

## DVD Review

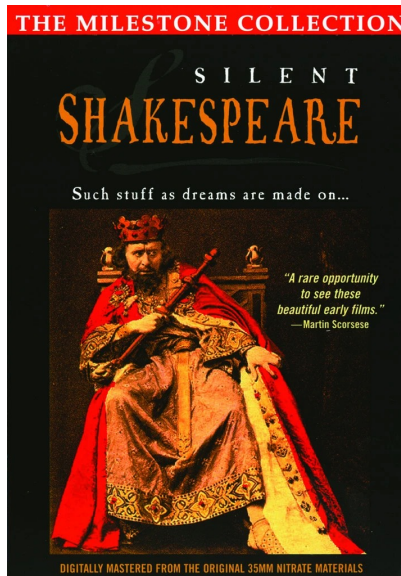
# Silent Shakespeare



Review by Kurt Easterwood | Published June 27, 2000

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If you do a search on "William Shakespeare" on the Internet Movie Database, you'll get over 400 films that can be credited, one way or another, to his writings. It's probably safe to say that few individuals have as many film credit appearances as the Bard himself. And while we usually tend to think of a relatively few adaptations (and adapters) when we think of Shakespeare on film—those classic Olivier's and Zeffereilli's, the interpretive Kurosawa's, the innovative Welles', or the neoclassicist Branagh's—Shakespeare's huge body of work served as fertile material for cinema's pioneers at the turn of the century, who ingeniously would condense the great comedies, tragedies, and histories into silent one- and two-reelers.



Seven of these early adaptations have been collected together in *Silent Shakespeare*, from Milestone Film and Video and recently released on DVD by Image Entertainment. The British Film Institute's National Film and Television Archive has painstakingly restored the seven works collected here from the original nitrate films, and while they are by no means in perfect condition, they truly are a magical sight to behold, and as close in condition to their original state as we will likely ever see. These films feel like they are from another time, which of course they are, but at the same time one can't help but be impressed with their liveliness, their inventiveness, and their exuberance.

### ***King John* (1899, Great Britain, 1-1/2 minutes)**

Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's *King John* (he both directed and played the lead) is considered by most experts to be the first ever film adaptation of Shakespeare, and for a long time was thought to be lost forever. However, several years ago a small piece was discovered in Amsterdam, and that is what is presented here. This piece is apparently one of four scenes filmed, in what wasn't so much an adaptation as it was an advertisement for the *King John* that Beerbohm Tree was staging contemporaneously at Her Majesty's Theater in London.

The scene presented here is the last scene of the play, the death by poison of King John in the garden of Swinstead Abbey from Act V, and Beerbohm Tree's histrionic death throes perfectly set the mood for the rest of the DVD—we know we're in for something ephemeral, delicate and fragile, yet full of vitality and boundless energy. While his stiff attendants and distraught son Prince Henry (incidentally played by a woman) look on, Beerbohm Tree flails and rages against the coming end. Like the Lumière and Edison "actualities" that came just a few short years before, this short piece slots itself wonderfully into that ambiguous space between story and documentary, fiction and fact. However you read it though, it packs quite a punch. The film clip ends just before King John succumbs to the poison, leaving the viewer hanging without the benefit of the classic denouement. This suspended climax then permeates the remainder of the DVD.

### ***The Tempest* (1908, Great Britain, 12 minutes)**

This 1908 production from a small British film company called Clarendon looks like it might have been made by the great French cinema-magician, Georges Méliès, with its inventive sets and primitive trick photography. The film will seem inevitably hokey to modern day audiences already jaded by the digital trickery of *Gladiator*, for example, but like the best of Méliès, it possesses a wonderful spirit of adventurous mischief making, perfectly in tune with Shakespeare's character of Ariel, herself a Spirit beautifully flickering in and out of reality, like an imagination that can't be snuffed out.

### ***A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1909, U.S.A., 11 minutes) and *Twelfth Night* (1910, U.S.A., 12 minutes)**

These two one-reelers were made by the Vitagraph Company of New York and directed by Charles Kent, who also appears in the latter as Malvolio. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, filmed at least partly in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, is perhaps the best preserved of all the films presented in this collection, with a consistent and wonderfully nostalgic wash of sepia and comparatively few scratches and blemishes. Like *The Tempest*, this film benefits greatly from the outdoor locations—there isn't an interior shot in the film. The best scenes in the film are those with the tradesmen rehearsing their play, with William Ranous as the weaver Bottom stealing the show. *Twelfth Night* by comparison feels a bit more hemmed in, both in terms of the filming and the amount of story that's crammed into its 12 minutes. Kent however is wonderful as the duped Malvolio.

### ***King Lear* (1910, Italy, 16 minutes) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1910, Italy, 9 minutes)**

These two works, both directed by Gerolamo Lo Savio for the Film d'arte Italiana production company, are really the shining jewels of this collection. Both feature extensive hand-stenciled color, which had to be painted directly onto the film, and make for stunning examples of the restoration work done throughout the collection. Both films make enterprising use of location filming, with the Venetian backdrop of the latter particularly impressive. Unfortunately, *The Merchant of Venice* suffers more than any other film on the DVD from missing footage—including the ending of the film—and so the result is an even more condensed Shakespeare reeling by at breakneck speed. Both shorts feature the legendary Italian stage actor Ermete Novelli, literally towering over the proceedings in his respective roles as the proud and ultimately crestfallen Lear and the scheming

Shylock. The costumes of each, brilliantly highlighted in the deep maroons and vibrant pinks and blues of the hand-tinting, are sumptuous. Both of these films are truly Magic Lantern slides come to life.

### ***Richard III* (1911, Great Britain, 23 minutes)**

The collection closes with Sir Frank Benson's production of *Richard III* for the Co-operative Cinematograph Company. Unfortunately, this work, which is the longest of the films presented here, the largest in scale with many characters and a host of extras, and the most complete when compared to the Shakespeare original, is also the most unimaginative when it comes to moving beyond the boundaries of the theater stage. In fact, it never does break out of the proscenium arch, remaining at the same fixed point through the 7 or 8 scenes, with only the backdrop changing. (In fairness, none of the films presented here varies the central fixed viewpoint—Griffith was still a few years off with his breakthrough of freeing up the camera — but in *Richard III* it is the most obvious.)

## Image Transfer

The films are presented in full-frame with contemporary titles introducing each film and its cast and crew. By contrast, intertitles are all from the original films. The visual quality of the material varies greatly, and none of the films, understandably, is in anywhere near pristine condition. However, all the films are more than presentable, and in a few instances, surprisingly clean and clear. One can only imagine what these films looked like before restoration.

## Audio Transfer

Laura Rossi's contemporary score, presented in Dolby Digital Stereo, is what you would expect, nothing more and nothing less. It never intrudes on the action, and rarely does it call attention to itself. Thankfully there is none of the added sound effects that so often detract from contemporary accompaniments to silent work.

## Disc Extras

There are no extras to speak of on the disc, other than the chapter stops allowing access to each film.

## Final Comments

These films brilliantly capture a burgeoning art, struggling with moving past the boundaries imposed on it by the conventions of the theater, and yet boldly interpreting the theater's greatest master of poetry and drama. While the title *Silent Shakespeare* accurately but blandly describes what this compilation is about, it really is a misnomer. These seven short films speak volumes—not the volumes of poetry that Shakespeare put into each of the original plays perhaps but rather that of the hopes and dreams of talented craftsmen and women who wanted to elevate and entertain the masses.

Image really needs to be commended on another stellar and important release. Cinema's silent past, comprising just about a third of its 105-year history, is all too easily forgotten by most current cinema-goers and DVD watchers. Yet within its sometimes-primitive confines, there is a wealth of discoveries waiting for the adventurous cinephile, whether they come from familiar names like Chaplin or Keaton or from the mostly forgotten filmmakers presented here.