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NEWSLETTER

Fall 2003

President's Welcome

Welcome to PCAS/ACAS 2003, everyone! Program chairs Rhonda Wilcox and Mary Alice Money have constructed one of the most exciting programs I've seen in years, with sessions on the edgiest elements of popular culture; on scholarly examinations of trends and all kinds of topics in American literature, history, politics, and art; on making the topics of all of these conversations—from Shakespeare to MERLOT to rhetoric—meaningful in our classrooms. Our program is once again an eclectic mix worthy of our reputation as the most enjoyable and professionally rewarding interdisciplinary conference *anywhere* each fall.

Some highlights deserve special mention, including the inaugural Liz Bell Special Session on Gender and American Culture, conceived last year by the Executive Committee as an annual memorial to Liz, a past PCAS/ACAS president, founding editor of *Studies in American Culture*, and longtime friend and member of the associations. Rhonda Wilcox, just back from an international tour of speaking engagements about her book *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the*

See you on the beach!

2003 PCAS/ACAS Meeting Highlights

The 32nd annual meeting of the Popular Culture Association in the South and the American Culture Association in the South will be held October 2-4 at the Sea Turtle Inn in Atlantic Beach (Jacksonville), Florida, a site to which the organization has returned many times. This year, instead of having a Friday luncheon, we will have two receptions (both with cash bar). A highlight of the Thursday reception will be an authentic presentation of medieval popular culture by Professor Dick Gibson and some of his Jacksonville University students: a Robin Hood dialogue and quarterstaff demonstration.

Vampire Slayer (edited with PCAS/ACAS colleague David Lavery), will conduct a "workshop" on *Buffy* for the uninitiated. And in the very first session of the conference, celebrated master photographer Mike Smith will present a slide-show discussion of his color landscape photography.

You'll also note that we've replaced our traditional conference luncheon this year with receptions, including heavy hors d'oeuvres and a cash bar, on both Thursday and Friday evenings. Our goal in doing this was simple: to schedule

The general business meeting will be held Friday at 5 p.m. Immediately afterwards, at 6 p.m., will be the Friday reception, the highlight of which will be the awards presentations. Friday will include evening sessions of film/television discussion workshops—a popular addition to recent PCA programs, which PCAS will be trying for the first time.

Saturday will feature a tour led by PCAS members Allison Graham and Angela (Jill) Hague, titled "Florida's Hidden History." Saturday sessions are scheduled to continue until 4:30. Throughout the three days, there will be many wonderful presentations to attend.

into the conference some extra opportunities for visiting with old friends and, of course, for making some new ones. At the reception on Friday, we'll present awards for outstanding essays presented at the conference and published this past year in our two superb journals. Please come to these events, and let's make extra efforts to welcome those new to our conference this year.

I look forward to seeing you all in Jacksonville.

Robert L. McDonald
Virginia Military Institute

2003 PCAS and ACAS

1 Meets in Atlantic Beach Oct. 2-4

Book Reviews

Shakespeare into Film (Facts on File), by James M. Welsh, Richard Vela, John C. Tibbetts, et al., Checkmark Books, 2002.

Scholars generally agree that Shakespeare adapted earlier works for all but four of his plays. This means that many members of Shakespeare's audiences were familiar with the basic plots of his plays, including the conclusions, before entering the theater. So it is likely they attended to see Shakespeare's "take" on these familiar stories, and it is equally likely that some were disappointed with Shakespeare's interpretations. However, I doubt Shakespeare received much criticism for not being "true" to his sources. Yet today few adaptations of text into film cause more disagreements than someone adapting Shakespeare for the screen.

In *Shakespeare into Film's* preface, Kenneth S. Rothwell traces the 20th century's history of those disagreements via a bibliographic survey of Shakespeare film. "It has been," Rothwell claims, "a movement from Victorian conservatism to modernist expansiveness to postmodernist permissiveness" (ix). In other words, critics moved from asking "Is it Shakespeare?"—this question

arising from their desire for a "literal translation of Shakespeare's language" and staging (ix)—to asking "Is Shakespeare in it?" (xviii)—this question coming in response to films such as *10 Things I Hate About You* (*The Taming of the Shrew*) and *My Own Private Idaho* (which occasionally alludes to *Henry IV*, parts 1 and 2, and *Henry V*). Rothwell's survey provides a useful starting point for those interested in further research into Shakespeare film and its attendant criticism.

In the introduction, "Seduced by Shakespeare, Transfixed by Spectacle," James M. Welsh continues the discussion of viewers' responses to Shakespeare film by examining a common, and mistaken, assumption often held by moviegoers: that a screenplay and a dramatic script are equivalents (xxiv). Quoting Peter R. Gerdes, Welsh notes that screenplays guide "the representation" whereas with a dramatic script "the representation serves the play" (xxiv). It is crucial, Welsh implies, for a director to understand this difference, yet that understanding does not necessarily mean a film must include the text verbatim to be a successful adaptation. For example, Welsh finds Tony Richardson's 1969 *Hamlet*, rather than Branagh's ponderous 1998 attempt, a very successful adaptation because Richardson places "the text and actors front

and center" (xxvi), though Branagh includes every syllable from the original and Richardson "trimmed the text to half its length" (xxvi). Apparently, Richardson grasped the difference between film and stage while Branagh confused them.

Examining how well, in the authors' opinions, various directors accommodated this stage/screen difference is the purpose of the nearly comprehensive A-Z listing of Shakespeare film that comprises the bulk of *Shakespeare into Film*. Each listing contains a synopsis of the play followed by a critique of the films directly adapting the play and many films influenced by Shakespeare such as *Forbidden Planet* (1956), a derivative of *The Tempest*. Welsh's, Vela's, and Tibbetts's critiques read more

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PCAS NEWSLETTER

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like sophisticated movie reviews than literary criticism, a definite plus.

Shakespeare into Film concludes with a dozen essays that appeared in *Literature/Film Quarterly* between 1973 and 2002. Why these particular essays were chosen is not explained, though one could surmise that readers new to the study of Shakespeare film could gain some understanding of the historic tenor of the field's scholarly conversation. That could be plausible, if it were not that nine of the essays were published in 1997 and later with the remaining three published in 1992, 1976, and 1973. Welsh, Vela, and Tibbetts should have explained why these particular essays were considered important for inclusion, lest readers get the impression that they hastily compiled the book. Included with the essays is an interview, conducted by Tibbetts, with Franco Zeffirelli and Mel Gibson about Zeffirelli's 1990 adaptation of *Hamlet*. This interview is disappointing, for Tibbetts does not ask Zeffirelli to explain his reasons for truncating *Hamlet* into a movie that is unintelligible unless one is extremely familiar with Shakespeare's dramatic script.

Nevertheless, *Shakespeare into Film* is a valuable resource for students interested in Shakespeare and/or film and an

excellent pedagogical reference for finding material to supplement teaching Shakespeare's texts.

Kenneth Wright
James Madison University

The Encyclopedia of Great Filmmakers (Great Filmmakers Series), 3 vols., edited by John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh, Facts on File, 2002.

It can certainly be argued that the filmmaker is as much a construction in his/her film as the actors and situations created there. As Tom Gunning notes, the authorial presence of the film director "remains precisely poised on the threshold of the work, evident in the film itself, but also standing outside it, absent except in the imprint left behind." Examining that "imprint" is precisely what John Tibbetts and James Welsh attempt to do in their three volume series: *The Encyclopedia of Great Filmmakers*.

The first volume, which is a condensed edition of their earlier two-volume encyclopedia, is not designed to be a comprehensive list of filmmakers; indeed, their roster is limited to only 150 entries. What is rather wonderful is how they compiled such a list: "calling on learned scholars to write entries on directors they considered 'significant,' college professors to write about those filmmakers pertinent to their classroom studies, and buffs

anxious that their favorite directors (no matter how little known) should not escape public notice," according to Gunning. The result is an encyclopedia populated with wonderfully passionate biographic entries, simply written, that range from Charlie Chaplin to Spike Lee. Each entry gives a complete list of the director's films and suggested resources for further research. Following the A-Z listings are appendices that focus specifically on documentary and experimental filmmakers, making this encyclopedia a valuable guide to anyone interested in the varied and international terrain of master filmmakers.

As companions to the broadly conceived *Encyclopedia of Master Filmmakers*, the series offers volumes that telescope individual filmmakers; I examined the volumes on Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles. What is striking about these volumes is the depth and breadth of the information provided: each volume retains the A-Z layout for ease of reference and each introduction seeks to contextualize the filmmaker's oeuvre and influence. Taken together, these encyclopedias would form a strong basis from which to expand and inform a study of a particular filmmaker as well as provide a handy guide for those teaching or studying the art of filmmaking.

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Like to contribute a review?

Write for the PCAS/ACAS Newsletter. We're looking for reviews of works concerning popular/American culture, especially if they are written or edited by members of our organization, or works to which members have contributed.

Contact Shelley Aley at aleysb@jmu.edu if you would be interested in contributing something for the next edition of the Newsletter this spring.

Check out the web site at

<http://web.jmu.edu/writing/PCASACAS.htm>

Check out the PCAS/ACAS Web Site
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