the living patrons accounts for the funniest scenes in the movie). "If we don't get a natural audience, I want to create a World for you. You should at least have people watching you. Even if they are cardboard."

The company arrives in Joe's car at the village of Hope. They tumble out and admire the picturesque little church situated at the top of a hill. But no, this is the wrong site. The *real* church is down by the village, an "ugly red church" that is damp and cavernous. At the first read-through, Joe admits, "I see it as a very long play." "I see it as a *very* long play, darling," retorts one of the players. "Sally Scissors is going to appear, we hope?" Everybody bickers about what lines are to be cut, details of costuming, who will play multiple roles, what period to set the play in, how to advertise. They worry about attracting the locals to see the play. "Hello kids," mocks Molly. "Do stop watching Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and come and watch a four-hundred-year-old play about a depressed

aristocrat. I mean it's something you can really relate to."

The first rehearsals. One actor defends his preposterous "grande dame" accent in Gertrude's opening lines ("They don't talk like they do in the real world—they put on the old cigarette gravel—the tragic thrill—the emotional break in the middle of the line—the operatic cadenzas"). So caught up is she in Ophelia's madness, poor near-sighted Nina shouts "Oh, my lord, I have been so affrighted"—and races right off the edge of the stage. One actor finds himself having to play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *at the same time*. There are worries about paying the landlord overdue electric bills. And there is not enough time for sufficient rehearsal. "We have set ourselves a challenge there is no doubt," declares Joe. "But at Shakespeare's own theatre, a six-week season would have produced thirty-five performances of seventeen different plays including at times four world premieres. So, as Polonius says, 'Sometimes Brevity can be the soul of wit.' But I don't think we should lose our nerve." The closet scene between Hamlet and Gertrude is interrupted by the revelation that the actor playing Gertrude had abandoned a child years before.

As things keep going wrong and the prospect of additional needed funding looks bleak, Joe at last loses his temper: "What is the point? . . . You're a perfectly decent bunch of people. A group of actors with all the normal insecurities and vanities. But basically I know you want to be here, we all want to do what's best for the show. But look at us. We argue. We're depressed. We've set ourselves too great a target. It is too personal for us all. It's a big play and we keep running up against it and hurting ourselves, and I for one can no longer what I'm doing or why I'm doing it." But the next day things look better. The scenes snap into focus. The cast comes up with the extra money.

Now come the technical rehearsal. Too much smoke. Nobody can see anything.

The opening words, “Who’s there?” take on extra meaning. Meanwhile, no one (least of all the movie viewers) have a clue as to what is the time period for the play. Relations among the cast are likewise indeterminate, as they keep falling in and out of love with each other.

Last-minute crisis. Joe’s agent, Margaretta (Joan Collins), gets him a lucrative movie job in a science fiction trilogy. She arrives on Christmas Eve to announce that the show will have to close. Joe has to leave that night. The actors, by now united into a family group, protest that the show must go on: “That’s what actors do. . . they hang on, they stick it out.” Joe’s Ophelia reminds him, “You put your whole life into this, Joe. Right from the start. You needed this job. You needed it then and you need it now. It’s not about fame or money or so-called wealth and security, it’s about nourishing your soul, nourishing your heart.” Molly prepares to go on at the last minute as Hamlet. She receives a canny piece of advice: “If I ever forget my lines in Shakespeare, I always say, ‘Crouch we here awhile and lurk,’ Always seems to do the trick.”

At last the performance. Smoke envelopes the stage (and the audience). At the words, “Who’s there?” Horatio, clad in a trench coat, fires a machine gun over the heads of the startled audience. From the back of the church comes Hamlet’s first words: “A little more than kin and less than kind.” It is Joe, to the rescue, clad in his winter coat, returned at the last minute for opening night. Quick onstage scenes intercut with Fadge backstage clinking glasses with Molly. The Nunnery Scene. Nina’s Ophelia is clad in a silver turban and glittery dress, making her look for all the world like Theda Bara. Clearly upset with Joe’s last-minute grandstanding, Nina concludes her lines—“Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind”—with a hard slap to his face. Quick glimpse of the Mousetrap Scene (with Claudius clad in military tunic and epaulettes). Cut to the

Closet Scene, where Hamlet says, “What is a man if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed, a beast no more.” The sword fight features Hamlet and Laertes, bare-chested, in pants and suspenders, exchanging lines and blades as they whirl about the room. Hamlet declaims his last lines, “The rest is silence.” Fortinbras says: “Go, bid the soldiers shoot.” Darkness. Drum. Gong. Wild applause. The whole performance has taken up a mere four minutes of screen time. Tom Stoppard could not have abbreviated the whole thing in a more trenchant and succinct manner. It is the Bard played at top speed.

Epilogue. The theatrical improbabilities spill out into the post-performance sequence with several tearful reunions and last-minute revelations. One of the audience members turns out to be a Hollywood celebrity. After dubbing Joe and Nina “Mickey” and “Judy” (“The whole thing was like a Judy Garland movie”), she offers Tom Newman a leading role and Fadge a job as designer in her new science fiction movie. Another audience member turns out to be Terry’s long-lost son; and they reconcile with a tearful embrace as Terry says, “I think you’re a wonderful queen, in every way.” In the meantime, it is revealed that Joe really has turned down the movie part for the sake of being with the play and with Nina. A mollified Nina falls into his arms and they dance, their future romance assured. Against an exterior night shot of the church, the words of the company are heard: “Merry Christmas!”

The triumph of this performance is nothing less than a Christmas apotheosis for the lowly cast members. “The enchantment of assuming the identities of fabled persons like Hamlet, Gertrude, and Ophelia casts its spell,” writes Kenneth Rothwell, “and their play turns into a Christmas miracle in which wretchedness is transfigured into sublimity” (224).

*A Midwinter’s Tale* serves as a comic curtain-raiser for the real treat to come—Branagh’s full-scale production of

*Hamlet* (1996), which presented the *complete* play, intact, for the first time on screen. (There's a private joke in *A Midwinter's Tale*, incidentally, when the director reassures his troupe they'll perform the play *with cuts*.) For some of us, however, *Midwinter* deserves its own privileged place alongside it.

Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996) might be subtitled *Looking for Shakespeare*. While trying to make sense of what is probably Shakespeare's most frequently performed, if relentlessly complicated play, Pacino and his company also cast about for the relevance of Shakespeare for today's audiences. To make *that* long story short, dozens of brief interviews with "the man in the street" persuade us that he doesn't mean a heck of a lot. As Anthony Lane wrote in *The New Yorker*, "This reaching out to an ideal public is bound to be a disappointment, because the majority of the population doesn't care a whit for Shakespeare and never will." (70)

To be sure, just what Pacino intends this project to be is never made clear. Just what is it documenting?—the relevance of Shakespeare today; the behind-the-scenes preparations for a play performance; or the shooting of a motion picture adaptation? Pacino himself is not quite sure, and he drifts through the proceedings like a Shakespearean version of Marcello Mastroianni trying to make sense of his creative vision in Fellini's *8 1/2*. There are discussions of the proper use of iambic pentameter, a trip to Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon (where Pacino inadvertently trips the fire alarm), a brief visit to the site of the Globe Theatre (which at the time was beginning its reconstruction), and interviews with stalwart Shakespeareans like Kenneth Branagh, Sir John Gielgud, Vanessa Redgrave, and Peter Brook. Pacino gathers his cast—Alex Baldwin as Clarence, Winona Ryder as Lady Anne, Aidan Quinn as Richmond, Kevin Spacey as Buckingham, and Pacino himself as Richard—and they tussle

mightily over issues of why American actors are intimidated by performing the Bard, how to make sense over some of the more densely-textured rhetoric, how Richard and Buckingham can be related to today's gangsters ("but "high-class gangsters"), and the riddles of character motivation (just why does Richard feel he has to marry Lady Anne?). Pacino has also brought an educator, Frederic Kimball, along for his scholarly savvy.

Predictably, rarely does anyone agree on anything. "Nobody knows *Richard III*," mutters Pacino in exasperation. "It's very confusing. I don't now why we're doing this [movie] at all." Later, as he begins to settle into his character, Pacino doesn't hesitate to reject the advice of Kimball. Kimball erupts in very real anger. "You hired me as a scholar to explain things," he shouts, "yet you *actors* seem to think your ideas are better than mine." Pacino only smiles and grabs a sword to confer a mock knighthood on the poor man, dubbing him "Sir Ph.D."

Meanwhile, Pacino, who does not exactly enjoy an extensive experience in matters Shakespearean, struggles with the convoluted plot. He is bemused but not abashed at its complexities. "There is something sly and rather Richard-like in the throwaway glee with which [Pacino] approaches matters of grave intent," notes Anthony Lane. He also credits Pacino's experience with the three "Godfather" movies to understand the "diplomatic savagery" that Richard employs to place himself on the English throne. There is the backstory of the War of the Roses and the recent defeat of the House of Lancaster to unravel; the complicated relationships among King Edward's presumptives to the throne; Richard's campaign to eliminate his rivals—in order, Clarence, the two princes, and Hastings; and the circumstances of the Battle of Bosworth.

Rehearsals, finished performance, and video replay all combine in a seamless flux and flow. In a series of quick edits, Pacino

begins a line in his apartment, continues it on stage in full costume, and then reviews the finished product on the video monitor in the studio. Punctuating the proceedings are a number of brief scenes when Pacino's Richard, clad in black tunic, hair wisping from beneath his black cap, addresses the camera with smarmy familiarity. His pale face emerges from out of the enveloping darkness, and his dissipated eyes flicker warily while his lips curdle in an ever so slight smirk. This is a most interesting Richard, a compound of diffidence and deadly authority. In the second half of the film are several protracted sequences which gives us our Shakespeare "straight," as it were. These include, in order, Richard's seduction of Lady Anne ("Twas thy beauty that provoked me," he suggests softly), his charge to two assassins to murder Clarence, the Council Meeting and the arrest of Hastings, and his exhortation to Buckingham to kill the two princes, and his nightmarish sleep when he is visited by the specters of his past crimes.

Unimpressed by all this are two filmmakers who protest Pacino's extravagance with the whole thing. Finally, after the Battle of Bosworth and Richard's death under Richmond's sword, one of them stands back from the set and asks in deadpan, "Is Richard dead? Is that *it*?" The other retorts sarcastically, "If I had told [Pacino] about that other ten rolls of film, he's want to use it!"

*Shakespeare in Love* (1998) would have us believe that an ill-starred love affair between young Shakespeare and a beautiful woman named Viola De Lesseps (Joseph Fiennes and Gwyneth Paltrow) directly inspired—and was in turn inspired by—the romantic tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*. What is backstage comes to the forestage—and returns full circle. This play-within-a-play-within-a-movie is cunningly written by Shakespeare veteran Tom Stoppard (*The Fifteen-Minute Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*) and Marc Norman; and directed by John Madden (who

displayed a deft touch with actress Judi Dench in another historical film, about Queen Victoria, *Mrs. Brown*).

London, 1593. Two theaters are contending for popular (and Royal) favor—the Curtain Theater, which claims the talents of the Chamberlain's company and playwright Kit Marlowe; and the Rose Theater, with the Admiral's company and young Will Shakespeare. The latter house is deep in debt, and its manager, Philip Henslowe (Geoffrey Rush) must get Shakespeare to write a sensational melodrama to fill the coffers. But poor scruffy, ink-stained Will is suffering from writer's block and sexual impotence ("I dreamed I was trying to pick a lock with a limp herring," he innocently tells his astrologer/counselor in an early scene). The play that's resisting his pen is a melodrama called *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*.

But inspiration springs up afresh, so to speak, when Will spies a young man named Thomas Kent at the play auditions who speaks his lines with extraordinary eloquence. Amazed, Will pursues him and tracks him down to a wealthy estate across the Thames. He does not find Thomas Kent, but he does encounter a dazzling, golden-tressed damsel named Viola. Will is instantly smitten with her and impetuously crashes a dance party to see her. But because Will is from the wrong side of the tracks—from the far shore of the Thames, as it were—he's tossed out by her angry suitor, Lord Wessex (Colin Firth). Back at the Rose Theater, rehearsals begin for *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*. The mysterious Thomas Kent reappears and joins the theater cast as the character of "Romeo." It's only a little later that Will realizes at last that he has been hoodwinked—that this boy is in actuality his beloved Viola in disguise ("I am theatre mad," she says, "and dream myself into a company of players"). It's a delicious moment, as Will waxes eloquently to the "boy" about Viola's charms, and "he" in

response suddenly kisses Will.

Keeping their secret, Will and Viola rehearse by day on stage at the Rose and make love by night in her chambers (her parents are conveniently out of town); and, newly inspired, Will transmutes their tender moments into scenes for the new play. In this way life, love, and the theater blissfully intertwine—until Viola’s ruse is discovered by the angry Lord Wessex, who first attacks Will in a sword fight and then has the Master of the Revels close down the Rose Theater on the grounds of the illegality of having a woman to appear on the stage). But Will’s rival acting company, Burbage’s the Chamberlain’s company, comes to the rescue and offers its Curtain Theater to put on the play (by now retitled, at the casual suggestion of one of Will’s actors, *Romeo and Juliet*). The play commences, but Will is broken-hearted because Viola is now married to Lord Wessex. Little does he know that not only has Viola run away from Wessex to attend the opening day of the play, but that she has taken the place of the boy portraying Juliet. When she comes on to the stage—a real woman playing Will’s real love—she and the character of Juliet have melded into one (just as Will is now a real-life Romeo). After the play ends to tumultuous applause, the Master of the Revels shows up determined to close down the theater. But who should rebuke him but Queen Elizabeth herself, who emerges from the gallery to closely examine Viola and slyly declare that her “illusion” as a “woman” is very convincing. The Queen sends Viola off with Wessex. Will, after a tearful departing scene with Viola, settles down to write *Twelfth Night*, with a heroine named Viola. . . . “Write me well,” Viola says, “with a new life beginning on a stranger shore.”

Joseph Fiennes’ Shakespeare is a portrait of a man on the run. He cops lines and situations wherever he finds them. He’s an artistic chameleon, alive to the vivid colorations of life on the street. He cadges plot tips from Kit Marlow and lines of

dialogue from street conversations—like, “a plague on both your houses,” overheard from a local minister fulminating against the wicked stage. He even imitates on stage his own life. And he writes like he makes love—at top speed, the quill pen splattering ink across the snow-white foolscap. Gwyneth Paltrow is certainly an intriguing sight sporting a mustache and dressed in men’s clothes, quite at home, ironically, amidst a crowd of men dressed like women! Other memorable touches include the boy who periodically shows up, torturing cats and mice, who says his name is John Webster and that he likes blood and murder (who, of course, will grow up to become the Jacobean author of such blood-and-thunder revenge dramas as *The Duchess of Malfi*). There’s some business with Kit Marlowe (Rupert Everett in a subdued mood), whose death from a tavern brawl Shakespeare mistakenly supposes to have been caused by his inference to Wessex that it is Kit, not he, who has been visiting Viola at night. Meanwhile, the show’s benefactor, the “money man,” as he declares himself, ends up a stagestruck idiot playing the character of the Apothecary. Philip Henslowe, the manager of the Rose, has a continuing bit of business wherein he declares that some “mysterious” power always comes to the rescue of even the most disaster-ridden theatrical enterprise (and sure enough, at the last moment the tongue-tied character portraying Chorus miraculously declaims his opening speech perfectly). It is also Henslowe who has the best line: After hearing Will describe the action of the play, Henslowe rolls his eyes and responds sarcastically, “*That’ll* have ‘em rolling in the aisles.” And maybe best of all is Judi Dench, who only appears in a few extended scenes (attending a farce with Will Kemp on stage, conferring her blessing on the marriage between Viola and Wessex, and settling matters after the premiere of *Romeo and Juliet*), but who with a flash of an eye or a grimace of the mouth can convey more of Elizabeth’s hauteur and sly wit than all the

arm-waving histrionics another actress could have done.

The play, *Romeo and Juliet*, indeed permeates the entire film, both on and off stage. Many set pieces illustrate the point. First is the long montage sequence wherein scenes of Will and Viola's nocturnal lovemaking are cross-cut with the actions of the daily stage rehearsals. In a seamless interchange, desperate embraces and impassioned speeches begin in the bedchamber, continue on stage, and conclude back things started. Similarly, in the extended scene of the play's premiere, Will/Romeo and Viola/Juliet come together to enact theirs and the play's anguish of frustrated love. As in the play, Will's first declaration of love to Viola is a veritable balcony scene. Again, as in the play her nurse becomes the accomplice through which they conspire to meet. Throughout, the impossibility of his love against her life of privilege and her arranged marriage parallels the play's "star-crossed" fatalism. Events come to blows between Will and his rival, Wessex, just as they do between Romeo and Tybalt. And there's also the rivalry between his company of players and Burbage's men, echoing that between the houses of Capulet and Montague.

Love and artifice, private life and public performance are indistinguishable. These lovers are actors in their own lives and participants in their own drama. It's a grand game, one in which they, and the viewers, become willing conspirators. The play-within-the-film functions not just to imitate the offstage action, but to inflect it, to reveal that the real theatrical clichés and artifices reside in the real world, not just on stage. Truly, art has only imitated life.

No theatrical film can rival Marcel Carne's classic *The Children of Paradise* (1944) in its variety of theatrical references and allusions, complex layerings of reality and illusion, and in its enduring charm. "*Les Enfants du Paradis* is a tribute to the theatre," said director Carne in 1944, shortly after completing the film. Its catalogue of

theatrical allusions include pantomime, farce, and melodrama; and its central theme, the frustrations and jealousies of love, derive from Shakespeare's *Othello*.

In the words of Edward Baron Turk, Jacques Prevert's screenplay "glorifies the capacity of theatrical fictions to confer coherence upon real-life experience." (230) that applies as much to the film's directly contemporaneous context (it was made during the German Occupation) as it does to the fictions depicted on screen. The setting is Paris in the year 1827 during Carnival time. The action is framed by the rise and fall of a theatre curtain. The story begins in the Boulevard du Temple, Paris' theatre district, which teems with acrobats, clowns, barkers, peepshows, and animal acts. Many of the patrons who come here are from society's lower ranks. They occupy *le paradis*, "the gods," slang for the highest and least expensive gallery seats, where they vent their frustrations and shout their enthusiasms to the actors, the "children of the gods," disporting themselves on the stage. It is clear that these crowds are a metaphor not just for the politically oppressed citizens of the French Occupation (during which time the film was made), but for today's audiences who come to movie theatres seeking relief from worldly burdens. "They're poor people, but I am like them," declares an actor. "I love them, I know them well. Their lives are small, but they have big dreams. And I don't only want to make them laugh, I want to move them, to frighten them, to make them cry."

Two of the principle characters of the story are actors based on real-life figures—the elegant mime Jean-Gaspard Debureau (played by Jean-Louis Barrault under the altered name of Baptiste Debureau) and the flamboyant Shakespearean performer Frederick Lemaitre (Pierre Brasseur). Each has his own theatre—Baptiste at the Theatre du Funambules and Lemaitre at the Grand Theatre. The comedy and farce of the commedia dell'arte (Pierrot, Colombina,

Harlequin, and Pantalone) and the tragedy and melodrama of *Othello* (Othello, Desdemona, Iago, and Brabantio), respectively, reflect and govern the actions of these men. What unites them—and links them with the more peripheral characters of the story, the villainous Lacenaire (Marcel Herrand) and the slimy aristocrat Edward de Monteray (Louis Salou)—is their fascination and involvement with the enigmatic beauty, Garance (Arletty). “Jealousy belongs to everyone,” says Lemaitre. “Even if women belong to no one!”

Baptiste and Lemaitre must turn to their art to survive. For both men the theatre offers not only solace but a kind of creative whetstone. As Lemaitre observes, “When I act, I am desperately in love, desperately, do you understand? But when the curtain falls, the audience goes away, and takes ‘my love’ with it. You see, I make the audience a present of my love. The audience is very happy, and so am I. And I become wise and free and calm and sensible, again, like Baptiste!”

Thus, Lemaitre transmutes his murderous jealousy into the role of Othello. Upon learning that Garance is in love with Baptiste, Lemaitre tells her that she is like a “Desdemona.” He declares, “Thanks to you. . . I shall be able to play Othello! I have been trying to find the character, but I didn’t feel him. He was a stranger. There it is, now he’s a friend, he’s a brother. I know him. . . I have him in my grasp.” Later, while performing *Othello* at the Grand Theatre, we witness a portion of the scene wherein Othello plots with Iago against Desdemona: “Get me some poison, Iago—this night. I’ll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again. . . .” Iago advises him to strangle her instead. Lemaitre/Othello’s eyes stray toward one of the boxes, where Garance/Desdemona is seated with her lover, the Count Edward de Monteray. Cut to the Count, who is beginning to suspect that Garance has had an affair with Lemaitre. He audibly complains at this

point of the play’s “debased violence.” On stage, meanwhile, Lemaitre/Othello continues: “. . . for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned to stone: I strike it, and it hurts my hand.” Minutes later, during the bedroom scene as Lemaitre/Othello prepares to strangle Desdemona, de Monteray, by now beside himself, threatens to murder Lemaitre. Cut to the stage, where Lemaitre/Othello is clearly addressing his lines not to his Desdemona on stage, but to his Desdemona in the box with the Count:

Therefore confess thee freely of thy sin;  
For to deny each article with oath  
Cannot remove nor choke the strong  
conception

That I do groan withal.  
Thou art to die.

The theatrics don’t end with the curtain, however. Minutes later, after the performance, the drama continues backstage in the Green Room, when the Count angrily confronts Lemaitre. He insults Lemaitre, and in the process tries to insult the whole institution of Shakespearean theatre:

COUNT: Monsieur, you played the part of this simple-minded and blood-thirsty brute as if you found it perfectly natural.

FREDERICK: You are too kind, Monsieur, but I hope that above all I played it as Shakespeare wrote it—as if it was the most natural thing in the world!

COUNT: A very peculiar character, this “Monsieur Shakespeare!” I have been given to understand that he served his literary apprenticeship. . . chopping meat on a butcher’s slab.

FREDERICK: And why not?

COUNT: Which would explain the bestial and savage character of his plays, and why, when he was alive, he was a great favourite among such people as dockers, carters. . .

FREDERICK: And kings!

Before this protracted disquisition can be revealed for what it really is, a deadly exchange between these two rivals for the

affections of Garance, it is interrupted by the arrival of Lacenaire, who clearly has something up his sleeve, as it were. In a nifty piece of theatrics of his own, he approaches his enemy, Count Monteray, and then wounds him more sorely than if he thrust a sword into his back. "I'm not a character out of a bedroom farce," he tells the Monteray, at which point, he draws aside a curtain, revealing Garance and Baptiste in a passionate embrace. What the astonished onlookers see is a perfect stage picture, nicely framed by the curtain, calculated to humiliate the Count and drive him into a duel with his rival, Lemaitre. Lacenaire has wrought as beautiful a piece of tragically dangerous theatrics as if he had just staged *Othello* himself. Putting it another way, he has played Iago to de Monteray's *Othello*. Whereas Lemaitre was able to purge himself of his deadly jealousies by enacting them on stage, de Monteray will inevitably fall victim to them. He will be slain by Lacenaire's knife thrust the next morning.

As for the neurotic, lovelorn Baptiste, he, like Lemaitre, also finds in his art both a reflection and an expression of his own frustrations. As his pantomimes become darker and more violent, he observes that there is not really such a great difference, after all, between pantomime and tragedy. After all, he says, *Othello* would "make a nice pantomime." Bitterly, he continues: "A man who kills his love, and dies of it. Poor man. A sad and ridiculous story, like so many others. . . ." His great performance, not unlike Lemaitre's afore-mentioned role as *Othello*, is a pantomime called "The Rag and Bone Man." It opens with Baptiste, clad in his silken white costume, face masked with makeup, arriving at a sumptuous evening party. His attempts to enter are rejected. Alone, under a street lamp, he encounters a rag merchant. Realizing he must attire himself in suitable evening dress, he tries to purchase the merchant's clothes. When he is unable to come up with the money, Baptiste draws a sword and runs the man through. Exit. The audience, startled

but delighted at the unexpectedly morbid tone of the performance, applauds wildly.

In the course of these events we realize that the other characters, the non-actors like Garance, Lacenaire, and the Count, have likewise donned masks of their own. As Garance has dallied with Lemaitre, Baptiste, and the Count, she has donned the twin masks of comedy and tragedy, assuming the "roles" of Colombina and Desdemona. The Count has found himself the object of a very deadly piece of theatrics (he ultimately dies at Lacenaire's hands), and Lacenaire himself has assumed the role of *metteur en scene*, or master stage director.

In the largest sense, *Children of Paradise* is about the enduring legacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century French theatre. The casting of Jean-Louis Barrault and Pierre Brasseur as, respectively, Baptiste and Lemaitre, constituted a tribute to those two great traditions of the French theatre, the pantomime and the romantic drama, and their two greatest 19<sup>th</sup> century exponents, Deburau and Lemaitre. At the time of the film's release, Barrault, newly elected *societaire* of the Comedie Francaise, had already initiated a general resurgence of interest in pantomime—for what Antonin Artaud called "the irresistible significance of gesture." (quoted on 258) His identification with Debarau was unquestioned. Pierre Brasseur was likewise a highly respected actor-playwright. In his excessive energies and self indulgences, he was ideally suited to convey the raw power and fierce individuality of the actor-rebel Lemaitre—who had once been dubbed by Hugo as "the French Kean." In evoking these traditions, says Turk, Barrault and Brasseur contributed to the film's theme that theatre is the proper arena to claim one's authentic being (276). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that theatrical activity, not political actions, were France's chief bulwarks against the Nazi oppression that gripped Paris during the German Occupation. In the words of Turk, France's theatres were "the 'safe houses' of those

collective dreams that take the form of plays and movies [and which] provided a public site for relief from political oppression.” (267)

Inevitably, perhaps, Shakespeare has entered the Age of Dogme 95 with Kristian Levring’s *The King Is Alive* (2001). Levring, along with co-founders of the Dogme movement, Lars Von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg and Soren Kragh Jacobsen, established Dogme in Copenhagen in March 1995 with the expressed goal of countering “certain tendencies” in the commercial cinema. Their manifesto was a “Vow of Chastity” that challenged filmmakers to shoot only on location, reject non-diegetic sound and music, use only hand-held cameras, rely only on natural lighting, and avoid all optical effects. *The King Is Alive* is the fourth film in the official series, preceded by Von Trier’s *The Idiots*, Vinterberg’s *Celebration*, and Jacobsen’s *Mifune*.

This “vow” has now been applied to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, stripping it down to a handful of lines and situations and grafting it on to a dramatic study of human survival against natural and psychological challenges. Set in the Namibian desert in southwest Africa, the story begins when a tour bus strays from the highway and runs out of gas, leaving ten tourists and a bus driver to fend for themselves. One hardy soul, Jack (Miles Anderson), offers to trek across the desert for help. “If I am not back in five days,” he instructs them, “take the tires off the bus and burn them as a signal for help.” A Shakespearean actor, Henry (David Bradley), decides that they should all keep busy in the interim by rehearsing a makeshift performance of *King Lear*. He writes out the parts and assigns them. As the weary, sunbaked travelers spend their days slogging through the play, each descends into his or her own primal hell: Liz (Janet McTeer) attempts to seduce the black bus driver (Peter Kuheka) in an attempt to make her husband Ray (Bruce Davison) jealous. The hapless driver is also

the recipient of the racist hate of the bully of the group, Charles (David Calder). When Gina (Jennifer Jason Leigh), reviles an older man’s sexual advances, he dresses up in coat and tie and hangs himself. Finally, at the end—with the play still unfinished—rescuers arrive, attracted by the fires that have been set.

Director/writer Kristian Levring inserts the *King Lear* Mousetrap device into the story to trigger a series of confrontations among the group that, by turns, both unify and disrupt them. They behave as if under the influence of Shakespeare’s lines, “This cold night has transformed us all into fools and madmen.” When Ray asks his wife what *King Lear* is all about, she replies, “You don’t have to worry, you know. Nobody has to fall in love and everybody gets to die in the end.” Well, love proves to be fickle and not everyone dies; and, excepting the obvious correlations between Henry and Shakespeare and Gina and Cordelia, not everyone easily corresponds to their assigned characters in the play. Nonetheless, *Lear*’s theme of the disruption of family unity handily mirrors the strained relationships among these stranded travelers during a time of crisis.

Finally, no survey of these Mousetrap films, however brief, is complete without reference to Tom Stoppard’s stage play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which he himself adapted and brought to the screen in 1990. Appropriately, it brings this discussion back to where it started, with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Stoppard’s play had been an immediate success upon its premiere in London in 1966, and launched Stoppard’s career. It is still the work most associated with his name.

Both play and film are truly a Byzantine exercise in mousetraps, a veritable *Citizen Kane* of mousetraps, a construction of mousetraps within mousetraps, if you will. What results is a cross between the meta-theater of Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and the Absurdist drama of Becket’s *Waiting for Godot*. It

would take a cross-section of many commentators and many exhaustive analyses of this work to do it justice—volumes by Felician Hardison Londre (1981), Anthony Jenkins (1987), and Susan Rusinko (1986) come to mind—but space permits only a brief examination here.

The narrative begins *in medias res* as two English courtiers find themselves on the road to Elsinore, only dimly aware that they have been directed to appear at the court of Prince Hamlet. On the road they encounter a troupe of strolling players also headed for Elsinore. The troupe's leader, known simply as Player, tries to interest them in witnessing a performance. But before they can begin, there is a sudden change of the light, and the characters of Hamlet and Ophelia appear. Queen Gertrude and King Claudius follow, and they engage Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in dialogue directly from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Similar interruptions, or breaches between the world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and that of the Shakespearean play occur at irregular intervals on the road, in the palace at Elsinore, and on the boat bound for England. "Never at a moment's peace!" declares Rosencrantz at these mysterious appearances and disappearances, "in and out, on and off, they're coming at us from all sides" (73). Meanwhile, Player and his troupe find themselves fleeing an outraged Claudius after an aborted performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*. They, Hamlet, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all wind up on a boat bound for England. It is at this time that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern learn that they are the bearers of an order for Hamlet's execution. But Hamlet escapes during a pirate attack, leaving his two friends confounded to know that now *they* are to be executed. Despite their protests at their fate, in mid-speech they disappear. According to the stage directions, the lights now go full up, revealing the tableau of court and corpses constituting the last scene of *Hamlet*. The two Ambassadors from England report to Horatio the famous words,

direct from Shakespeare, that "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead."

If Shakespeare uses the Mousetrap play in *Hamlet* to throw light upon events external to the play, Stoppard reverses the process and uses peripheral events and the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—mere walk-ons in Shakespeare's original—as well as the Player, as a Mousetrap device to examine the meaning of the play known as *Hamlet*. (To a degree, and in a more direct and accessible way, he did much the same thing in his screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love*.) To paraphrase Player's lines, they enact on stage the things that are barely alluded in Shakespeare's text, while standing apart from the ongoing performance of the play *Hamlet* ("We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off, which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else," 28).

However, that barrier separating the onstage *Hamlet* from the offstage *Hamlet*; art from life; the story from the play; the play from the play-within-the-play—call them alternative realities, if you wish—is porous. Sporadically, unpredictably, these worlds interpenetrate. For example, there is the aforementioned Act 1 encounter between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Gertrude and Claudius. Then, the first fifty lines of *Hamlet's* Act 2, scene 2 are enacted, uncut, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern witness Gertrude and Claudius' discussion about Hamlet's "affliction." At the beginning of Stoppard's Act 2 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern again find themselves impressed into Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, this time in Act 2, scene 2, where they exchange their colloquial diction for the proper Elizabethan speech as they discourse with Hamlet and Polonius. Other scenes from *Hamlet* that Stoppard interpolates into the action include thirty lines of dialogue from Act 3, scene 1, in which Claudius and Gertrude learn about the advent of the traveling players; Claudius' request to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act 4,

scene 1 that they find out from Hamlet where Polonius' body is hidden; Hamlet's conversation with a soldier in Act 4, scene 4; while other scenes, like Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy are only alluded to in a comically oblique fashion.

These encounters trigger many discussions, nonsensical and ironic by turns, among Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Player that serve as a hilarious postmodernist critique of the meanings, or the lack of them, in Shakespeare's text. Stoppard himself has said that he chose to employ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as leading characters precisely because "these two guys in Shakespeare's context don't really know what they're doing. The little they are told is mainly lies, and there's no reason to suppose that they ever find out why they are killed" (quoted in Rusinko, 28). Thus, they completely miss the point of many of the scenes they witness from *Hamlet* (or, to put it another way, their obtuseness suggests the possibility that there was no point in the first place). With a lethal deadpan flatness, Rosencrantz summarizes some of Hamlet's more peculiar (offstage) remarks in a way that drains them of any significance, much less poetry: "Denmark's a prison and he'd rather live in a nutshell; some shadow-play about the nature of ambition, which never got down to cases, and finally one direct question which might have led somewhere and led in fact to his illuminating claim to tell a hack from a handsaw" (57). Another discussion of Hamlet's mental state resolves into palaver worthy of Lewis Carroll's Mad Tea Party:

Guil.: He's melancholy

Player: Melancholy?

Ros: Mad.

Player: How is he mad?

Ros: Ah. How is he mad?

Guil: More morose than mad, perhaps.

Player: Melancholy.

Guil. Moody. . . . I think I have it. A man talking sense to himself is no madder than a man talking nonsense not to himself.

Ros: Or just as mad.

Guil: Or just as mad.

Ros: And he does both.

Guil. So there you are.

Ros: Stark raving sane (67-68).

According to commentator Felicia Londre, this sort of thing "sums up centuries of scholarly debate over the question of whether Hamlet is really mad" (26).

In another striking scene Player relates to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the action of the play his troupe will perform before the King. This narration, in Londre's words, "goes much further than the play-within-the-play that one sees in *Hamlet*" (28), including the closet scene with Hamlet and his mother, his stabbing of Polonius, and his being sent to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who bear a letter that seals their deaths.

Yet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in the end, make little sense of all this. The true "author" of the events that entangle them remains unknown. "It is written," is the only truth vouchsafed them. "What a fine persecution," laments Guildenstern, "—to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened. . ." (41). Moreover, their efforts to alter their fate are useless. "Wheels have been set in motion," says Guildenstern in stoic exasperation at one point, "and they have their own pace, to which we are. . . condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one—that is the meaning of order . . ." (122). Later, he declares, "We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current" (60). These remarks in turn echo Hamlet's own: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will." Stoppard's Mousetrap device not only stimulates our meditation on the frustrating ambiguities of *Hamlet*, but also serves as a commentary on the essential artifices of theatricality and on the absurdity of our attempts to make sense of our lives and to

define reality itself.

### AT THE CURTAIN'S FALL

We might be reminded that, as commentator Francis Fergusson has noted, the subtlety of Hamlet's "mousetrap" play suggests that it is designed not only to "catch" the conscience of Claudius, but to provoke reaction from the rest of its auditors—and that includes all of us in the audience (194). Part of that reaction, of

course, as critic Anthony Lane has suggested, is that movies like these "perplex a settled theatrical tradition" in altering the contexts in which theatrical events are perceived and measured. They "break a long line of grand performing masters in favor of something not just more sneaky but also, in an odd way, more democratic." (72) And that, in its own way, is a method and consequence of the grandest kind of theatre.

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Better Smarter Mousetrap: Ralph Waldo Emerson once said "build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door." Perhaps that's what motivated Tom to keep trying to catch Jerry using ever more elaborate Rube Goldberg-esq traps that ultimately failed. Here's a mouse that was caught with the trap. At the time, I didn't have the smarts built yet, but the trap itself works pretty well. Add Tip. Ask Question. Building a better mousetrap is a huge accomplishment. Creating a sustainable and profitable business model is a whole other story. If a man has good corn or wood, or boards, or pigs, to sell, or can make better chairs or knives, crucibles or church organs, than anybody else, you will find a broad hard-beaten road to his house, though it be in the woods. "Build a Better Mousetrap" just sounds catchier and flows easier. Anyway, as the point remains, build a better product above the competition and customers will line up. Profits will pour in. If it were only that easy though. Building a better mousetrap is a massive accomplishment. Creating a sustainable and profitable business model is a whole other story. Tired of being a warrior or mage? Become a Bard! - This mod lets you play all of the instrumental and voiced songs included with the game or choose from over 125 new songs added by this mod. You can also add your own music and play it in-game. - You can pick up and play any instrument in the game, including the war horns. - If you complete the Bards College quest line, your Bard Skill is high enough (50 or higher), and you have earned one of the bard perks described below, Viarmo may have additional work for you. - Each time you play, your Speechcraft skill will increase a tiny bit. - The volume of your songs is adjustable in the normal Skyrim options menu under Audio. MultiXWM is a good tool for this. There are others.