

Peter Holland

Sheedy Award Reflections 2012

Thank you, Tom. I swear there were moments when I almost thought I recognized myself.

Thinking of the Sheedy Award as the equivalent of a Notre Dame teaching Oscar, obviously I ought to start by saying I'd like to thank the Academy. Actually, I want to start by thanking John and Susan McMeel who with such generosity endowed the chair that brought me to Notre Dame in 2002. Something is plainly wrong with giving me the Sheedy Award and I kept asking JoAnn Della Neva, when she told me the news, was she really sure she had the right person or would she turn out to have made an embarrassing mistake. This is my eleventh year at Notre Dame and only in my first year did I teach a full 2/2 load. I don't think the committee really had enough evidence to make its decision. But it's too late now and *nothing* but nothing in my teaching career has made me feel quite so proud. Ironically, in order to be here now, I've had to cancel class today – not that my students complained too much about that.

Consider these seven film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. The quiz questions will follow in a moment and, as my students know to their cost and annoyance, I like tough quizzes.

1. Romeo and Juliet are kept apart by the politics of their two families in 20th century America: middle-class Republicans and blue-collar Democrats.
2. Romeo and Julianne are lawyers working for rival firms, kept apart by the ethical differences between their approaches to the practice of the law and to corporate greed as they confront each other in a major case of corporate fraud.

3. Romeo and Juliet belong to families of feuding gnomes in the gardens of adjacent houses numbered 2B and Not 2B.
4. Romeo and Julian are high-school basketball players who discover their sexual orientation and mutual attraction and have to cope with the opposition of family and friends.
5. The young lovers are the children of warring fast-food franchises who come together because they both love Shakespeare and are involved in a school production of *Romeo and Juliet*.
6. The lovers are not teenagers but seniors in a retirement home.
7. The story is mapped onto the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys.

Question 1. (Easy) Identify which one is an animated film released in 2011.

Question 2. (Difficult) Identify which one is set in and made in Singapore (released in 2000).

Question 3. (Next-to-impossible) How could you get hold of a copy of any of the other five?

The answer to Question 1 is, as I'm sure many of you know, film 3, the feuding gnomes of *Gnomeo and Juliet*, with a soundtrack of numbers by Elton John and the voices of, among others, Maggie Smith, Michael Caine, Dolly Parton, Ozzy Osbourne and Hulk Hogan. No, I'm not making this up. It can stand here for the pervasive cultural presence of the *Romeo* narrative and the playfulness of playing with/playing off Shakespeare, the profoundly resonant echoing of the story as something we know without knowing how we know it. My students love it, as do I, and my one rule in class discussion is that each may only use the word "cute" once.

The Singaporean film is number 5, *Chicken Rice War*, in which the fast food franchises are run by rival families, a Shakespeare film adaptation which, like many others, embeds high-school Shakespeare into itself, locating the cultural experience of Shakespeare in pre-college education but, as in *10 Things I Hate About You*, allowing for the idea that school kids might

actually *like* Shakespeare. But it also stands here for the global Shakespeare film, legacies of Empire here but mapped onto a non-Anglophone text within which Shakespeare's own text exists.

And question 3 is a trick question because all the other five are outlines of screenplays created by ND students as part of their midterm papers in my 'Shakespeare and Film' class this semester. I had never tried asking my class to create their own Shakespeare film before but I borrowed – alright, stole – the idea from a friend in England, imitation being the sincerest form of flattery and as an early modernist I value the art of *imitatio*. So I made their first substantial piece of writing the first five pages of a Shakespeare screenplay, coupled with a five page analysis of what they had written, its curve, its filmic style, its intended audience demographic, its cultural contexts, its purpose. I had more fun reading these midterms than any others I've ever had and, I fondly imagine, they seem to have had more fun writing them. 'Fun' is a crucial term in – well, the word had to turn up sooner or later – my *pedagogy*, which is a concept I can honestly say I had never thought about before coming to Notre Dame.

Some of you will have noticed by now that none of this seems to involve much work on the Shakespeare plays underpinning these films, completed or imagined. Teaching 'Shakespeare and', as I usually do – Shakespeare and Film, Shakespeare and Performance, Shakespeare and Editing, for instance – is not the same as teaching some version of 'Shakespeare' *tout court*, something I've not yet done at Notre Dame. One of the series I'm involved in as a General Editor, is Oxford Shakespeare Topics, an Oxford University Press series, which I run with Stanley Wells, and currently stretching to 22 volumes, nearly all with titles in the form 'Shakespeare and' (and Text, and Masculinity, and the Drama of His Time, and Material Culture, and the Bible and so on), leavened with a few 'Shakespeare in's (in America, in Eastern Europe,

in the 18th century). It seems to be the way my mind works and my discipline thinks but it involves a complex interrogation of the copula; as I try to make plain in my course on ‘Shakespeare and Film’, the ‘and’ in the middle is a really complex dynamic, not a simple linkage. How one might get from the one side of ‘and’ to the other is the crucial question, in either direction.

The kinds of questions I am asking of the materials with which I work and which I teach depend on one of the central features of working on Shakespeare, who is of course the gift that keeps on giving or, in the phrase used by Judi Dench and her late husband Michael William, ‘the gentleman who pays the rent’. If quiz questions tend to have only right answers and wrong answers, questions about meaning in Shakespeare and, indeed, questions about Shakespeare films or Shakespeare performances depend not on either/or but both/and, a mode of thinking that underpins the openness of the object and which reinserts the subject into the negotiation with the text. And my students can be unnerved by the discovery that in papers for my class they are not only permitted but also encouraged to write ‘I’. Writing about Shakespeare cannot be done well within a template constructed for high school students, most of whom, by definition, are less talented than our wonderful students. Writing about Shakespeare cannot be done well is done dispassionately, as an academic exercise, as nothing more than a course requirement.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Before we teach we are taught. And I can’t honestly say that I was well taught in English studies. Time for a bit of autobiography. I was the first in my family to go to college. Since many Americans tend to assume that being part of an immigrant culture is their prerogative, let me just say that I am first-generation British on one side and second-generation on the other. My mother’s parents were Jews from Russia who met and married in London; my father was an illegal immigrant who, with three friends, all in their

mid-teens, fled from their Polish *shtetl* in 1927. Theatre was the art-form my parents loved and I work now on Shakespeare and performance because of the delight, the profound delight in going to the theatre that I shared with them. There is a thrill in being at a live performance, in that moment as the houselights go down that is one of the great joys of my life. Nothing in my experience of Shakespeare at school had anything to do with performance. What I enjoyed doing at and for school was reading, all day and every day, anything and everything. I borrowed books from the wonderful public libraries of in my suburbs – actually, I belonged to libraries in two boroughs so that I could borrow more books at a time. And my parents encouraged me in that love of books. Learning has a high status in Jewish communities, especially in North London, even if Jews might not be welcomed in the best schools. My own public school, i.e. private school, had only recently abolished its 3% quota of Jewish schoolboys when I went there in the late 1950s. When I went to university my father, bless him, gave me an allowance but also opened accounts in his name at the two major bookshops in Cambridge so that buying books was never something I had to choose over the important purchases of student life, like buying beer. I loved books then and still do, in that slightly manic way that results in the chaos of books in my office and study.

So I went up to Cambridge to read English – in England you read a subject, you don't major in it and the different formulations may be significant. And read English is what I did. No university requirements, no maths or theo or phys ed or writing and rhetoric. Just three years of English. Oh and three years of discovering film in the vibrant student film culture of Cambridge and three years of watching student theatre too, where I quickly learned that I couldn't direct and had no desire to act. Teaching in Cambridge takes two forms: tutorials, known as supervisions, one-hour sessions once a week, in pairs with a faculty member, for which one wrote papers every

single week (I had one supervisee who wrote 30 pp a week for me, 30 exciting, thoughtful, smart pages at that); and lectures, entirely optional, on which we voted with our feet, coming back each week or not as we chose. The lectures were wonderful: brilliant people, usually reading their carefully written lecture and we learned to listen attentively for an hour, wanting to hear, say, Raymond Williams, the founding father of cultural studies, who lectured without a script, sat on a stool and talked in an arc that precisely shaped his argument and equally precisely filled the hour, while his wife Joy sat at the back of the room and took notes so that he could write his next book from her notes. But the supervisions I had were poor until my last undergraduate year when Brian Vickers took pity on me and gave me a few supervisions on the History and Theory of Literary Criticism and enabled me to understand what being an academic is all about. Brian's passion for teaching meant that he would bicycle round to my flat on a Sunday morning with lists of more articles to be read for the next supervision. I didn't do that for my students in Cambridge and I haven't done that here. But I try to convey that passion that I feel just as much as Brian does,

And then, after a couple of years of graduate work I started giving supervisions, proposing lecture courses to the Department, being a teacher. And no-one ever told me how to do it. There was no training, no resources, no Kaneb, no discussion of pedagogy. I taught, we all taught, as best we could. And we taught a lot. Until I reached the equivalent of Full Professor, when University regulations limited me to six hours supervision a week, I gave a minimum of a dozen supervisions a week plus the lectures I taught for the Department. In my heaviest teaching week ever, in the run-up to exams – and all grades depended 100% on final exams set by the Department's exam board, not by a course instructor – I once gave 35 supervisions, seven hours

a day for five days, smoking non-stop to calm myself. Supervisions can have an intensity and, given how good the students can be, a sharpness of engagement that is unequalled.

But I still had no pedagogy. Moving to Notre Dame was, therefore, something of a shock. I had never written a course outline, except for a course at UCLA when I visited there for a quarter. I had never taught a 15-week semester. I had never prescribed mid-terms and finals and journal entries and response pieces. I had never taught a class of 20. If some of our new junior faculty struggle in their first semesters, so did this senior faculty member. I had two advantages. One is my voice. Most of you will never have received a narrative TCE which ignored the standard questions and simply read “His accent really rocks.” I can’t help it. It’s not an accent. It’s what I sound like. And all the years in Cambridge of lecturing and supervising and talking at dinner trained me in speaking in complex sentences as eloquently as possible. I came to understand that here *eloquence* is not necessarily a word of praise; rather it connotes here a suspicion that this is superficial rhetoric, not thought. In Cambridge there was a distinction between being intelligent and being clever, with the latter viewed with the same dubiety as eloquence can be here. But we learned to speak well, to use the skills of rhetoric to make our speech persuasive, not as a disguise to cover poor thought or to erase weaknesses. Eloquence for me is a means of conveying the truth.

The other is that I have a great teaching mentor. Everything I know about teaching at Notre Dame comes from watching my wife Romana Huk engage with her students. We’re different kinds of teachers, of course, and she doesn’t have an English accent. But as I’ve watched her prep for class or comment on student papers, met her at a day’s end after her innumerable long talks with her students, listened to her worrying about a course’s design or the demands on student time, I’ve learned how I might try to teach as well as she does. As a student

in my class who has been in her class said to me on Monday “She’s awesome”. She is. This award is hers as much as mine.

Since 2004, I have had a third advantage: teaching my film classes in the Browning Cinema. As someone who used to screen films for class by renting 16mm reels, using a noisy projector onto a lousy screen, I know (but my students don’t know) how lucky they are to be studying and enjoying films, even from dvds, projected in our THX-certified cinema. Digital projection is the next and vitally necessary step for our work. Before long, no new film will be available on celluloid. Development, please note.

Still, one can’t please everyone. I looked myself up on ratemyprofessors.com this week: there are only two comments. The first from 2006 reads ‘Looks just like Shakespeare, including the bad hair, and has great accent -- what more do you want in a hot Shakespeare expert?’ – and I am reminded that for a long time the ND directory listed me as ‘Professor, Shakespeare Stud’. The second from 2010 just says ‘He makes me angry!’, followed by sixteen exclamation marks (I counted them). That saddens me, not that I angered the student (I can cope with that) but that s/he never talked to me about it. That’s truly disappointing.

There are two things more I want to talk about. The first, since this is a public platform and I have your attention, is to say that I believe that it is time for Notre Dame to reconsider its university requirements and core curriculum. It’s closing on forty years since they were established in their current form and the world has changed. It’s not the announced aims of the core curriculum that is at fault but it is a real question whether our requirements still fulfill those aims. As I mentioned, my own intellectual formation did not involve any gen ed. And I am not convinced that what we work with here, the high number of requirements (14 or 15 in all, more than we require in a major) and their distribution, really serves our 21st century students well. My

students do not bring their math and science courses to bear on their work with me, nor even their theo and philo courses. The liberal arts education we pride ourselves on is, for most, simply a matter of ticking boxes, not of creating a coherent experience. It's time to consider the matter afresh. I know that the members of any working party on the topic would be committing themselves to a vast labour, much antagonism and likely failure. But the lack of training in so much that underpins a graduate's experience of our world seems to me the worst kind of fossilization. We need requirements in technology and visual literacy, not calculus. It's time to take on the task.

That's the serious business. The other is that I promised myself that I'd show one clip, something I find rich and complex and provoking, something that is funny and potent and contemporary, something that speaks of film cultures and studio systems and where Shakespeare might be found in them, something that shows the endless meta-status of Shakespeare film, constructing a commentary on itself, something that rethinks an attitude towards Shakespeare's language and how we might now understand it, something that enjoys its own in-jokes and knows that few in the audience will get all of them, something that relates to film genres my students know far more about than I do (for I always learn from them and with them), something that is the kind of material I love using in class because it makes me smile and is fun and pleasurable for me – and central to my teaching is a clear belief that if I'm not enjoying the materials there is precious little chance that my students will. No one clip could do all that but here is the nearest I could come up with. It's from John McTiernan's 1993 film *Last Action Hero*. Danny Madigan is a school kid whose screen hero is Jack Slater, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger. At this point he's on his way to school, hours late, having been watching the latest Jack Slater film for the sixth time in the run-down, near-derelict local movie theatre where

the projectionist is his friend. And I should mention that one joke in this sequence depends on the fact that Danny's schoolteacher is played by Joan Plowright who is the widow of Laurence Olivier.

Wasn't that fun? Thank you.