Looking for Mr. Shakespeare:
Four Films in Search of a Hollywood Identity;
or The Hollywood Four

I call them “The Hollywood Four.” They were the only feature-length sound adaptations of Shakespeare released by major studios in the heyday of the Hollywood “classical” cinema. Prior to the late 1950's, “old Hollywood,” that crossroad of art and commerce, churned out movies that became the envy of the world. An exasperated German cinéaste, Rudolf Messel, quotes a fellow countrymen as saying “America with all her faults [did] one thing . . . well . . . she could produce popular films – films that were stupid, inane . . . often immoral, but . . . films that did fill the theatres.” Unhappily my Hollywood Four did not always fill the theatres but with a vigorous shelf life on disk and tape, “ultimates” in industry

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2 British Film Institute computer-based SIFT catalog lists Widgey R. Newman's snippet from The Merchant of Venice as a first attempt at a Shakespeare talkie. Other contenders have been a 1927 extract from Gound's Romeo and Giulietta (McKernan and Terris), and Thomas Edison's failed 1913 “Kinetophone” of a scene from Julius Caesar (Freedman).

jargon, they remain available and are: the Fairbankses 1929 *Taming of the Shrew*, the Reinhardt/ Dieterle 1935 *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the Thalberg /Cukor 1936 *Romeo and Juliet*, and the Houseman/ Mankiewicz 1953 *Julius Caesar*. This quartet shared the dozen or so hallmarks of classical Hollywood cinema that film scholars like David Bordwell have identified as setting them apart from the postwar continental movies that defied the classical Hollywood mantras of seamless continuity, unobtrusive camerawork, and orthodox capitalist ideology. Francois Truffaut even said that “we loved the American cinema because the films all resembled each other,” yet an occasional classy writer like William Shakespeare qualified for a prestige picture that bent the rules.

Let’s begin with the Pickford/Fairbanks *Shrew*, the first feature-length talking Shakespeare picture and the one with the deepest roots in America’s golden age of silent film. Director Sam Taylor, an ex-gag writer for Harold Lloyd comedies, persuaded a courageous Mary Pickford to play Kate opposite Douglas Fairbanks’s Petruchio in a scenario indebted to Garrick’s abbreviated *Catherine and Petruchio* (1754), a decision she later bitterly regretted. “Purist” critics went into terminal culture shock, especially when for the first time in 1929 British audiences at the London Pavilion world premiere heard harsh American voices speaking Shakespeare.

Although working closely with producers Pickford and Fairbanks gave Taylor a unit director’s independence, he couldn’t function without the Hollywood assembly line infrastructure. No wretched wage slaves as in Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, Taylor’s technicians, who nowadays are listed interminably in the closing credits, were skilled craftsmen with their own protocols but always ready, like stone masons in medieval cathedrals, to subordinate their own art to the higher common purpose—a seamless work of art that concealed art. The guiding genius was artistic director, William Menzies (assisted by Laurence Irving), who had designed the spectacular sets for *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) and, then later on, for *Gone with the Wind* (1939). As Bordwell stresses, classical style always

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5 Quoted in D. Bordwell, at al., *The Classical Cinema*, p. 3


accommodated differentiation within standardization so that the film skips
the conventional establishing shot in favor of a mid-shot of Punch and Judy
show, whose slapstick battle of the sexes omits the epistemological profundities
about “supposings” in the Sly Induction scene. After that the camera pulls
back to reveal a master shot of a bustling Padua crammed with street life,
though the extras look too well scrubbed for Italian street people, unlike
the gloriously grubby London streets in *Shakespeare in Love* (1999). Fairbanks
and Pickford, like Burton and Taylor later on, epitomized the old Hollywood
studio star system. Swashbuckling Douglas Fairbanks, wearing his trademark
expression of maddening insolence, also fit the screen writer’s formulaic,
goal-oriented hero who knows what he wants and how to get it, whether
as the Thief of Bagdad, or Petruchio.

After D. W. Griffith’s pioneering innovations, Hollywood’s belief in
alternation between master shots and analytical close-ups locked into
a cinematic Nicene creed, which came to be known as “the American
fetishizing of the shot.” Following a master shot of Baptista Minola’s
grand home, Bianca, Hortensio, and the harried Baptista appear in close
and mid-shot. The rhythm accelerates with a *découpage*, or montage worthy
of Eisenstein, whom the Pickfords once visited in Russia, that clinically
documents the Minola’s dysfunction. Separate shots show a smashed window,
people and objects hurtling down the staircase, a shattered mirror, and
a dog scrabbling for cover underneath a chest. The camera tracks up the
stairs to reveal total disarray, and then pans left to reveal the virago
herself, Mary Pickford as a smoldering Kate, who with equal ferocity can
rack a whip or a quip.

Gremio’s description of the “mad marriage” becomes one of those reported
scenes, like the drowning of Ophelia, that movie directors cannot resist
adding. Its slapstick origins lie in the silent version that was released for
small-town theatres without sound equipment, a common practice during
this transitional period between silent and sound movies. A sight gag has
Petruchio insolently munching on an apple while kneeling at the altar beside
his furious bride. When he hands the apple core to Grumio, the poor devil
is stuck with surreptitiously disposing of it, even under the baleful stare
of a nearby monk.

It takes more than even Douglas Fairbanks to tame this Kate. When,
in the controversial speech of submission, Kate utters the word “obey” she
subverts it by broadly winking in the direction of Bianca (as Diana
Henderson has pointed out) to underscore the sisterly bond in the “female

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8 D. Bordwell, *et al., The Classical Cinema...,* p. 60.
subculture,” which will always have the last word anyway, since statistically women outlive men. Although called “America’s Sweetheart,” Pickford was a self-referential Kate Minola, off-screen a shrewd real estate operator, very much the new woman of the Jazz Age, not likely to knuckle under easily to any man.

No film better shows Hollywood as “The New Weimar” than Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, which appeared after the notorious 1926 “Par-ufa-met” agreement, by which Paramount and Metro effectively crippled Germany’s UFA, and triggered a mass exodus of German filmmakers to Hollywood,11 an early result being F. W. Murnau’s 1927 expressionistic Sunrise. After Reinhardt’s successful Hollywood Bowl Midsummer Night’s Dream,12 Jack Warner, whose company specialized in gangster movies and Busby Berkeley musicals, boldly gambled $1 1/2 million to film it on a 38,000 square foot sound stage.13 A close head shot of the premier ballet dancer in the Masque of Night, choreographed by Branslawi Nijinska with music from Mendelssohn, combines expressionistic soft focus and the continental style of portraiture. The ballerina ascends toward the stars with her arms and hands gracefully crossing, twining and intertwining, until only the delicate white fingers are visible before they dissolve into the blackness. This exquisite moment may not be Shakespeare but it is pure Reinhardt, who had been staging the play since 1905. The play’s darker, Kottian side, surfaces in the nightmare wood of gnarled elves and mythical unicorns, mostly inspired by former Reinhardt actor and co-director William Dieterle, whose Hunchback of Notre Dame (1939) later showcased his impeccable taste for the grotesque.14

Reinhardt theatricality and Hollywood grandiosity merge beautifully. The iron law that classical film scripts begin in medias res is only slightly violated with Mendelssohn’s overture against a static charcoal backdrop of a moonlit forest. Russell Jackson and Robert Willson have shown, however, that the scenarists were contemplating an even grosser transgression of the classical scenario primer by beginning with Theseus’ war against the Amazons15 (which does open the egregiously non-classical 1987 Coronado gay/punk Midsummer Night’s Dream). Alternation between master shots of Theseus’ palace and cut-ins to the principal characters insure classical

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13 Warner press kit.
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continuity by rapidly identifying all the characters. The close shots take
the spectator not just to the edges of the narrative but well into it. And
so after the establishing shot, a close-up of Theseus (Ian Hunter) and
Hippolyta (Vere Teasdale) shows the wronged Amazon queen looking a bit
stand-offish in a bizarre snake costume. While everyone else joins in a rousing
diegetic hymn, “Theseus Be Blest,” as if in a dumb show, Lysander (Dick
Powell) and Demetrius (Ross Alexander) spar for the attention of beautiful
Hermia (Olivia De Havilland), while a forlorn Helena (Jean Muir) looks
wistfully toward an indifferent Demetrius. Egeus (Grant Mitchell) testily
stomps his staff at the inattentive Hermia. Traces of local Hollywood talent
survive in midshots of anachronistically costumed Athenian choristers, some
looking like Hollywood’s own Vienna Boys Choir; others the 1933 Vassar
Daisy Chain; and another, the Senior Men’s Geriatric Chorus. Peter Quince
(Frank McHugh) conducts the socially marginalized “crew of patches, rude
mechanicals” (3.2.9), comprised of studio contract actors like Joe E. Brown
(Flute) and James Cagney (Bottom), a flagrant kind of code switching, or
stunt casting, that elicited the usual howls from traditionalists who did not
think the Declaration of Independence extended to putting the meaner sort
into Shakespeare. An earlier plan to give Bottom a shrewish wife, which
has now surfaced in the recent (1999) Hoffman/Kline A Midsummer Night’s
Dream, died somewhere between script and release. The subversive fairy
world of Oberon (Victory Jory), Titania (Anita Louise) and 14-year-old
Mickey Rooney as a marvelous Puck achieves Rembrandt effects through
gauze-covered lenses and Reinhardt’s highly publicized “Akron Spider
Cobweb” machine, all of this forest being in contrast with the hard bright
dges of Theseus’ palace.

Fortunately with Theseus’ “Four happy days bring in another moon,”
Shakespeare had already anticipated the screen writer’s love affair with
suspenseful deadlines for temporal continuity, usually signaled by clocks on
a wall, flipping calendar pages, or a news paper blown in by the wind.
Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s musical arrangement subliminally contributed
to this sense of movement. He was so successful that some have said the
movie supported Mendelsohn rather than Mendelsohn supporting the movie.
Like Igor Stravinsky, Korngold probably didn’t think so. To Stravinsky
good film music should function like wallpaper, there but unseen, or unheard,
ready to fill in the cracks of silences when necessary, another sacrifice to
the dogma that art should conceal art.

If the spirit of Weimar Germany hovered behind Midsummer Night’s
Dream, the ghost of Britannia haunted the staid 1936 Romeo and Juliet,

16 Ibidem, p. 40.
whose producers lived in the shadow of the dreaded purists who had exorciated Hollywood for Americanizing Shakespeare. They therefore preemptively crammed the screen with a veritable wax works of upper class snobbery recruited from Hollywood’s colony of expatriate British actors: Leslie Howard (Romeo), Ralph Forbes (Paris), Violet Kemball Cooper (Lady Capulet), and C. Aubrey Smith (Capulet), the estimable Smith for once not serving with Errol Flynn at the Khyber Pass as colonel of the Queen’s Own Royal Regiment of Imperial Horse Dragoons. Thirty-five-year-old American Norma Shearer was allowed to play Juliet because she was a talented actress, no more antiquated than Katherine Cornell, then playing Juliet on the Broadway stage. A 44-year-old icy Basil Rathbone was cast as the fiery Tybalt, while to add even more “class,” the great John Barrymore was paraded as a scenery-chewing, over-age-in-grade, but nevertheless charming Mercutio. Norma Shearer’s Juliet and Leslie Howard’s 43-year-old Romeo exactly embodied the middle-brow stereotype for “sublime” Shakespearian actors, which 60 years ago was closer to a lofty Forbes-Robertson than to a Leonardo Di Caprio. Prof. William Strunk, Jr. of Cornell University sprinkled academic holy water on the enterprise.

Cumbrous sound and camera equipment forced MGM to spend a million dollars on an 8-acre back lot replica of Verona rather than going on location. Carpenters worked from 2769 pictures and 54 scale models, and Oliver Messel painstakingly designed elaborate costumes, as shown by his color sketch book at the Folger. When Thalberg discovered Tchaikovsky for the first time, however, a miffed composer, Herbert Stothart, was forced to drop his plan for carefully researched 16th-century modes and to borrow heavily from Tchaikovsky, then all the rage (who of us over 65 can forget “Our Love”?).

With deeply embedded antitheses between Montagues and Capulets, light and dark, womb and tomb, youth and age, love and death, the inner design of Romeo and Juliet lent itself admirably to the MGM official style. The feuding houses of Montague and Capulet as they cross the piazza in Verona, after a motif inspired by Gozolli’s “Procession of the Magi,” inspire textbook parallel editing, match-cuts, and shot/reverse shots, until the metronome-like pattern yields to the frenetic montage of the street riot. The single-word “Fight,” in the Folio licenses a wild mêlée with 40 or so

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shots from a variety of camera angles. Capulets rush toward Montagues; Peter (Andy Devine) comically struggles to remove his stuck dagger from a scabbard; and in the inevitable Odessa steps quotation a terrified woman clutches her baby. The prince’s entrance brings a return to the master shot, this time of subdued citizens in the piazza. The camera has taken us deep inside the action and then allowed us, godlike, to view it from an Olympian distance.

No debutante cotillion in pre-war America photographed by *Life* magazine could have been more genteel than Agnes De Mille’s elegantly choreographed Capulet ball. Likewise the stately pace of 90 shots for 205 lines of dialogue in the balcony scene is precisely attuned to mature actors, not the teen-agers of Zeffirelli and Luhrmann. The low-key lighting for Leslie Howard’s approach through sepulchral gardens to Juliet’s balcony stirs up creepy feelings that the cement statues in the cemetery have come alive at midnight. With the fastidious Howard and Shearer speaking more eloquently than passionately, the film straitjackets the play in the way that the sonnet imprisons Juliet’s language at the Capulet ball, until she “gallops apace,” so to speak, in her own unfettered blank verse (3.2.1). This movie never gallops apace but it canters beautifully.

By 1953, when MGM released producer John Houseman and director Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s $2 million *Julius Caesar*, classical Hollywood cinema was on its deathbed, done in by economic and technological viruses. This *Julius Caesar* was neither native American, imported German, nor pseudo-British but wouldbe New York Actors Studio with an adroit mix of British and American stage and film actors. Regrettably Shakespeare in a rare lack of foresight had failed to create a classical Hollywood hero. Except possibly for the ruthless Octavius Caesar (Douglas Watson), neither Brutus (James Mason), nor Cassius (John Gielgud), nor Caesar (Louis Calhern), nor even Antony (Marlon Brando) follows a clear trajectory to success. To remind us of their importance, however, ubiquitous statues of prominent citizens with their hair brushed well forward in the high Roman style expressively fill the mise en scene as the camera tracks Cassius and Brutus through public squares and palace corridors, enough statuary I estimate to stock the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photographer Joseph Ruttenberg indulges his taste for portraiture by giving even the actors faces of chiseled stone. Brutus stands next to a bust of Tarquin as he speaks of how his ancestors drove the tyrant from Rome, while earlier the shadows from tree branches play over his face to emblemize the anguish of a man whose political idealism convinces him that he is a sacrifier, not a butcher. Casca’s report to Cicero of the “civil strife in heaven” invites a film noir ambiance totemic of the dark forces unleashed in Rome. The men may be stone but the lovely women, Portia (Deborah Kerr) and Calpurnia (Greer Garson) are
anything but that, as in despair they play insightful eirones to their husbands’ self-deceiving alazones.

As Robert Hapgood has pointed out, the steep staircases, balconies, ramps, become metaphors for the ups and downs of power in Rome.\(^\text{22}\) While hundreds of toga-clad extras mill around in the narrow streets, the arrogant Caesar remains framed at the center, even when pressed in on by cheering riffraff. At the senate, a low camera angle makes Caesar the epitome of mastery, as “constant as the northern star” (3.1.60), while behind him a dark-browed, scowling Casca (Edmond O’Brien) sneakily maneuvers to stab him in the back.

Non-classically, for it meant greater expense, Mankiewicz filmed the virtually uncut script in the same sequence that Shakespeare had written it, and allowed the actors uninterrupted delivery.\(^\text{23}\) Marlon Brando as Antony had the extras cheering over his funeral oration when it turned out that he didn’t always talk like Stanley Kowalski. Miklos Rozsa, another Weimaran import, composed the fine musical score, as inconspicuous as wallpaper, but sonically affirming the rise and fall of Caesar and Brutus.\(^\text{24}\) A deeply embedded political subtext, like the Wellesian Mercury Theatre anti-fascist Julius Caesar, may or may not connect Cinna the poet with McCarthy-ite witch hunting: “I am not Cinna the conspirator . . . It is no matter, his name’s Cinna” (3.3.32). If this connection exists, it is too subtle to detect for MGM had subscribed to the 1947 Waldorf Declaration blacklisting suspected dissidents.\(^\text{25}\) No red hunt, however, could invalidate Cassius’ famous prediction that “this our lofty scene [shall] be acted over/In [states] unborn and accents yet unknown!” (3.1.112), even in Hollywood classical style.

Finally, though, the Hollywood Four show again how in the classical system differentiation could work even within the framework of standar-dization. They challenge the opinion of our German critic that American movies are inevitably stupid and inane. Not so, when we consider also how uncannily they validated Northrop Frye’s\(^\text{26}\) seasonal classifications with a springtime comedy (the rollicking Taming of the Shrew); summery idyll (a romantic Midsummer Night’s Dream); autumnal tragedy (a reverential Romeo and Juliet); and wintry tragic irony (a theatrical Julius Caesar). There must have been a higher dynamic at work than monolithic systems.

of management, production and distribution. For a shining moment, product merged with art. To echo a recurring theme from *Shakespeare in Love*, “It’s a mystery.”

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