

SHAKESPEARE ON SILENT FILM

A Strange Eventful History

Robert Hamilton Ball

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Volume 1

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1968

This edition first published in 2013

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-82198-8 (Set)

eISBN: 978-0-203-43119-1 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-415-83210-6 (Volume 1)

eISBN: 978-0-203-44890-8 (Volume 1)

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A Strange Eventful History

ROBERT HAMILTON BALL

Illustrated

London

GEORGE ALLEN AND UNWIN LTD

RUSKIN HOUSE MUSEUM STREET

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1968

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
in 11 point Ehrhardt type
BY C. TINLING AND CO. LTD
LIVERPOOL, LONDON AND PRESCOT

TO MY WIFE

*'O give thyself the thanks, if aught in me
Worthy perusal stand against thy sight'*

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‘What’s dumb in show, I’ll plain with speech.’

Pericles

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TO THE READER

‘Dost thou love pictures?’

The Taming of the Shrew

THIS book might be called a diversion. Certainly it deals with a subject which is unconventional for an academic who has spent much of his life teaching English literature to college and university students and whose publications, until he began gathering material for the book, had little to do with films. It has been a diversion in another sense too, a distraction from other and more customary forms of research and writing, a recreation, and on the whole great fun. It has led to a series of adventures and detections which have provided the thrill of the chase and the satisfactions of discovery over a considerable period of time. It has taken me to places to which I would not otherwise have gone and introduced me to some delightful people I would not otherwise have encountered.

Yet it is not so much a diversion as might be thought. I have been teaching Shakespeare for forty years and writing about the drama and stage for almost as long, and I have seen a great many films from the early days of cinema to the present. What more natural than that Shakespeare, the history of theatre in its inclusive meaning, and film should at some time come together.

Finally – for this play on a word – this book should not be considered a diversion in the sense that it is meant as mere entertainment for the reader, though I hope he will find it entertaining too. It is an attempt to show a relatively unconsidered way in which the influence of Shakespeare has been pervasive and through to me a fascinating if imperfect medium how Shakespeare reached a different and wider public by whom he was generally ignored. It is my hope therefore that what I have written will appeal to Shakespeareans, to specialists and enthusiasts in film, and to others who are interested in knowing more about a segment of history and the activities of a group of men and women who were doing strange or remarkable things in the period from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of its third decade. A volume now in preparation will continue the story with Shakespeare on sound film.

Recognizing, however, the probability that whatever appeal this history has may be to different types of readers, I have divided it into two sections.

The first is a fairly straightforward narrative, uninterrupted by elaborate detail and documentation, which treats more or less chronologically what was done with Shakespeare on the silent screen. Here too, I have tried to put the subject in perspective by showing briefly how Shakespeare on film was related to other film, who were responsible and how they went about it, and how film itself fit into a world which has now passed. The second section, which I have called, 'Explanations and Acknowledgments', is for the film buffs and the scholars. Here each film treated in the main text is given additional comment or elucidation with particulars, even minutiae, not necessarily important to the general reader but of interest to specialists in film. Here too will be found specific indications of my indebtedness to many people and publications, my sources of information on the individual films covered in both parts. Those who wish to read the text and then immediately the subsidiary material in the second part on the same film are referred to the Index, where the page numbers for main treatments are italicized. I realize that for some readers this division may prove an inconvenience or an annoyance, but is the best arrangement which, after consideration, I have been able to contrive under the circumstances.

It has been suggested to me by my good friend, Ernest Lindgren, of the British Film Institute, that I should say something somewhere about the difficulties of film research. This book and the subsequent one planned have occupied me, not of course uninterruptedly, for over twenty years. In the first place, scholarship in the history of film has with notable exceptions, been shockingly bad. I enthusiastically indicate my debt to Harold Leonard's remarkable *Film Index* and to historians such as Terry Ramsaye and Lewis Jacobs for the United States, Rachael Low for Great Britain, Georges Sadoul for the world but especially for France, Jay Leyda for Russia, and Maria Adriana Prolo for Italy; the recent Wiesbaden brochure, *Shakespeare im Film*, has been useful and the *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo* invaluable. But most of the books and articles which refer to Shakespeare film are inaccurate or contradictory and have proliferated error upon error. Films are listed which were never made or with credits which are incorrectly assigned or with wrong dates. Such publications can only serve as leads to be investigated; what they say can only be true if found to be true.

Essentially there are only three ways to achieve anything like accuracy; I do not pretend to complete accuracy and I have no doubt missed films I should have named. The first is to find the films, if they are extant. A surprising number have indeed survived, but they are scattered over the world, some in archives, some in private collections, some in the hands of distributors or makers or renters, some in storage vaults, some in junk shops. The archives are the places to start and they usually have lists, though not always complete ones, and sometimes facilities for screening or examination, but after onerous tracing, a film I have wanted to see turned out to be non-existent or in deplorable condition, or a piece of property 'unavailable for

examination'. Another difficulty is that archives, especially those on the Continent and in South America, are frequently unwilling or unable to answer letters of inquiry. Nevertheless films turn up like the recently re-discovered Forbes-Robertson *Hamlet*. One never knows where, however: an American *Twelfth Night* in London, an English *Taming of the Shrew* in up-state New York, a French *Macbeth* in California, an Italian *Julius Caesar* in Cornwall. All this search takes time and travel, funds, and particularly when films are in private or company ownership, sometimes argument and tact. Yet if the films are available, one cannot write about them without seeing them. Moreover, they cannot properly be judged without viewing other films contemporary with them.

The second major source of information is the trade journals which describe the production, distribution, and nature of the films at the time they were made and released. It means reading or at least paging through all you can locate in several languages, not only English, but French, German, Italian, and so on. But these like the films are widely dispersed. Even the best or the most specialized libraries do not have complete files. Trade journals were highly ephemeral; they were meant principally for distributors or exhibitors who tossed them away when the films they mention were out-of-date. Maddeningly the particular issue you want often cannot be discovered or is so distant you cannot get at it. Because they are so rare and are in their way authentic (not, however, in their synopses of films), I have quoted from them at length, even to the point of repetition. Besides they are not uninteresting in their own right; they show the commercial aspects of movie making as no other source can, and without the business there would be no Shakespeare films.

The third method of research is tracing people who were directly or indirectly involved with the films themselves, and this is real detective work. It means finding out whether they are still alive, who knows where they now live, writing endless letters, arranging for interviews. In the case of this volume most of these people are veterans to be questioned about films made many years before, few of them still connected with motion pictures. Unless they have personal records, many have hazy memories which must be checked by other data. One prominent actress gave me lucid details which turned out to be wrong from beginning to end. Others in their efforts to be helpful think they remember but they do not. On the other hand, the hunt is exciting and the rewards often large. It took me months to follow various hints as to the whereabouts of Edwin Thanouser in America and Europe; it turned out his residence had been a mile from mine. The first screen Romeo in the United States, Paul Panzer, had batches of stills in cartons in his garage. I could not have put together what one film was like without talking with Edmund Gwenn and A. E. Matthews, nor dated another without finding its cameraman. In a way it is fortunate that this study has taken so long. I was able to meet and talk with Albert E. Smith, Godfrey

Tearle, Theda Bara, now all dead, but Arthur Kingston I did not discover until 1965.

In short, research in the history of film is likely to be lengthy and at times arduous and exasperating, but the pursuit of Shakespeare in this medium has provided more than a recompense if it shows the breadth of the trade in his name, the adaptation of his plays for the screen, indication of which of his plays were most used, and who participated in and enjoyed the results. I am quite aware that there are inconsistencies in treatment, but I have not been able to avoid them. The amount of space or the kind of analysis given to a picture, for example, frequently depends not on my own judgment of its importance but to the information available or to the conditions under which the picture was examined. It makes a difference whether a film was screened, shown on an Editola, examined in a hand viewer, or peered at, frame by frame, through a magnifying glass. In some cases there was time for repetitions, notes on each sequence, copying of all subtitles; in others, all I could do was to scribble in the dark and put down my recollections as soon as possible after projection. My judgment also may have been at fault in including so many inconsequential films to demonstrate the nature and breadth of Shakespeare's sway; all I can say is that they interested me and therefore may interest others. Finally, though I have learned a good deal about film, I do not consider myself a technical expert, and I offer apologies if I have made mistakes in describing the processes employed. I shall be happy to receive corrections in these and other misapprehensions or errors.

My obligations to those who assisted me in obtaining information about specific films is expressed in the second section of this book, but organizations and individuals also encouraged and supported me over long periods of time. Much of the research was enabled by the award of a fellowship of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, and I owe much to Dr Henry Allen Moe, its then President. I am also indebted to the Rockefeller Foundation and Mr John Marshall for a grant for another purpose which sent me abroad for eighteen months and allowed me a third of that time to conduct research. At the beginning of the work I received helpful endorsements from Arthur H. DeBra, Director of Research, Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America; Iris Barry, Curator of the Film Library, Museum of Modern Art; the late Barrett H. Clark, Executive Director, Dramatists Play Service; George Freedley, Curator, Theatre Collection, New York Public Library; Dr Louis B. Wright and Dr James G. McManaway of the Folger Shakespeare Library; and Mr John Gassner, then of the Play Department, Columbia Pictures Corporation, late Sterling Professor at Yale University. I make grateful acknowledgment to the staffs of the Museum of Modern Art, especially to Mr Bernard Karpel and Miss Margareta Akermark; to Mr Freedley and to Mr Paul Myers of the New York Public Library Theatre Collection; to Colonel Willard Webb and members of the staff of the Library of Congress; to Mr John E. Allen for hunting out and screening for

me Shakespeare films in his collection; to Mr Jay Leyda who has gone out of his way to send me many useful contributions; and to too many to name who have written me and assisted me as company executives, interested individuals, and friends. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Mr Ernest Lindgren, O.B.E., F.B.K.S., Curator of the National Film Archive of the British Film Institute, who, for three long periods gave me free run of the resources of the Archive and allowed me to use it as a base for European operations, and to members of his staff who could not have been more kind on my behalf: Mr David Francis, Mr Roger Holman, Mr Liam O'Leary, Mr Harold G. Brown, Mrs Kristen Brockman, and Mr John S. L. Barnes. I am particularly indebted to Mr Martin Quigley, Jr., President of the Quigley Publishing Company and Editor in Chief of the *Motion Picture Herald* for permission to use material from its predecessor, the *Moving Picture World*. I wish also to express my appreciation to Mr Robert M. MacGregor, my friend and American publisher, and to Mr Philip Unwin and Mr Peter Leek of George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., for all their care and courtesies at Ruskin House.

Queens College of the City University of New York

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CHAPTER I

Pioners and All:

THE BEGINNINGS OF SHAKESPEARE FILM

(1899-1907)

IT WAS bright in London on that day towards the close of the nineteenth century – or at least there were bright intervals. In the early morning the sun sparkled on the silver Thames, and as one strolled north along the Victoria Embankment from Westminster Bridge, Wordsworth's sonnet came to mind. Farther north still, as the river turned more and more to the east above Charing Cross it was pleasant to wander in the gardens. This was historic ground. At the foot of Buckingham Street was the seventeenth-century Water Gate of York House and then the region known as the Adelphi, built by the brothers Adam. It had once been the site of Durham House, the home of the fourteenth-century Bishop of Durham, and later of Lady Jane Grey and of Sir Walter Raleigh. Adelphi Terrace, looking on the Thames, had been inspired by Robert Adam's visit to the palace of Diocletian at Spalato though remodelling had now altered its original design. Robert and James Adam had resided at No. 4; Thomas Hardy had worked at No. 8; the Savage Club occupied Nos. 6 and 7. There were dramatic associations too. David Garrick had lived and died at No. 5; Richard D'Oyly Carte was in the Adam residence; and Bernard Shaw had recently moved into No. 10.

This particular day was also to be in a peculiar way historic. If Shaw stood at his window contemplating Cleopatra's Needle and glanced obliquely elsewhere, he saw a curious sight. There were groups of people in elaborate and antiquated costumes who walked and gestured in a strangely theatrical manner and who appeared to be enacting a scene from a play. Two individuals were in charge. One was a man who stood at a tripod surmounted by a black box with a crank and whose dress contrasted with that of the others by being more or less what one might expect to see along the Embankment in 1899. The other, a tall, lanky man with a personality obviously more buoyant and dominant, wore, of all things, a robe and a crown. The name of the first man has vanished but what he was operating was a motion picture camera. The second man Shaw might have recognized – he had indeed known him for

some years. It was Herbert Beerbohm Tree, and he wore the crown of King John. This was the first Shakespeare film.

In 1897 Tree had opened Her Majesty's Theatre, where he was to produce thirteen of Shakespeare's plays with unusual splendour. His first real success there had been the presentation in 1898 of *Julius Caesar* with scenery and costumes by Laurence Alma Tadema. *King John*, which he put on earlier for special matinees at the Crystal Palace Theatre in 1889 – 1890, was his second Shakespeare production at his new theatre. It began on September 20, 1899, achieved its hundredth performance on December 16, and was then withdrawn until Boxing Night, when it was resumed until January 6, 1900. Supporting Tree as King John were Julia Neilson as Constance, Louis Calvert as Cardinal Pandolph, and as Faulconbridge, the Bastard, Lewis Waller, who was especially applauded. Quite clearly the presentation was a distinct hit, and the business phenomenal. The review in the *Era* of September 23rd indicates some of the reasons. The play itself is 'without central purpose, but very eventful; and Mr Beerbohm Tree has done the best thing possible, in the circumstances by cutting away the superfluous matter, arranging the piece in three acts, and, by a succession of splendid tableaux, giving us a grand idea of the pomp and circumstance of war and politics in the thirteenth century. . . .' Of all the tableaux the one which was most noticed was an insertion of 'the granting of the Magna Charta . . . represented by Mr Walter Hamm in a stage picture of elaborate pictorial arrangement.' Evidently there was material here which could be caught by a motion picture camera.

Nevertheless it is remarkable that even a primitive Shakespeare film should have been made so early. This is hardly the place to present the arguments of those who claim to have 'invented' the motion picture. Moreover, the whole matter has been confused by national pride, the dates of patent registrations, and the equity of legal decisions. But Edison's peep show Kinetoscope, though demonstrated in 1889, had no commercial presentation until 1894, when it also reached London, and there was nothing like what we call the motion picture until successful screen projection in 1895. In England Robert W. Paul first demonstrated his projector on February 28, 1896, and it was in that year that the British public became aware of projected films. It was then only five years after the peep show type and three years after projection when Tree was photographed in motion in *King John*. Moreover, unless one counts Joe Jefferson, who had acted bits from *Rip Van Winkle* for the Mutoscope in 1895, there was no precedent for so eminent an actor to allow himself to participate in a medium which was hardly regarded as respectable by the cultured public.

The explanation lies largely in Tree's character, his boyish light-heartedness, his impulsiveness, his willingness to be considered eccentric, his energy and his vision. He was always eager for experiment, and he enjoyed the excitement of taking chances. He had made a risky gamble when he

assumed the management of the failing Haymarket Theatre in 1887 and challenged the rivalry of Henry Irving. There he dared to produce special performances of plays which he admired but which were not expected to prove financially successful. He showed his recognition of the new drama by producing Maeterlinck, Wilde, and Ibsen, later Shaw. His own acting roles were deliberately varied rather than chosen for comfortable success. He acquired the site of Her Majesty's and built his theatre there with a pocketbook frequently almost empty. He was to found the Academy of Dramatic Art and to institute an annual Shakespeare festival. This was not the kind of a man to let slip the opportunity to try a new medium.

Unfortunately it is not clear for what purpose the experiment was made, nor who suggested it. Later, Tree was to be involved in three other Shakespeare films, in two of which he both acted himself and made money. There is no evidence he made money here, and it is more likely that he lost. In 1899 films were very short indeed, but it took some time to arrange and take the picture, and there was the expense of transporting actors and appurtenances from the theatre. There is no record, moreover, that the finished product was ever publicly exhibited or brought in any returns. It seems probable either that Tree was caught by the excitement of active participation in a new sort of enterprise or that he realized – he did of a later film – that the camera could be used to make a kind of record in motion of a successful performance which would remain after the theatre production had vanished into limbo, a record which might in addition, at some time in the future, afford a few minutes' amusement to him and his friends.

It is improbable that much of the play was photographed. Perhaps the site on the Embankment gives the clue. Here was greenery and the Thames, an approximation to Runnymede. The tableau of the granting of the Magna Charta needed no words, only pantomime for its effect. This may have been all. If so, it is ironic that the first film of a performance of a Shakespeare play was of a scene which Shakespeare did not include. At any rate the characters were Shakespeare's, and Tree's King John was there in part, and to Tree's other efforts in pioneering must be added that he became a motion picture actor in 1899 in a part created by Shakespeare.

The casual itinerant who happened upon Tree's filming of *King John* became more purposeful the next year. He crossed the Channel to attend the Paris Exposition, grandly open from April 15th through October of 1900. One of its wonders was sound film, first commercially exploited at the Olympia two years before, but still a wonder nevertheless. At one pavilion a demonstration of *phonorama* presented hand-coloured scenes of Parisian life accompanied by street cries, and at the Théâtre de la Grande Roue there were audible and visible sketches with original dialogue, one of which presented a comic scene of a pretty wife and her angry husband preparing for bed (*rien d'indécent*, however). Yet these were perhaps too tame as

attractions. On the other hand at the beginning of the Rue de Paris near the Pont des Invalides there were crowds before the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre. Here there was a poster, designed by François Flameng, on which a beautiful lady in modish costume pointed winningly with a long cane to the bill for the day. It included the clowns Footit and Chocolate; Emilio Cossira from the Opéra singing a tenor aria from Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*; *L'Enfant Prodigue*, three tableaux by Mlle Félicia Mallet; the celebrated comic, Little Tich; Polin in an air from *La Fille du Régiment*; and two duel scenes from celebrated plays. In the first Cyrano de Bergerac in the person of the elder Coquelin discomfited the Vicomte de Valvert. The second was last on the programme and calculated to send patrons away from the theatre with gasps of pleasurable astonishment, Sarah Bernhardt in *Hamlet*.

The sound films at the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre had been made by Clément Maurice. It was he who had introduced Antoine Lumière to the Kinetoscope in 1894, an event which started the Lumière sons, Auguste and Louis, on the road to screen projection. When they were ready it was to Maurice they turned for public exhibition. As concessionaire he found a billiard room, the Salon Indien, which had been closed by the police, in the basement of the Grand Café, 14, Boulevard des Capucines, near the Opéra, and opened it to show Lumière films on December 28, 1895. In addition he was a still photographer of some reputation who specialized in theatrical portraits. His work naturally brought him into contact with people of the stage and gave him opportunities to persuade various celebrities to appear in his films for the Exposition, where they were shown five or six times a day. Later he was to found two important companies, Radios, which combined with Eclipse, and Eclair; both companies made Shakespeare films.

Maurice's system was simple enough. First the performers played before his motion picture camera; then retaining so far as possible the same cadence, they recorded song, words, or other sounds on the wax cylinders of a phonograph. Warned by a red light, the projectionist in his booth listened by telephone to the sound of the phonograph near the screen and adapted the speed of his hand cranking so as to make sound and visual images as far as possible coincide.

Since he had been involved with *phonorama*, the projectionist at the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre was probably not that extraordinary cameraman, Félix Mesguich, but after the Exposition closed Mesguich took Maurice's films on tour, and on his return presented them at the Olympia. In his memoirs he describes some of the hazards of operation. Synchronization in any case must have been nerve racking and imperfect, but it was also complicated by the tactics of competitors who resorted to sabotage. On one occasion while the room was in darkness, a malevolent hand cut the telephone wire which permitted Mesguich to follow the sound of the phonograph and to communicate with its operator, Jacques Berst (later Director-General of Pathé in New York). Fortunately Mesguich was by then so experienced in

maintaining the proper pace that the audience was never aware of the difference. Exit villain, foiled.

This Mesguich is worth noting. An Algerian, he had been a Zouave before he found his *métier* with the brothers Lumière. He was one of the operator-projectionists whom they sent to the United States in June, 1896 to show their cinematograph at the Eden Musee and B. F. Keith's Union Square Theatre in New York, and in other principal cities. In competition with Edison's Vitascope, which had begun exhibition at Koster and Bial's (now the site of Macy's) on April 20th, and outmanoeuvred by American interests, Lumière's representatives had to flee in disorder. Mesguich returned to Paris by way of Canada, and in 1897 was sent to Russia, where he shot and projected Lumière films, in Yalta before Nicholas II, and in Moscow before the Grand Duke Michael. He made a film of the crowning of the czar. At the fair in Nijni-Novgorod in July, 1898 he showed this and other Russian pictures before a stupefied public which suspected diabolical agency and had to be dispersed by the police. Ultimately his installation was burnt out, excellent publicity for the engagement which was to follow at the summer theatre of the Aquarium in St Petersburg. At this cabaret, two entertainers were at each other's throats, Lina Cavalieri, not yet an opera singer nor publicized as 'the most beautiful woman in the world' (she starred in films from 1914 to 1921), and the Andalusian-born dancer, Caroline (La Belle) Otero, whose successes included appearance *au naturel* on a silver platter. The latter by way of squelching her rival asked Mesguich to make a film of her dances. In her *Valse brisante* her partner was a young Russian officer. When the film was shown, it was interrupted by whistles and the police, and the next day Mesguich was accused of insulting the army and ordered to leave on the Paris express. Since the Lumières had now decided to give up the business of exhibition, Mesguich with a Lumière camera he had bought was on his own. After an interval he filmed the scenes of Parisian life for *phonorama*. La Belle Otero, now remembered primarily as a subject of Toulouse-Lautrec, turned up at the Exposition in a film of her Spanish dance.

After the Exposition closed, Mesguich took the films and cylinders of the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre through provincial France to Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and Spain with what he called lively success. After their showing at the Olympia in 1901 he was reaffiliated with Lumière and was the projectionist there for Méliès' famous *Voyage dans la lune*, but he was never really happy unless pursuing *actualités*. 'Tourneur de manivelle à travers le monde,' he called himself. He took pictures of the coronation of Edward VII, followed the Russo-Japanese War, was in St Petersburg for the beginning of the Revolution in 1905, caught President Loubet donning his hunting breeches at Rambouillet – the film was shown at the Folies Bergère while an orchestra played 'Le bon roi Dagobert a mis sa culotte à l'envers' – filmed the Olympic Games in Athens in 1906, the marriage of Alfonso XIII, and in 1908 became the first aerial film photographer, in the plane of Wilbur

Wright. He crowned his career as a news and documentary cameraman by a trip around the world. An unusual man, this Mesguich. What, one wonders, did he think of that other pioneer, Sarah Bernhardt?

At the turn of the century, Bernhardt was much in the public eye, no less because of her decidedly controversial interpretation of Hamlet. There was difference of opinion about her merits as an actress, almost universal recognition of her determination, her waywardness, her vitality, and her brilliance. What Henry James called her 'génie de la réclame,' her skill in self-advertisement, together with the adulation of her devotees, had made her not only a celebrity but an institution. Playgoers everywhere knew of her fractious temper and unpredictable temperament. Her early and not particularly successful engagement at the Comédie Française had been terminated when she boxed the ears of an elderly colleague, and she had built her reputation at the Odéon before she returned to the national theatre in 1872. Here too, after eight years, she broke her contract and had to pay substantial damages. Thereafter she acted when she wished, managed her own theatres, toured all over the world. Her quarrels and her caprices were common gossip and excellent publicity, a publicity not contradicted but augmented by her personal magnetism. At various times she made balloon ascents, stood on a captive whale, and kept a collection of unlikely animals. Her bedroom contained a skeleton as a reminder of mortality, and she slept and learned her parts in the coffin she was finally buried in. So tempestuous a personality and so energetic a seeker of attention would not fail to embrace the opportunity to appear in a filmed duel as Hamlet, a part she had recently added to her repertory.

Sarah had played Ophelia as early as 1886, but it was not until 1897, when she was fifty-three, that she decided to act the title role in her own production of *Hamlet* and commissioned a new prose translation. By 1899 she took over the Théâtre des Nations and renamed it the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt. It was here that her presentation greeted an astonished and on the whole, delighted audience on May 20th. On June 12th she appeared in the part at the Adelphi Theatre, London, and later at the Memorial Theatre in Stratford. She reopened her own theatre in Paris on December 16th with President Loubet, he of Mesguich's enrobement scene, in a stage box. New York did not see her as the Dane until after the film, at the Garden Theatre on Christmas Day, 1900, during a repertory presentation of five plays with Coquelin *aimé*. Coquelin, who was in the other duel on the same bill at the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre, was the First Grave Digger.

Bernhardt's conception of Hamlet evoked heated controversy. There was nothing new about an actress playing the part. Mrs Siddons had done so in 1777 and was followed by a spate of female princes in Great Britain and the United States in the nineteenth century. In France, Mme Judith had appeared as Hamlet in 1867. It was not primarily a matter of sex but of interpretation. The French take their theatre seriously and as a subject of

discussion and argument. Bernhardt's Hamlet was both admired and disputed, but it was accepted as a revelation. Rostand said she made him comprehend Hamlet for the first time; two journalists, one of them Catulle Mendès, fought a duel over whether Hamlet was fat. In England, though Walter of the *Times* thought the play 'acted to perfection,' most of the comments were satirical. 'Where everything is necessarily wrong,' said the *Athenaeum*, 'nothing can be right,' and Max Beerbohm in the *Saturday Review* of June 17th wrote of 'her aberration at the Adelphi. Had she for one moment betrayed any faintest sense of Hamlet's character, the reminiscence were less painful.' In New York, William Winter of the *Tribune* was bitter: 'Her superficial and expeditious performance' was a 'dreadful desecration.'

Why? Bernhardt played Hamlet as 'manly and resolute, not a weak or languid person' but 'firm and logical' a 'young strong determined character' of 'great power of mind.' There was no mental shock, and difficulties, including the ghost, were encountered with equanimity. This Hamlet knocked together the heads of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and kicked Polonius in the shins. To people to whom Hamlet was associated with imagination, sensibility, nobility, and melancholia, Bernhardt was a shock. Nevertheless the vigour must have made an effective duel scene, and it was the duel scene which was filmed.

Reviews and illustrations of stage and film performances convey some idea of what a visitor would have seen at Mme Marguerite Chenu's little theatre at the Paris Exposition. On the stage, Winter tells us, 'at the climax of the duel Hamlet's sword-hand was made to show a trace of blood, and the Prince's face and person were made to reveal pathological symptoms of the approach of death by poison. Mme Bernhardt's Hamlet died standing, and his reeling body was caught by Horatio' In the photograph of film frames, Bernhardt appears at one side crossing rapiers with Laertes on the other. Laertes was Pierre Magnier, an 'élegant jeune premier' and frequently Bernhardt's leading man; she had engaged him for her company in 1898. Behind the duellists stand two 'valets d'armes' in lieu of a court, and a page, Suzanne Seylor, who had been with Bernhardt as early as 1892 and become her inseparable companion. Bernhardt herself is sprightly, graceful, and slender. (The figure was padded on the stage to reduce her femininity.) She wore a belted black silk tunic, a white ruffle around the neck; black silk tights; a black cloak which hung from her left shoulder; a wig of fair, waved, bobbed hair. The setting is simple, an archway supported by columns and a painted backdrop. After the duel the body of the Prince is carried away on a shield. The whole action took perhaps three minutes. Various writers speak of the sound effects, the clash of weapons, the stamp of feet. These were probably recorded, but the scene required little or no speech, and Henri Cossira is explicit that the *voix d'or* was unheard. Still, much could be enjoyed for the twenty sous admission price.

Unlike the reviews of Bernhardt's stage performances, comments in the

journals on the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre are chiefly on the scientific achievement and the entertainment provided thereby. Since some of the remarks are clearly publicity, it is not easy to judge their critical accuracy, but *Le Figaro* of June 8, 1900 congratulates Clément Maurice for a combination of cinematograph and phonograph which is 'complète et absolue' and a 'résultat de rare perfection'. It constitutes a real artistic progress and will have considerable documentary value in the future. And on September 8th, it adds that Sarah Bernhardt has been admirably caught in the duel scene from *Hamlet*, and that 'la reconstitution de cette scène est une merveille d'art en même temps qu'un chef-d'oeuvre d'exactitude.' *Le Gaulois* of September 9th speaks of the combination of sight and sound in respect to Coquelin as prodigious, but notes we go from marvel to marvel for here is Sarah Bernhardt with Magnier. And it was reported in the second *Figaro* article that the artists themselves came to the theatre to see and hear themselves, and what is 'bien agréable', to hear themselves applauded as if they had actually appeared before the public. According to one report, however, possibly apochryphal, seeing herself on the screen so shocked the divine Sarah that she fainted.

All due allowance made for uncritical enthusiasm, there is no doubt of the contemporary popularity of the films at the Exposition and later on tour and at the Olympia, as Mesguich testifies. Evidently Mme Chenu was still the proprietor of the films, because he says he and Berst did the bill posting on their travels in order not to increase her expenses. As late as 1908 George Kleine in the United States announced that he had received from Urban-Eclipse in London and Paris 'a remarkable assignment of film subjects . . . depicting famous French actors and actresses in their most popular plays, such as Bernhardt and her company [a slight exaggeration] in *Hamlet* It is of peculiar interest that the films were taken *eight years ago* and only now has permission been obtained for their public exhibition [i.e. in America].' There is no evidence, however, that these primitives then attracted any attention.

In 1930 the films and cylinders of the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre were discovered in the archives of the Compagnie de Tirage Maurice, owned by Mesguich and Clément Maurice's son. In 1933 Pathé-Cinéma showed some of the films as reconstituted by Roger Goupillières at a new theatre on the Champs-Élysées where they provoked some nostalgia. Articles of the period credit Mme Chenu with having originated the idea of the sound films, no doubt with the collaboration of Clément Maurice, for her theatre at the Exposition. She has other reasons to be remembered. In World War I she was a nurse who founded a hospital; later she was sent by France to the United States on a propaganda mission. A woman, said Robert Destez, with a head and a heart. A worthy pioner!

It could be said that all periods of the motion picture, including our own,

have involved experiment, but the older the medium became, the more it tended to fall into definite norms. At the beginning it struggled to find out what it was and what it was for. At first an invention, it soon grew to a business, a means of providing entertainment, and only gradually to pretensions of art. The *King John* of Tree, and Bernhardt's duel scene from *Hamlet* showed one direction which it could take, the reproduction of stage scenes, and this tendency was to continue, but from 1901 to 1907, there were other gropings too. With some of these we are not concerned; the filming of actualities which results in news or documentary pictures, for example, has little or nothing to do with Shakespeare. Any films relating to Shakespeare have at least a basis in literature or the theatre, that is, in art, though their ultimate aim may lie in amusement or the box-office. The problem was how Shakespeare's name and plays could be employed to draw and hold audiences who found pleasure in the relatively new experience of watching moving images on a screen.

During these eight years of cinema such Shakespeare film was used to accompany recitation and music, to reproduce stage scenery, and to tell briefly the story or show a bit of action of certain of the plays. In addition, titles and subjects from Shakespeare were adopted or adapted for non-Shakespearean films. Finally one man used Shakespeare material to suit his vision of what a film should be. Except for the last it was all very crude; with the last, however primitive, there were glimmerings of understanding of the nature of the new medium.

To follow a strict chronology is here neither possible nor desirable. Some of the films cannot be accurately dated, some of the references are highly questionable. I have no confidence in the authenticity of a statement that 'Shakespeare was first put on the screen by the Vitagraph Company, *Othello* having been released in 1902, and *Romeo and Juliet* in 1903.' Vitagraph was an important American company, and in 1908 it made films of these plays, but it seems altogether unlikely that it made versions so early. I am almost equally doubtful about a hand-coloured *Cleopatra* (Pathé) purportedly of 1903, which even if it did exist may not have been in any sense Shakespearean, and an Italian *King Lear* of 1905 to which all my references are German. There is, however, good evidence for a nevertheless vague *Othello* in 1907, put out by the Cines company which had been founded in Rome in 1905. A British distributor indicated that, 'the grand tragedy of William Shakespeare [was] retold with glorious effects. The canals of Venice beautifully tinted, the strong dramatic story of the jealous Moor, the lovely Desdemona and the wicked adventurer, Iago, culminating in the smothering of Desdemona, the death of Othello. 540 feet.' Such films as were actually made must have been attempts to recount the familiar tales.

In some cases the telling of the story itself was not the purpose, rather the depiction of an episode from it. A manuscript notebook in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, a record of the American Mutoscope and Biograph

Company for the years 1903 to 1912, lists as Film No. 3063, a *Duel Scene from Macbeth*, photographed on July 15, 1905. This company had been in business from the middle nineties, and produced both apparatus and films for peep show (Mutoscope) and projection (Biograph). The *Macbeth* duel was probably shot on the roof of the Hackett-Carhart building in New York, which it called its studio. The manuscript at any rate says 'taken in studio', and the company had not yet moved to the brownstone house in Fourteenth Street which was to become famous. The operator of the camera is listed as G. W. Bitzer, the Billy Bitzer also to become famous as the cameraman for David Wark Griffith. The length was 53 feet. In mutoscope or on the screen – it was made for both purposes – Macbeth and Macduff fought for less than a minute. Nevertheless the film was copyrighted and two copies were deposited in Washington. Motion pictures were copyrighted, if at all, as photographs in those days. The subsequent history of the *Duel* is also recorded in the manuscript. Evidently Shakespeare's characters were to lose their individualities, for the bit became Scene 3 in Negative No. 3272. Negative No. 3272 was *Fights of Nations*, otherwise shot in 1907, also by Bitzer, and presumably in Fourteenth Street, whither the company had moved in 1906. *Fights of Nations* was 750 feet long, but the original duel was not extended. Evidently a specific Macbeth and a specific Macduff did not longer 'lay on', but I cannot help wondering whether a property head was used to illustrate a characteristic finale of duels in Scotland.

Another kind of action was also recorded on film in 1905, and apparently for a somewhat different purpose, at least originally. The event reintroduces Herbert Beerbohm Tree, and if the evidence is authentic, shows him pioneering in a new direction. In March, a London trade journal announced: 'Mr Charles Urban, never behind in seizing every opportunity that presents itself for making the Bioscope popular, has by means of his splendid lens used on his recent trip to America, successfully photographed the ship scene in Mr Tree's play, *The Tempest*. As the company now tour the country, there will be no need to carry the cumbersome property belonging to the scene. The Bioscope will do the work of depicting the scene by projections from behind the screen. The audience, however, will not be made painfully conscious that they are looking at animated pictures, as the colouring of the films and various other technicalities we need not mention, serve to produce the illusion of reality, equal if not better than did the original mechanical contrivances.' Though I find no evidence that Urban's film was ever used on tour in an actual production of what the journal naively but not entirely inaccurately calls Mr Tree's play, *The Tempest*, there is at least here an indication of intention in Tree's mind, and it is the first instance I know of where the motion picture was envisaged as a means of painting moving scenery with light. It could possibly have been the enterprising Urban's suggestion.

A shrewd organizer and astute business man, Charles Urban, after

becoming a salesman for Edison films and the Edison Projecting Kinetoscope in America, had developed his own projector, the Bioscope, came to London in 1897 where he organized the Warwick Trading Company for export and import trade, brought out the Warwick camera and settled down to his special interest, the documentary film. Some of his factual films were not as factual as they might have been. In 1902 he presented pictures of the coronation of Edward VII; the exterior scenes were authentic but the coronation itself was a reconstruction made in Paris by Georges Méliès, of whom more shortly. However, most of his actualities were dignified and informative records. He founded the Urban Trading Company in 1903, retaining his own patents and contracts, and distributed not only his films but those of various foreign manufacturers. Mesguich, and W. G. Barker, who was to make Shakespeare films, were at various times his cameramen, though not, I think, for *The Tempest*. He is best remembered as the exploiter of a colour film called Kinemacolor, developed by an associate, G. A. Smith. Later Urban's career turned to France and then back to the United States, but during the first decade of the century he headed one of the largest and most far reaching motion picture organizations in England.

At any rate, Tree's presentation of *The Tempest* provided material spectacular enough for independent exhibition as well. It had opened on September 14, 1904, ran for a hundred forty-three performances, and was subsequently revived. 'In the production at His Majesty's,' wrote the *Era* of September 17th, 'modern science has enabled Mr Tree to fairly stagger us by some wonderful storm effects and to produce a magnificent realization of the shipwreck that opens the play. The vessel takes up the whole of the stage . . . Amid the shrieking of the wind and the roaring thunder we hear faintly the voices of the ship's master and the boatswain; the very timbers seem to creak; the mainmast snaps like a piece of matchwood; and the spectacle is really awesome. In the triumphs of modern stagecraft nothing quite so fine as this shipwreck has been seen, and it will be the talk of London.'

Urban's catalogue and that of George Kleine, who brought the film to America, are more graphic about the storm and more explicit about the film, which was 'photographed through the courtesy of Mr Beerbohm Tree by special and exclusive arrangement. This remarkable picture, taken under the ordinary conditions of stage lighting during representation, illustrates the great advances in animated photography which the motion camera has rendered possible. The shipwreck with all its intense realism is reproduced with startling detail. The lightnings flash, the billows leap and roll, and break, until on the tossing ship, where the terror-stricken voyagers can be seen wildly rushing about the mast snaps and crashes to the deck. Three views are given in the film, each from a more distant point as the wreck recedes, and as the film is issued tinted to the suitable weird moonlight color, the effect obtained is very fine. It is also issued artistically colored, which

greatly heightens the wonderful effect of what is unquestionably one of the greatest triumphs of stage production ever attempted.' The film storm was 100 feet in length, and was over in less than 2 minutes. Tree was not in the picture – he played Caliban – and I hope Viola Tree's Ariel did not flame amazement, but presumably 'wildly rushing about' and visible for \$13.00, Kleine's price for the film, were J. Fisher White as Gonzalo, S. A. Cookson as Alonzo, Lyn Harding as Antonio, W. A. Haines as the Boatswain, Basil Gill as Ferdinand, and assorted mariners, howling inaudibly, 'All lost!'

Nevertheless this is all comparatively sublime. On the other hand Shakespeare was in this period forced to lend his name or his weight to the ridiculous. The 'Edison Films' Catalogue No. 135 of September 1902 lists under 'Imported Films' a *Burlesque on Romeo and Juliet*, 75 feet, \$9.00. The story detailed makes no sense and has nothing to do with Shakespeare except for the inclusion of a kind of balcony scene. I make no apology for failing too to summarize two American films, *A Midwinter Night's Dream*, or *Little Joe's Luck* (Vitagraph, 600 feet, 1906) and *All's Well That Ends Well* (Selig, 760 feet, 1907) which show no Shakespearean influence whatever except in their titles.

In these absurdities, the camera was clearly the whole show, but it was also used as an accompaniment to sound. It had been employed originally for the still pictures of optical lantern days to form illustration to song or recitation. In 1901, for example, Harbach and Co., film and photographic supply dealers, were offering a 'grand recitation, with ten exquisite coloured slides' of *The Merchant of Venice*, priced at \$5.00. A favourite was the 'Seven Ages' speech of Jaques from *As You Like It*. I suspect the *Seven Ages* motion picture offered by Edison in 1905 was used as a background for oral delivery; at least it is difficult to see how it could have been effective in silence. Perhaps, however, the eight views copyrighted February 27 were part of an early sound film. Synchronization of motion picture and the phonograph had been achieved in Edison's West Orange workshop as early as 1899; in fact the invention of the motion picture as we know it today sprang from attempts to do for the eye what the phonograph did for the ear. Indeed Edison was supplying to exhibitors synchronized films and recordings.

Synchronization of visual images and music ran parallel to silent films. Cossira, we recall, had sung an aria from Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, probably 'Ah! Lève-toi soleil,' in Maurice's sound films at the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre in 1900. Some years later, perhaps in 1907, primitive sound film was to introduce Germany's first film star, Henny Porten. The daughter of an actor and singer, she mimed for the camera with her father, Franz, and sister, Rosa, appropriate action for the illustration of excerpts of opera played on records. One of the records was the 'Death of Othello' from Verdi's *Otello*. A picture in her autobiography shows Fräulein Henny 'in den letzten Zugen' on a draped bed, Franz in the leading role standing at its foot about to stab himself, five supernumeraries raising their hands in pro-

test, and Rosa as Emilia (?) seated in front of them in the right foreground. Such scenes were photographed in the Berlin studios of the pioneer of German cinema, Oskar Messter, who had begun making films with a camera of his own devising in 1896. The décor was simple and hasty, the costumes rented for the occasion. The camera ground while the record played, and the film was of course of the same duration. The usual procedure was one film before breakfast as soon as the sunlight was suitable, and one or two afterward. The direction was handled principally by Franz Porten, but Carl Froelich, who had been a cameraman with Messter since 1905 may well have assisted. The synchronization process was known as Biophon; it had been developed by Messter as early as 1903 before he opened the first really commodious cinema theatre in Germany on Unter den Linden in 1905. He and Henry Porten were to be associated for many years. Such was the début of the girl who was to become not only the most popular film actress in Germany but a symbol of German womanhood.

But though experiment was frequent, sound film was not in the main stream of development; like the photographs of stage action, the recitation and musical pictures were aberrations. They were aberrations because they showed no recognition of the unique and special capabilities of the motion camera as an interpreter nor of cinematic ideas. One man, however, who incidentally concerned himself with Shakespeare, did have a real, if limited, creative vision, and if it could not at this period be used successfully because of the limits of duration and the absence of lines, to present on the screen anything which allowed a significant presentation of the dramatist's plays, there was at least a realization of the need under these conditions of adaptation to the new medium rather than a mere reproduction of another art. That man was a Frenchman, Georges Méliès.

The versatile Méliès was at the time of the exhibition of the Lumière films at the Grand Café a professional magician and the proprietor of the Théâtre Robert-Houdin near the Opéra, where he presented his transformations and feats of prestidigitation. Excited by what seemed to him a revelation of possibilities, he acquired a camera and began photographing in motion the familiar sights of Paris streets. On one occasion his film jammed in the camera. When he later projected it, he discovered to his surprise that a bus he had been shooting had suddenly turned into a hearse. By an accident he had achieved a new kind of transformation. Realism could be turned into film fantasy. He had already tried some experiments in this direction but now he saw his path more clearly. In 1897 he built a practical studio behind his house at Montreuil and turned in earnest to the production of films suitable not only to his own predilections but to presentation at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin, scenes of magic, stories of the supernatural, subjects already prearranged. For these films he made his own designs, with assistants constructing the settings, hired performers from the music halls, and directed and photographed them – or when he was in them, had them photographed –

on the stage he had constructed at one end of the studio. In the process he discovered many of the techniques of the camera which would further his aims of mystifying spectators and transporting them to a world that never was: stop, slow, fast, and reverse motion; double exposure and animation; fades and dissolves. For a decade Méliès' fantastic and trick films enjoyed enormous success not only in Paris, but elsewhere in Europe and in America.

Méliès was an intelligent and well-read man in both French and English, and if he turned naturally to Jules Verne, it was also to be expected that he would dabble with Shakespeare. His 1899 film inaccurately titled *Cléopâtre* showed no such dabbling, but in 1901 he made a picture, *Le Diable et la statue*, which included two Venetian lovers, Roméo and Juliette, and a balcony scene. Otherwise the story had nothing to do with Shakespeare. Another early Méliès film also bears some relationship, probably equally slight, to Shakespeare, *Le Miroir de Venise (Une Méaventure de Shylock)*, but of this there is no extant scenario. So far there is nothing that could really be called adaptation of Shakespeare; there is merely borrowing of the names of characters or a setting or a situation.

In 1907, however, Méliès came out with a *Hamlet*, and though this is not a particularly characteristic Méliès film nor probably one of his best, it does show him deliberately cutting and rearranging the story in order to make it intelligible within the compass of 570 feet of film by means of flashbacks and visions. Of this *Hamlet* we fortunately have a full summary in the delicious English of Gaston Méliès, Georges' brother, who was his representative and general manager in the United States.

‘The melancholy disposition of the young prince is demonstrated to good advantage in the grave-yard scene where the diggers are interrupted in their weird pastime of joshing among the tombstones by the appearance of Hamlet and his friend. After questioning them he picks up one of the skulls about a newly-dug grave, and is told that it is the skull of a certain Yorick who was known to Hamlet in his natural life. Hamlet slowly takes up the skull, and his manner strongly indicates, “Alas, poor York, I knew him well!” The following scenes combine to show the high state of dementia of the young prince's mentality. He is seen in his room where he is continually annoyed and excited by apparitions which taunt him in their weirdness and add bitterness to his troubled brain. He attempts to grasp them but in vain, and he falls to brooding. Now is shown the scene in which he meets the ghost of his father and is told to take vengeance on the reigning monarch, his uncle; but not content with this, Hamlet's fates tantalize him further by sending into his presence the ghost of his departed sweetheart, Ophelia. He attempts to embrace her as she throws flowers to him from a garland on her brow, but his efforts are futile; and when he sees the apparition fall to the ground, he, too swoons away, and is thus found by several courtiers. He is raving mad and storms about in a manner entirely unintelligible to them; but they calm

him gradually. The last scene shows the duel before the King, when Hamlet returns from the fool's errand upon which his royal uncle had sent him in order to get rid of him. The word is passed, and the well-known story of the duel before the King takes place in pictures which show the Prince's antagonist as he falls after a fierce combat. Now the episode of the poisoned drink, which the King has prepared for Hamlet, is depicted; his villainous mother takes the drink instead, and falls lifeless. Hamlet is now desperate, and bidding the courtiers to stand aside, he ends the life of his wicked uncle with one thrust of his sword, and then turns the weapon on himself; before dying he tells the secret of his terrible enmity toward the King, then sinks to the ground. Lying upon his shield, he is carried off on the shoulders of the courtiers.'

It is easy to brand this ten-minute film an absurd simplification, and one which could not fail to tickle the risibilities of a sophisticated audience. But Méliès audiences were not sophisticated, and the film was a primitive of 1907. It may not have been, as it was advertised, 'An artistic film reproduction for lovers of the great playwright,' but it was nevertheless a distinct advance over anything which had heretofore been achieved in Shakespeare film. Here was a picture which contained at least three scenes, in those scenes told the story of the main external action in *Hamlet*, attempted to convey some of the perturbation of the Prince's mind, and did these things by using the camera to create effects proper to itself, and difficult or impossible to realize satisfactorily on the stage. It eschewed the chronological method for a kind of montage, partially escaped from mere realistic reproduction, and concentrated on major scenes at the end of the plot. In other words, this film is basically an adaptation of Shakespeare's play in cinematic terms. As stills make clear, Méliès himself acted Hamlet; he was shortly to play Shakespeare himself.

Méliès' last Shakespeare film, also of 1907, stemmed not from a play but the creation of one. It was called *Le Rêve de Shakespeare* or *La Mort de Jules César*, or more frequently in English, *Shakespeare Writing Julius Caesar*. It showed according to an advertisement; 'How Shakespeare conceived his world-famed death scene. An elaborate reproduction costumed and staged according to the history of ancient Rome.' Shorter than *Hamlet*, it was in 344 feet. Again the *Star* Film Catalogue comes to the rescue with details.

'The idea of the film is a novel one. It shows the bard of Avon seated in his study, trying to devise the scene in which Caesar is murdered by the conspirators. He makes several attempts, but apparently the results are unsatisfactory to him. He reads them over and over and then begins to pace the room impatiently. At his wits' end, he sits down in an armchair, crosses his legs, and leaning on his hand prepares for a good, long think. Suddenly his thoughts take life, and right before him appears an old Roman forum. Shakespeare is still seated in his armchair and now watches all that occurs.

Several classical female figures appear and one of them burns incense; after stepping around the small flame, they take their leave. Now the conspirators – Brutus, Cassius, Casca and the others enter, debating hotly on what action to take against their dictator. After an argument, they draw swords and pointing them to the ground together they swear that Julius Caesar shall die. While this is going on Shakespeare is an interested spectator – it seems to be just what he had been striving for. Now Caesar enters with two consuls, and all three seat themselves. Now the conspirators one at a time lay their grievances before the dictator. The first two do naught but speak, but the third, in his frenzy, raises his dirk. Caesar, however, envelopes his face in a fold of his tunic, and the would-be assassin desists from striking the defenceless man; but the next conspirator is quicker, for he suddenly draws his sword and Caesar falls from one stroke. The scene now changes to Shakespeare's study again; the poet recovers himself, realizes that he at last has come upon the required idea and begins to stalk about excitedly, going it all over for himself. While he does this his servant enters with a tray of food, but Shakespeare pays no attention to him but keeps on tearing and ranting about the room in his passion. Alone he goes through the entire scene and winds up by raising a knife and plunging it furiously into the loaf of bread which was on the table. Realizing the humour of the situation he now joins in a hearty laugh with his servant, but is unable to eat from enthusiasm. When the servant leaves the room he steps back and folds his arms, and the scene dissolves into a bust of William Shakespeare, around which all the nations wave flags and garlands.'

The dissolve unfortunately shows the author of a pleasant little scenario yielding to the magician and the need for a transformation, however inappropriate. Evidently Shakespeare made some slight changes in his plans before *Julius Caesar* was given to the world.

Méliès' Shakespeare films show both his virtues and his limitations. He was full of ideas and he was a man of great technical resources. He was aware that the camera could do something more than take pictures of whatever was at hand or convenient, that it could be used creatively. His careful pre-arrangements led to considered results and in his fairy tales and planetary travels there was something both childlike and poetic or occasionally satiric. But his ingenuity was not always tastefully applied, and his vision was curtailed by his delight in magic. The purpose of his films was too frequently not to convince but to baffle. His shooting of scenes on a stage led often to *tableaux vivants* rather than to cinematic action. Nevertheless he made great advances and was much imitated. Unfortunately by 1907 he had reached his peak and a decline had started in his fortunes. Méliès lived in a world of his own. He did not or could not adapt to whatever progress was being made by others; the others learned from him. He sold his positives outright long after most manufacturers were using a system of rental distribution. He stayed

indoors when others went out. His fantasies were too much alike and began to pall. When he turned to other subjects, he illustrated rather than re-created them. Though he continued to make pictures until the War, he could not keep up with competition and had to make an unfortunate alliance with Pathé. He lost his home, his studio, and his films. For fourteen years, he all but vanished. In 1928 he was recognized selling toys and candy at the Gare Montparnasse. He was helped by friends, tendered an elaborate banquet, decorated with the Cross of the Legion of Honour. In 1932 the *Chambre Syndicale Française du Cinématographe* arranged for him to pass his last years at the chateau d'Orly. He died in 1938. Méliès had founded the *Chambre* in 1897 and for ten years been its president. On fortune's cap he was not the very button, but he did have dreams.

CHAPTER II

What, All in Motion?

SHAKESPEARE BY VITAGRAPH (1908-1911)

AND suddenly there was a march of Shakespeare on film. 1908 was the key year, 1908 through 1911 the period. The United States led the way; with somewhat different impulses, Italy and France joined the parade. In four years, not counting minor adaptations and petty pilferings, almost fifty new productions of Shakespeare were on the screens in America, England, and on the Continent. They included seventeen of Shakespeare's plays, seven of the tragedies, six of the comedies, two each of the dramatic romances and English histories. Most of them were in one reel, approximately a thousand feet of film; some spilled over into two; one anticipated the feature picture of a later era. Why were more Shakespeare films made in this period than in any comparable span later, more in 1908 than in any subsequent year?

There were no doubt cross-influences from one country to another. This was the period of the 'art film' in France and Italy and the stage-film in England. But these films with theatre actors, though they represent something pervasive in the air – and the air was international – do not for the most part explain what lay behind the work and the choices of the studios in New York. The American films tended to get off the stage and go outdoors; they made little appeal to the intelligentsia; they did not employ known writers or name actors from the theatre – indeed, it was only gradually that companies revealed the identity of their mimers, and to movie audiences they were with a few exceptions merely familiar faces. In order to explain why there were ten American Shakespeare films in 1908, it is necessary to know what was happening in the United States.

By 1908 the story picture had become general. News items, local events, vaudeville skits, and comic episodes were no longer sufficient. For camera narratives, people were now writing scenarios as fast as they could but there were not enough. It was natural to borrow from literature and the stage, and surely Shakespeare himself would have approved. Moreover his variety of scenes fitted in well with new conceptions of scenario structure, with cutting and editing. For some years the major companies had been copyrighting

their films in Washington, but for their scripts they went to whatever literary sources were handy or would be effective. Surely photographs could not be considered a means of plagiarism from written words, and no acknowledgments were necessary. But in 1907 the Kalem Company produced a *Ben Hur*, and was promptly sued by its publisher, the producers of a stage version, and the administrator of the estate of Lew Wallace's heir. Though the suit was not settled against Kalem until 1911, it had to be defended, and it frightened the major producers. One way of avoiding legal difficulties was to disguise their reconstructions, but another was to make use of authors not protected by copyright. Shakespeare was not concerned with rights and royalties.

An additional drive toward Shakespeare stemmed from the need for respectability. When the motion picture was an infant phenomenon, it impressed because it was a novelty and because it moved. Few cared what it said or implied. But narratives involve people, and people, conduct and morality. Favourite subjects were portrayals of crime, or risqué situations (at least according to the titles). There were sordid settings exemplifying a crude realism. The attraction of the *vulgus* could be maintained by vulgarity. In 1907 there were the first serious attacks from outraged society. The movies it was said in print, appealed to the baser passions, caused juvenile delinquency. Though the industry martialled its forces in reply, it knew the opposition had both power and justice on its side. It joined in 1909 in the formation of the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, which later became the National Board of Review. Meanwhile no one could object to Shakespeare. It is ironic that someone did. In Chicago the police censor called the Vitagraph *Macbeth* 'worse than the bloodiest melodrama' and ordered the deletion of the stabbing of Duncan, the brandishing of a bloody dagger, and the duel between Macbeth and Macduff.

The enormous expansion of the industry in America invited the search for the untried. From 1903 the exchange system brought wider distribution, increased profits, and the clamour for more pictures. By 1907 there were over a hundred film exchanges. Renters and distributors not content with their own incomes went into manufacture to supply the demand. The major companies left the streets for roof-top stages, and in 1906 for permanent and specially constructed studios where they could use the newly developed mercury-vapour lamps. By 1908 there were close to ten thousand nickle-odeons, five-cent 'theatres', mostly in stores. In 1905 Kalem had been founded on \$600; three years later it was making a net profit of \$5,000 a week. The larger Vitagraph was filming four pictures a week, twice as many as Kalem. The competition among companies was incessant. Much of it was quantitative, but it was also qualitative. The better the pictures, the better the profits. How could their films be improved? Well, Shakespeare was the best dramatist in the world, wasn't he? People spoke well of him. And finally, there were some concerned with the production of films who

had read Shakespeare and acted in his plays. In at least two cases, they could urge, and even more important, act as directors of Shakespeare films.

One of those men was to come in 1908 into the Vitagraph company, the producer of the largest number of Shakespeare films ever made by one company: not counting a title-borrowing for an otherwise non-Shakespearean *Comedy of Errors*, ten of them within less than two years. Vitagraph, one of the earliest and largest of the producing organisations, was found in 1899 in William T. Rock's billiard hall on 125th Street by combining the interests of three people who had already been making or exhibiting films. 'Pop' Rock had bought in 1896 from Edison a Vitascope, one of the perfected Kinetoscopes, with territorial rights for the state of Louisiana, where he exhibited films. In the same year J. Stuart Blackton, usually Jimmy, a free-lance sketcher, entertainer, and newspaper writer, had been sent by the New York *World* to interview Edison about his new machine. Edison told him that his latest, the Projecting Kinetoscope, would soon be on the market. Blackton and a friend, Albert E. Smith, who was clever with his hands, acquired one and began giving shows. The ingenious Smith shortly turned the apparatus into a camera and they began to take pictures, first on the pavements, and then on the roof of the Morse Building on Nassau Street. They called themselves Vitagraph. When Rock, now a free lance as well as the operator of the billiard parlour, began to take away their customers, they joined in partnership rather than fight each other. The combination prospered and in 1906 the firm acquired property in western Flatbush and built a studio. It was here that Vitagraph assembled a kind of stock company of actors and here or from here that they made their Shakespeare films. Blackton was in charge of the choice and direction of films but the rapidly expanding business needed additional assistance. An advertisement in the New York *Clipper* brought to the studio one William V. Ranous.

'Billy' Ranous had been in the theatre since childhood in a variety of capacities. Actor, stage manager and director, he is nevertheless difficult to trace because he was so frequently 'out-of-town' with minor companies. He made a kind of speciality of copying New York hits and jumping to the sticks with a scrub group of players until the law caught up with him. In more legitimate activities, he played 'heavies' or character parts and stage managed road companies. In New York his roles were usually bits, which he acted competently. He played unimportant characters in plays starring Fanny Janauschek, as early as 1874, and was at various times with Salvini, George Rignold, Genevieve Ward, Ernesto Rossi, Frank S. Chanfrau, Margaret Mather, Kyrle Bellew and Eleanor Robson. Some of his parts were in Shakespeare. He had done some acting in moving pictures made by the Edison company. If published theatre annals say little about him, he was obviously a man of wide experience, and a valuable acquisition for Vitagraph. Ranous was a theatre man; Blackton was not. Ranous had played Shakespeare, and probably also stage managed and directed some of Shakespeare's

plays. It seems reasonable to suspect that now the time was ripe, he urged or supported Blackton in the decision to film Shakespeare at Vitagraph. In any case he directed most of the Shakespeare films made by the company and acted in some of them. When he left Vitagraph in the fall of 1909 to become the first director for the newly organised Imp, the Independent Motion Picture Company of Carl Laemmle, the number of Vitagraph's Shakespeare pictures dwindled.

Paul Panzer, later the villain of the famous serial, *The Perils of Pauline*, reminisced in 1917 about Shakespeare film production at Vitagraph and gives us a valuable picture of activity in the studio.

'And it was when we began work in Flatbush that we had our first salaried director – the late William V. Ranous . . . He was a Shakespearean actor of the late Salvini school and a most capable man. Under his direction, Vitagraph produced *Macbeth*, *Richard the Third*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear* and other Shakespearean plays. They were all in one reel each. Those are the days that I remember best. We built our own scenery and props, and we certainly must have presented an incongruous sight, doing carpenter work and painting canvas while we were dressed in the costumes of Shakespeare's time. After we had built a set we threw saw, hammer and paint brush aside and stepped on to the stage and assumed the characters drawn by the immortal Bard.

'In this connection there is one thing that stands out with cameo clearness in my memory. There was a happy trio at the studio – a little girl named Florence Turner, a young man named Hector Dion and myself. Mr Dion and I built our own frames for the scenery, and Miss Turner sewed the canvas together on a borrowed sewing machine. When all was ready, we three would tack the canvas on the frame. For these services we received the magnificent salary of \$14 a week; but we got \$3 a day extra when we played in pictures. As a memento of those times Mr Blackton still has one of the rough battle axes that I made of wood for the production of *Macbeth* . . .'

Macbeth was indeed the first of the plays to be filmed by Vitagraph; 835 feet long, it was released on April 17, 1908, and could be obtained 'beautifully tinted'. It contained at least seventeen sequences with the emphasis on the first part of the play. The witches are shown before an effectively atmospheric studio backdrop of gnarled trees; they hail Macbeth and Banquo; Macbeth is informed that he is now Thane of Cawdor; Duncan names Malcolm his heir; Lady Macbeth receives her husband's letter; Duncan arrives at their castle; Macbeth sees a supernatural dagger; Duncan is dispatched; his murder is discovered; Banquo meets his death; his ghost appears at the feast; Lady Macbeth sleepwalks; Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane; Macbeth is finally killed. There were other scenes too, but the rest are difficult to identify.

It is necessary to warn the reader of the uncritical enthusiasm displayed

by trade papers, but the review in the London *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* of May 14 shows not only that the Vitagraph *Macbeth* was almost immediately exhibited abroad but also something further about the film.

'This firm are to be congratulated on the masterly way in which they have staged Shakespeare's tragedy. The famous play contains many situations which lend themselves admirably to effective treatment in picture form, and the company have made the most of them. Thus in the first scene, when the three 'Weird Sisters' prophesy that Macbeth shall be King we are shown him as in a vision, in the King's robes and crown. Another effective scene reveals Macbeth on his way to murder the King, the appearance of the dagger being cleverly represented. Then in order are pictured the other famous scenes of the play, culminating in Macbeth's death at the hand of Malcolm [?] . . . Each scene is cleverly set, the costumes are accurate and the acting good and we shall be surprised if this does not prove one of the most successful of recent subjects.'

Two stills show Macbeth killing Duncan and Banquo's ghost at the banquet, the latter confirming the hint of double exposure in the review. Other details of the film are pointed out in the published remarks of the unfortunate Police Lieutenant who censored it in Chicago. He rules especially against its realism. It is difficult to have much sympathy with censorship, but the point of view becomes understandable.

'I am not taking issue with Shakespeare. As a writer he is far from reproach. But he never looked into the distance and saw that his plots were going to be interpreted for the five-cent theater.

'Shakespeare has a way of making gory things endurable, because there is so much of art and finish. But you can't reproduce that. The moving picture people get a bunch of Broadway loafers in New York to go through the motions and interpret Shakespeare . . .

'The stabbing scene in the play is not predominant. But in the picture show it is the feature. In the play the stabbing is forgotten in the other exciting and artful and artistic creations that divert the imagination. On the canvas you see the dagger enter and come out and see the blood flow and the wound that's left.

'Shakespeare is art, but it's not adapted altogether for the 5-cent style of art.'

If the Lieutenant was right, the picture did not live up to its subtitle: 'Shakespeare's Sublime Tragedy,' though Billy Ranous, who played Macbeth, made the most of his opportunities. A Miss Carver was the Lady Macbeth, Panzer was the Macduff, and I suspect Charles Kent doubled as Duncan and Banquo, thereby being killed twice.

'The time has been
That when the brains were out, the man would die'

As far as one can gather, *Macbeth* was largely taken in the studio; for its next Shakespeare film, *Romeo and Juliet*, Vitagraph shot much of the action outdoors. The evidence is conclusive, for this is one of the films which has survived. In addition there are more stills to examine, and much more was published about it than for *Macbeth*. The balcony scenes for example, utilized a house near Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn. The duel between Romeo and Tybalt was fought on the paved terrace at the south end of the Boat Lake in Central Park, close by the tiered Bethesda Fountain surmounted by the winged Angel of the Waters. The figures on the fountain of Temperance, Purity, Health and Peace are perhaps only ironically suitable to the atmosphere of street fighting in Verona, but they were well in the background, and there is at least a tenuous appropriateness in that they, as well as the Angel, had been executed by the sculptress, Emma Stebbins, who at the time of their completion in 1865 was living in Rome in the home of Charlotte Cushman. The outdoor contestants were Paul Panzer as Romeo, and John G. Adolfi as Tybalt, both later with Warner Bros, the one as actor, the second as director. The Juliet of this film was Florence Lawrence. Others recognizable are Ranous as the apothecary – he also directed – Charles Kent as Capulet, Charles Chapman as Montague, William Shea as Peter, and Miss Carver as the Nurse. Josephine Atkinson, who the next year was to become Mrs Panzer, had a bit part. *Romeo and Juliet* was 915 feet in length, could be had tinted, and was released on June 2, 1908.

Romeo and Juliet was advertised by Vitagraph, not quite accurately as in nine scenes:

'Scene 1—Capulet introduces his daughter, Juliet, to Paris, her future husband.

Scene 2—Romeo, son of Montague [Capulet's enemy] enters Capulet's house during a masked ball and there meets Juliet.

Scene 3—Love at first sight. [The wall-leaping and balcony scene.]

Scene 4—The secret marriage of Romeo and Juliet in Friar Lawrence's cell.

Scene 5—Infuriated by the death of his friend, Mercutio, Romeo fights and kills Tybalt, a kinsman of Juliet, and is banished by the Prince.

Scene 6—Capulet insists on Juliet's marriage to Paris.

Scene 7—'Take this potion and for two days you will be as dead, then I will come to the tomb and awaken you [used as a subtitle].'

Scene 8—Hearing of the supposed death of Juliet, Romeo buys poison and prepares to kill himself.

Scene 9—Juliet recovers from the effect of the potion and, finding that Romeo is no more, joins him in death.'

[The reconciliation between the two houses follows].

This summary omits the picture of Juliet drinking the potion, a shot of