

Milestone Film & Video presents

Silent Shakespeare

Such stuff as dreams are made on...

Released by
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Silent Shakespeare: Such stuff as dreams are made on...

1899–1911. 88 minutes. B&W, Tinted and Original Hand-Stenciled Color. Original score by Laura Rossi. Digitally Mastered from the Original 35mm Nitrate Materials by the British Film Institute's National Film & Television Archive.

“A rare opportunity to see these beautiful early films.”
— Martin Scorsese

“Fascinating! Painstakingly restored... A priceless document in the history of both Shakespearean acting and the cinema”
— London Daily Telegraph

“Shakespeare in Love might have carried off the Oscars, but the silent cinematic versions of William Shakespeare's plays still have the power to be a hit.” —London Observer Review

In the early days of the cinema, pioneer filmmakers created these seven charming, moving and magical films based on the plays of William Shakespeare. Considered a “lowbrow” medium, the fledgling movie industry sought to elevate its status by immortalizing the classics and hiring the greatest actors of the day. As most of these early photoplays were only one or two reels long, adapting the Bard proved to be both challenging and inspiring. Whatever these films gave up in language and length, they made up for in exuberance, cinematic artistry, visual wit and bravura acting.

Digitally restored to video by the British Film Institute's National Film and Television Archive, the tape features *King John* (Britain, 1899, with Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree), *The Tempest* (Britain, 1908), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (USA, 1909), *King Lear* (Italy, 1910, with Francesca Bertini), *Twelfth Night* (USA, 1910), *The Merchant of Venice* (Italy 1910, with Francesca Bertini) and *Richard III* (Britain, 1911, with Sir Frank Benson).

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Background

Silent Shakespeare films were made because the cinema of the time had need of them. In the early years of the 20th century there was a film industry sensitivity towards its low class reputation. Producers and cinema owners sought to elevate their product, as a matter of pride, as a means of placating censorious authorities, and with the hope of attracting a moneyed, middle-class audience. A major strategy adopted was the imitation of the theatre. Cinemas copied theatre furnishings, film producers signed up stage stars, and stage plays were turned into films. The greatest challenge was Shakespeare, and scores of films were made of his plays in the pre-First World War era, when films were only one or two reels long. Viewed now, the surviving examples of such films can seem merely quaint, but it is a mistake to view them as failed stage plays. They must be judged according to their own outlook, as texts in their own right. What we must acknowledge is not the original play, but the film made of that play. It is a simple but very important distinction. Silent Shakespeare films have much to tell us about contemporary staging, acting styles, cultural assumptions, how the early cinema saw itself, and (of course) about Shakespeare. These movies, selected from the rich collection of Shakespearean films in the National Film and Television Archive are marked by their exuberance, invention and conviction.

The Films

King John (Great Britain 1899)

Director: W-K.L. Dickson Production company: British Mutoscope and Biograph Company

Herbert Beerbohm Tree.....King John

Dora SeniorPrince Henry

F.M. PagetRobert Bigot

James FisherEarl of Pembroke

This is the first Shakespeare film ever made, and features Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1853-1917), one of the great actor-managers of his day. It was released both as a film in variety theatres and as a peepshow Mutoscope ('What the Butler Saw') on 20 September 1899, the same day as Tree's production of King John opened at the Her Majesty's Theatre, London. Filmed only a few days beforehand, this was one of four scenes (the other three are lost) from the play, which did not in any way tell the story of the play, but served rather more as an advertisement for it. The film was taken in the open air at the Biograph company's studio on the Thames embankment. It was long believed to be lost, until a print turned recently in the Netherlands. Tree is also well-known as the father of famed director Carol Reed.

The Tempest (Great Britain 1908)

Director: Percy Stow Production company: Clarendon Film Company

Cast not known

Clarendon was a small British film company, based in Croydon, which made modest but inventive social comedies and amusing farces. Nothing else in their output gives any indication of an ambition to attempt the classics, and we do not know why this film was made any more than we know who the actors were. Whatever its conception, the film is a delight. No other one-reel silent Shakespeare is so adept at translating both the substance and the spirit of the play to the demands of the medium. The titles alone are a model of rationality. This is not so much a simplification, rather a discovery of the play's simplicity.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (USA 1909)

Director: J. Stuart Blackton/Charles Kent Production company: Vitagraph Company of America

William V. Ranous.....Bottom

Maurice CostelloLysander

Walter Ackerman.....Demetrius

Julia Swayne GordonHelena

Rose TapleyHermia

Gladys HulettePuck

Vitagraph (based in New York) was the most prominent American company of the pre-Hollywood era. They made a specialty of 'quality' productions from literary or historical sources, including numerous Shakespeare adaptations made between 1908 and 1912. Vitagraph tended to be too much in awe of the original play, cramming in more action and characters than one reel of film could sensibly support, but there are ample compensations in their dramatic verve and in the quality of the performances. This version of A Midsummer Night's Dream benefits greatly from being filmed in the open air, and conveys a delightful sense of play. Significant additions to its attractions were Julia Swayne Gordon and Maurice Costello, two of the most popular screen actors of the time. Given Vitagraph's fidelity to Shakespeare, the introduction of the character Penelope instead of Oberon seems impossible to explain.

King Lear (Re Lear) (Italy 1910)

Director: Gerolamo Lo Savio Production company: Film d'Arte Italiana
Ermete Novelli King Lear
Francesca Bertini Cordelia

Film d'Arte Italiana was the Italian branch of Film d'Art, a French company devoted to the production of art films, by which was meant the filming of classic stage productions with famous actors, often (as here) with rich stencil coloring, painted directly onto the film. *Re Lear* is a model of its kind, with an intelligently simplified plot, fine use of locations, and a performance by Ermete Novelli (1851-1919), one of the most celebrated figures in Italian theatre history, that is true and affecting. Francesca Bertini was soon to become one of the greatest of Italian silent screen actresses.

Twelfth Night (USA 1910)

Director: Charles Kent Production company: Vitagraph Company of America
Florence Turner Viola
Charles Kent Malvolio
Julia Swayne Gordon Olivia
Tefft Johnson Orsino

Vitagraph's *Twelfth Night* possesses all the virtues and vices of the company's Shakespeare films. A cluttered plot with too many characters can only have baffled those new to the play, but there are three fine performances that help make this a production of great charm. Florence Turner, one of the very first genuine film stars, is a charming Viola; Charles Kent, Vitagraph's most experienced Shakespearean performer, ably personifies Malvolio in mime; and an unknown actress is an irrepressible Maria.

The Merchant of Venice (Il Mercante di Venezia) (Italy 1910)

Director: Gerolamo Lo Savio Production company: Film d'Arte Italiana
Ermete Novelli Shylock
Olga Giannini Novelli Portia
Francesca Bertini Jessica

Another example of a prestige Film d'Arte Italiana production, filmed in Venice, with the great Novelli again proving himself a master at conveying the essence of his part with the essential gestures. His large wife Olga (also seen as one of Lear's daughters in *King Lear*) is an improbable Portia, but Francesca Bertini again shows her star quality. The surviving print is handsomely stencil colored but incomplete, with some abrupt cuts that would not have featured in the original, and the ending is missing.

Richard III (Great Britain 1911)

Production company: Co-operative Film Company
F.R. Benson Richard III
Alfred Brydone Edward IV
James Berry Henry VI
Eric Maxon Richmond
Murray Carrington Clarence
Moffat Johnston Buckingham
Constance Benson Lady Anne

The renowned Shakespearean company of Sir Frank Benson (1858-1939) was the precursor of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and this is a faithful reduction of one of their Stratford productions. One of a series of Shakespeare films made by the F.R. Benson Company for the Co-operative

Cinematograph Company (and the only one to survive), this primitive but compelling production makes no pretensions to be anything other than a record of the stage play, and as such takes us directly back to the theatre of 1911, though as with others of these silent Shakespeare films we seem nearer to the theatre of Shakespeare's day than that of our own. The titles give us more of Shakespeare's words than we have had previously, and Benson has a magnetism that we can recognize later in Olivier.

Film Notes by Luke McKernan
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Bibliography

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Milestone Film & Video

Milestone is a prestigious boutique distribution company with eight years experience in art-house film distribution. The company has earned an unparalleled reputation for releasing classic cinema masterpieces, new foreign films, groundbreaking documentaries and American independent features. Thanks to Milestone's rediscovery, restoration and release of such important lost films as Mikhail Kalatozov's award-winning *I am Cuba*, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma*, and F.W. Murnau's *Tabu*, the company now occupies an honored position as one of the most influential independent distributors in the American film industry. In 1999, Milestone was chosen as "Indie Distributor of the Year" by the L.A. Weekly.

Amy Heller and Dennis Doros started Milestone in 1990 to bring out the best films of yesterday and today. The company's new releases have included the films of famed artist Eleanor Antin, the art documentaries of Philip Haas (*Music of Chance and Angels and Insects*), Bae Yong-kyun's *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East*, Luc Besson's *Atlantis*, Yoichi Higashi's *Village of Dreams*, Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Maborosi* and Takeshi Kitano's *Fireworks (Hana-Bi)*.

Milestone's re-releases have included restored versions of Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and his Brothers*, *Tabu*, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *Grass and Chang*, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert*, and Hiroshi Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes* and Antonio Gaudí. Milestone is currently working with the Mary Pickford Foundation on a long-term project to preserve, re-score and release the best films of the legendary silent screen star.

Milestone is also known for rediscovering, acquiring, restoring and distributing unknown "classics" that have never been available in the US and Canada. These include Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma*, Alfred Hitchcock's "lost" propaganda films, *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, Early Russian Cinema (a series of twenty-eight films from Czarist Russia from 1908–1919), *I am Cuba* and Jane Campion's *Two Friends*. In 1999 Milestone began their releases of Roy and John Boulting's anti-Nazi drama *Pastor Hall* (1940), Roland West's *The Bat Whispers* (1930), and Kevin Brownlow's feature films, *It Happened Here* (1964) and *Winstanley* (1975). For 2000, Milestone will be releasing restored versions of Marcel Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity*, Rolando Klein's *Chac*, and Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Wide Blue Road* starring Yves Montand.

Milestone received a Special Archival Award in 1995 from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration and release of *I am Cuba*. Six of its preserved films — *Tabu*, Mary Pickford's *Poor*

Little Rich Girl, Edward S. Curtis' In the Land of the War Canoes, Clarence Brown and Maurice Tourneur's The Last of the Mohicans, Winsor McCay's Gertie the Dinosaur and Grass — are listed on the Library of Congress's National Film Registry.

Megan Powers started working at Milestone as an intern in 1997 and is now director of non-theatrical sales. Cindi Rowell joined the company in 1999, and is head of acquisitions.

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