

Milestone Film & Video presents

# Silent Shakespeare

Such stuff as dreams are made on...



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## Silent Shakespeare: Such stuff as dreams are made on...

1899–1911. 88 minutes. Be3W, 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 Senior .....Prince Henry

F.M. Paget .....Robert Bigot

James Fisher .....Earl 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 Costello .....Lysander

Walter Ackerman .....Demetrius

Julia Swayne Gordon .....Helena

Rose Tapley .....Hermia

Gladys Hulette .....Puck

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

<p><b>Winner: January 9, 2005</b> <b>Special Award from the New York Film Critic's Circle</b> <b>in honor of 15 years of restoring classic films.</b></p>
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Milestone enters its fifteenth year of operation with a reputation for releasing classic cinema masterpieces, new foreign films, groundbreaking documentaries and American independent features. Thanks to the company's rediscovery, restoration and distribution of such important films as Mikhail Kalatozov's *I am Cuba*, Marcel Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity*, and Alfred Hitchcock's *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, the company has long occupied a position as one of the most influential independent distributors in the industry. In 1995 Milestone received a Special Archival Award from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration

and release of *I am Cuba*. *L.A. Weekly* chose Milestone as the 1999 “Indie Distributor of the Year.” On January 2, 2004, the National Society of Film Critics awarded Milestone Film & Video their prestigious Film Heritage award. And the kudos continue: in December 2004, the International Film Seminars awarded Milestone its prestigious Leo Award, named for indie distribution pioneer Leo Dratfield, and the New York Film Critics Circle voted a Special Award “in honor of 15 years of restoring classic films.

When Amy Heller and Dennis Doros first started Milestone in 1990 their goals were to find and release the best films of the past *and* the present. The company’s US premieres have included such remarkable new films as Manoel de Oliveira’s *I’m Going Home*, Bae Yong-kyun’s *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?*, Hirokazu Kore-eda’s *Maborosi*, Yoichi Higashi’s *Village of Dreams*, Takeshi Kitano’s *Fireworks (Hana-Bi)*, Tareque Masud’s *The Clay Bird*, and Jerzy Stuhr’s *The Big Animal*.

Milestone has released a wide range of classics in sparkling restorations, including: Luchino Visconti’s *Rocco and His Brothers*, F.W. Murnau’s *Tabu*, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack’s *Grass and Chang*, Henri-Georges Clouzot’s *The Mystery of Picasso*, Frank Hurley’s *South: Ernest Shackleton and the Endurance Expedition*, Kevin Brownlow’s *It Happened Here and Winstanley*, Lotte Reiniger’s animation masterpiece, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, Michael Powell’s *The Edge of the World*, Jane Campion’s *Two Friends*, Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Wide Blue Road*, Conrad Rooks’ *Siddhartha*, Anthony Howarth’s *People of the Wind*, and Rolando Klein’s *Chac*. Milestone is also 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. The company premiered a new restoration of E.A. Dupont’s *Piccadilly* — starring the bewitching Anna May Wong — at the 2003 New York Film Festival. Such stellar contemporary filmmakers as Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Woody Allen, Jonathan Demme and Dustin Hoffman have co-presented important Milestone restorations.

Milestone has established strong working relationships with some of the world’s great film archives, including the British Film Institute, UCLA Film & Television Archive, George Eastman House, Library of Congress, Nederlands Filmmuseum and Norsk Filminstitut. In 2000, Milestone’s 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Retrospective was shown in venues nationwide and Milestone raised and donated \$20,000 from these screenings to four archives in the United States and England.

In addition to the company’s strong presence in art-house film distribution, Milestone has built a highly praised video/DVD collection. Most of these DVDs have been released on Image Entertainment’s “The Milestone Collection” label and have earned the company new accolades. Milestone’s video-only releases have included such important silent restorations as: *Eternal Love*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *The Blot*, *La Terre*, *It*, *Simba*, *The Chess Player*, *Silent Shakespeare*, *Mad Love: The Films of Evgenii Bauer*, *Early Russian Cinema* (a 10-volume compilation), and *The Cook & Other Treasures*.

Milestone also released on DVD four great animation collections: *John Canemaker: Marching to a Different Toon*, *Cut-Up: The Films of Grant Munro*, *Norman McLaren: The Collector’s Edition*, and *Winsor McCay: The Master Edition*. Other video premieres have explored the stories of four remarkable American women: *Millay at Steepletop*, *Captured on Film: The True Story of Marion*

*Davies, Without Lying Down* (about screenwriter Frances Marion) and *Mary Pickford: A Life on Film*. Some of the company's other classic films on video include *With Byrd at the South Pole*, *The Bat Whispers*, *Tonight or Never*, *The Gay Desperado*, and *Night Tide*. Milestone's independent docs on video include *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China*, *Shackleton's Boat Journey*, and Alan Berliner's documentary trilogy, *Family Album*, *Nobody's Business* and *Intimate Stranger*.

Milestone has many features lined up for 2005 for theatrical, video and television release. Included are Marcel Ophuls' *The Troubles We've Seen*, *Electric Edwardians: The Films of Mitchell & Kenyon*, *Cut to the Chase: The Charley Chase Classic Comedy Collection* (15 short films, 6 hours), *The Harold Lloyd Collection* (13 short and feature films, 5 hours), *The Crossing* (directed by Yoichi Higashi), *The Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack Collection* with *In Search of Kong* (directed by Serge Viallet) and newly remastered versions of *Grass* and *Chang*, The films of Charles Burnett including *Killer of Sheep* and *My Brother's Wedding*, *Nosferatu* (directed by F.W. Murnau with a score by James Bernard), *The Olive Thomas Collection*, *Uttara* (directed by Buddhadeb Dasgupta) and *Oporto of My Childhood* (directed by Manoel de Oliveira).

The Library of Congress has selected eight Milestone films for its prestigious National Film Registry: Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (to be released in 2005), *Tabu*, Edward S. Curtis' *In the Land of the War Canoes*, Mary Pickford's *Poor Little Rich Girl*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *It*, Winsor McCay's *Gertie the Dinosaur*, and *Grass*.

In 2003, Nadja Tennstedt joined the company as director of acquisitions and international sales.

*"Since its birth the Milestone Film & Video Co. has steadily become the industry's foremost boutique distributor of classic and art films — and probably the only distributor in America whose name is actually a guarantee of some quality."*  
— William Arnold, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

*"Milestone Film & Video is an art-film distributor that has released some of the most distinguished new movies (along with seldom-seen vintage movie classics) of the past decade"*  
— Stephen Holden, *New York Times*

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