

Shakespeare at the Movies

By Ashley Levy

Shakespeare's plays have been translated into many different formats since they were first written. Adaptations of the plays that alter the length and content have been made, as well as fiction novels based on the plays and performances of the plays themselves. Many of these adaptations have been created in an effort to introduce the Shakespearean works to a new, young audience. A film adaptation for teens is a perfect way to interest a new generation in a classic writer. Michael Friedman (2008) writes that there are varying categories of teen films: adaptations and citations. Adaptations borrow the characters, storyline and themes from the play but use modern language. Citations reference to Shakespeare but do not draw from a specific play. Adaptations, due to modern settings and language are popular with teen film audiences. Several movies have been released within the past decade that have become quite popular with teen audiences.

She's the Man (2006)



Directed by Andy Fickman, starring Amanda Bynes and Channing Tatum, this 2006 film is an adaptation of the popular Shakespeare play, *Twelfth Night*. The play moves to a private school setting where Viola uses gender-bending to prove to herself and her old soccer coach that girl soccer players are as good as boys.

Viola is a soccer player at a private school whose team gets cut due to budget constraints and the coach's belief that girl soccer players are not as good, or as enjoyable to watch, as boys. She decides to prove him wrong by cross dressing as her twin brother Sebastian, who was about to start at a new private school, but instead ran away to the United Kingdom to play with his band. Viola has to prove herself as good as the

boys, all the while hiding the fact that she actually is not one.

This movie is a funny, fresh take on the Shakespearean play. Characters in the movie are named after the play's characters. For example, Duke Orsino, is renamed Duke. Even minor characters are represented, often in funny ways, like Malvolio, who has become a tarantula. Further Shakespearean references are found in the school names. The movie is a hilarious romp through the play. The characters tend to be over the top in terms of behaviour or interests but these exaggerations add to the general merriment in the movie.

Ten Things I Hate About You (1999)



A slightly older teen movie based on the Shakespeare play *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Ten Things I Hate About You* was filmed in 1999. Directed by Gil Junger, it starred Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Julia Stiles and Heath Ledger. This teen movie updates the plot of the play to modern times and features a neurotic father and a pair of sisters in high school.

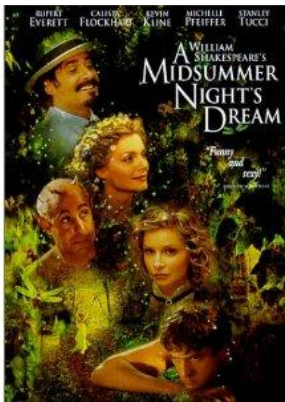
The movie focuses on a new student who has his eyes set on the younger of the Stratford sisters. The only problem is, the younger sister is only allowed to date if the older sister does too. So this student decides to recruit someone to date the older sister. However, the only person willing to try is the school's bad boy, who is in many ways the complete opposite of the feminist, anti-conformity older sister.

Many of the play's elements are found in the movie as well. However, while the play is regarded by some to be overly misogynistic, in the movie this element is challenged by Kat's feminist and anti-conformity opinions and arguments. Kat does not become obedient but rather learns to compromise and love. The producers of the movie did a fair job of reducing the play's

misogynistic themes, and *Ten Things I Hate About You* has become a classic movie for teens that is highly enjoyed.

Midsummer Night's Dream

(1999)



The Shakespearean comedic classic, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, is always a well-received play, and is entertaining no matter what form it is presented in. The film, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, is yet another adaptation that remains quite faithful to the original play. Directed by Michael Hoffman, the 1999 film stars a cast with well known actors including Stanley Tucci, Calista Flockhart, Jeremy Irons, Rupert Everett, Michelle Pfeiffer and Kevin Kline.

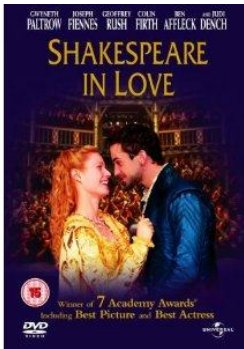
The film itself is almost a line by line re-enactment of the original play. Some lines have been edited to allot for time,

but few, if any, lines that did not originate in the play are included. The play has been altered in that the setting has been updated to Victorian Tuscany as opposed to Greece. What makes the film interesting is how it incorporates into the original work things that would be new and interesting in the Victorian age. For instance, one of the main characters carries a bicycle around for a good portion of the film.

The film is on the whole faithful to the original play. What makes the film extraordinary is the fact that the line by line re-enactment is a way for those who cannot go to the theatre to see *Midsummer Night's Dream* as it was meant to be seen. Movie magic makes it possible for complete and instant scene changes, and gives the opportunity for fairy magic to make an appearance. The actors portraying the characters are also memorable and entertaining; a particular favourite is Helena, who gets more and more frustrated as the film progresses, and becomes more and more funny to watch. Stanley Tucci is also memorable in his role as Puck, a mischievous yet empathetic character (Tucci brings these same qualities to each of his roles in other movies.)

One of the only drawbacks is that since the film is in Shakespearean verse, it might be hard for some to keep up with the fast delivery of the lines. However, the body language of the characters often makes up for this. Overall the movie is entertaining and gives everyone a chance to see a Shakespearean play close to the way they were meant to be seen.

Shakespeare in Love (1998)



Shakespeare in Love follows a young Shakespeare who is struggling to write a play that has already been sold to rival theatre companies. This 1998 film was directed by John Madden and stars Gwyneth Paltrow, Colin Firth, Joseph Fiennes and Geoffrey Rush.

Will Shakespeare is faced with writing without a muse in a time where the plays that are successful are those that the Queen approves of and the

bubonic plague is a constant threat. Viola de Lesseps is in love with theatre and longs to be an actress. She dresses as a boy and lands a part in Shakespeare's unwritten play. He discovers her disguise and she becomes his muse, inspiring him to write *Romeo and Juliet* as they carry out a passionate, doomed love affair.

The movie is not based on any of Shakespeare's plays but references many of them. It is a fictionalized account of Shakespeare's life and creative process, as well as a love story. Most viewers know that since there was no Viola de Lessep in Shakespeare's recorded life, the love story cannot end well for the two, so those who live for happy endings may not enjoy this movie as much.

This movie features scenes of frontal nudity, so this is not appropriate for younger viewers and is recommended for an older teen and adult audience.

Gnomeo and Juliet (2011)



This updated version of *Romeo and Juliet* changes the star crossed lovers into clay and plaster gnomes in the gardens of feuding owners. Directed by Kelly Asbury, the 2011 animated film features the voice talents of James McAvoy, Emily Blunt and Ashley Jensen.

Gnomeo is the son of the head blue gnome, Lady Bluebury, and Juliet is the daughter of head red gnome, Lord Redbrick. They live in neighbouring gardens and accidentally meet and fall in love. They meet in secret in the garden across the alley and discover there a lonely pink flamingo who pledges to keep their secret. They are discovered when the angry Tybalt, a red gnome, tries to smash a blue gnome, Benny, and Gnomeo steps in to defend Benny. The war escalates when Benny orders a super lawnmower online and it gets out of

control. The resulting carnage makes all the gnomes and their owners rethink what is important to them.

The film is simply a delight. It is extremely funny and features amusing characters with distinct personalities. The movie is peppered with Easter egg references to many of Shakespeare's plays and the characters frequently quote lines of Shakespeare, usually for comic effect. Shakespeare himself even makes an appearance, as a statue in the park with the inscription "William Shakespeare: 1564-1616, or thereabouts." The film also features an all-star cast, with Patrick Stewart, Hulk Hogan, Ozzy Osbourne, Jason Statham and Dolly Parton all lending their voices. *Gnomeo and Juliet* was produced by and features the music of Elton John. This is definitely a movie that needs to be seen by adults, teens and children.

References

- Friedman, M. D. (2008). Introduction: "To think o' th' teen that I have turned you to': The Scholarly Consideration of Teen Shakespeare Films.". *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 26(2), 1-7. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.