

*Shakespeare in Love* is perhaps best described as a “lark.” The premise of its plot—that Shakespeare lived through a romance like that presented in *Romeo and Juliet*, that in fact just such a romance was the inspiration for Shakespeare’s most famous love tragedy—is as absurd and unlikely as the plots of Shakespeare’s own comedies. But screenwriters Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard give us exactly what we want: a Shakespeare who experiences the intensity of romantic love in the same way his famous characters do. We like to believe that only a writer who has lived through tragic passion can write accurately and passionately about that kind of love. But of course this overlooks the reality of what we know about Shakespeare.

Shakespeare didn’t need to live through a *Romeo and Juliet* scenario to write it for stage. He only need to observe human behavior, borrow the story already extant in more than one English text, and imagine—in a more perfect language than his predecessors—this story of tragic and passionate love. And this is the real Shakespeare that this nevertheless delightful film obscures: the Shakespeare who was capable of imagining human beings experiencing life in ways he himself never had. This is not to say that Shakespeare never experienced a lover’s passion—his “shotgun” wedding with Anne Hathaway suggests he knew what it was to be overwhelmed by sexual desire. This is not to say that Shakespeare never experienced the kind of hatred and despite he “loads” into a character like Tybalt (the obvious possibility overlooked by the suggestion that Shakespeare had to be a *Romeo* to write a *Romeo* is that Shakespeare must then also be a *Iago* or a *Coriolanus* to write their characters so effectively.

But I don’t think, finally, that this is what Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard were actually proposing. In fact, I sometimes think they intend the film to function as a kind

of parody of *Romeo and Juliet*. Who could resist dropping William Shakespeare into the role of one of his most immature protagonists?

And the delights of the film, especially in its portrayal of Elizabethan London and the world of its theatre, outweigh any absurdity those of us who know a bit about Shakespeare might snort at. Indeed, knowledge of Shakespeare and his theatre greatly enhance the experience of the film. If you know a bit about the kind of plays John Webster writes as one of the playwrights in the generation after Shakespeare's, you can only laugh and approve of the boy who confesses to Queen Elizabeth that he like the part where Juliet stabs herself. Familiarity with the mysterious circumstances of Marlowe's death in an inn in Deptford increases the sense of irony when Shakespeare uses his name to protect his own interest in the woman he loves, only to hear that Marlowe has been killed: Shakespeare imagines it must have been the jealous fiancé to whom Shakespeare had identified himself as Christopher Marlowe. And the theatre itself, with its proprietor Philip Henslowe (played wonderfully by Geoffrey Rush), including rehearsals and then the performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Rose theatre, the appearances and behaviors of known actors like Edward (Ned) Alleyn and Richard Burbage (even Will Kemp with his comic dog routine), right down to the Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney: all of this is portrayed in a way very much in line with what we have come to learn about Elizabethan theatre. This is for me, personally, the real success of *Shakespeare in Love*: the recreation and representation of the world and nature of Shakespeare's theatre.

One more delightful tactic, provided by the screenwriters: the implementation of lines from Shakespeare's plays, slightly adjusted for new circumstances. The better you know Shakespeare's texts, the more enjoyment you receive in this respect as well. For

example, when Viola de Lessup has learned about Shakespeare's wife, he says to her, "There needs no wife come from Stratford to tell you this," echoing Horatio's response to Hamlet's assertion that "There's never a villain dwelling in all Denmark / But he's an arrant knave": "There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave to tell us this" (*Hamlet* 1.5.123-26). The film holds many such moments as this, and I hope you will enjoy them. And so without further delay, we present *Shakespeare in Love*.

Samuel Smith, Professor of English

Parmer Cinema, Fall 2006