



Shakespeare

A Magazine for Teachers and Enthusiasts

"Shakespeare in Love"

a new movie

reviewed by **Stephanie
Cowell**



Gwyneth Paltrow
and Joseph Fiennes

Photo by Laurie
Sparham

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No writer surely took freer artistic liberty to chisel and hone what he wished to say of historical figures than Master Shakespeare himself. Most infamous is his wicked Richard Crookback, but in other plays he widely changed the age of protagonists, and certainly made a hero for all time of Henry V by endowing him with great poetry during the bloody French wars. Time has turned round as it may, and young William is now himself the subject of a major movie. And what more likely way to present this great writer who is to so many students a dusty marble bust, a ponderous tome of archaic words, than in a romantic comedy? An outlandish one, silly and yet marvelous and cocky, as implausible as any of his girl disguised as boy plots, and very accessible.

If you are looking for true scholarship on the silver screen, this is not the movie for you. Any serious Shakespeare lover knows that *Romeo and Juliet* could never have begun as *Romeo and Ethel the*

Pirate's Daughter. Nor could William have lounged on the couch of a Cheapside psychiatrist and, as the sand ran through the hour glass, complained of his writer's block as does the romantic looking Joseph Fiennes (younger brother of Ralph). The beautiful girl of wealthy parents, Viola (Gwyneth Paltrow) whom he loves and who loves him, disguises herself as a young man to audition for the role of Romeo in the yet unfinished play. William does not know this Romeo is his true love, even though there is something about the actor's eyes which remind him of someone else. Viola's ample golden curls suddenly become a very close crop of hair for her disguise, another charming implausibility.



Tom Wilkinson

Photograph by Laurie Sparham

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The play starts with a conundrum: producer Henslowe (Geoffrey Rush) must have a successful play and William, needing inspiration, finds it in love. Play becomes life and life becomes play; William climbs the balcony to his Viola and is so startled to come across the little homely nurse (Imelda Staunton) in her stead that, with both of them shrieking, he falls to the ground, rousing the guards. Extraordinarily amusing is Dame Judi Dench's dictatorial, wry Queen Bess who falls asleep and snores at plays she does not like, and

(my own favorite) the veteran actor Tom Wilkinson as a stage struck backer who gets star billing on posters as the apothecary, and almost ruins it. His terror struck eyes at his cue is worth the price of the movie.

Ben Affleck is a hot shot, quick blooded Ned Alleyn whose American accent and pushiness offended me until I realized how truly he had caught the wild Elizabethan street spirit; Colin Firth is the nasty unwanted suitor for the hand of Viola who goes to no end to part the lovers in his jealousy. Delightful is the gawky Jim Carter, a stolidly built lad whose voice is on the edge of changing who, as apprentice lad Ralph Bashfor, is Shakespeare's only choice for his delicate Juliet until a better one miraculously appears. Also featured are Rupert Everett as Marlowe and Antony Sher as the doctor. A nasty little boy who revels in killing rodents identifies himself as one John Webster. There are many such jokes for those of us who know the play and the period. The script is written by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard and directed by John Madden as a fast paced romp.

I saw the movie in preview, knowing nothing of it but the title, and my initial reaction was shock. I had published two novels to some critical success featuring a seriously researched Shakespeare - *The Players: a novel of the young Shakespeare* (W.W. Norton, 1997) and *Nicholas Cooke* (W.W. Norton, 1993) - and I expected the

Stoppard/Norman piece also to be a likewise deep study of the emerging artist. I could not believe what I was seeing on the screen. I had expected to be moved to serious tears, not those of laughter. I had hoped to put out my hand and touch the real William.

But who is the real William? Scholars and lovers of his plays have been searching for him for centuries. Some see him as an opportunist munching his way through other men's plots and wives, some as nearly a saint with a Christlike compassion for his fellow men; some as a conservative middle class family man who wrote plays to finance his property investments, and some as not himself at all, but a certain notorious nobleman. Was it the scholar Schoenbaum who said that if we stare at a man's portrait long another in a gallery we begin to see our reflection on the glass? Do we see him as we would like? My fictional portrait was of a sensitive man slow to find his strengths, who was playful, a wicked mimic of queen and court, and who pined for his children; who was a fervent lover of female beauty until, beyond anything he could have imagined, he also fell shockingly in love with a young man.



Colin Firth and Judi Dench
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In "Shakespeare in Love," writers Norman and Stoppard have vigorously thrust forth their own concept of William. Here he is potently heterosexual, rashly romantic, culpable in that he gives his name as Marlowe to avoid the ire of Viola's other suitor, playful enough to go to a royal ball disguised in Viola's nurse's garments with a veil held carefully over his beard. He cares passionately about his art.

And in the end if you put all thoughts in your back pocket of how *Romeo and Juliet* was really written, you may enjoy it very much. Best of all, those people who find this great and long dead writer too scary to open the pages of his books, may be convinced to open them now, as even the highly erroneous portrait of the proud little Mozart in *Amadeus* brought new friends to his music. So there are two strong strikes for this highly original movie, and many cheers that our inestimably rich, realistically portrayed Elizabethan age is bringing movie fans all over the world to the box office this winter. ►

Stephanie Cowell is the author of *Nicholas Cooke* (actor, soldier, physician, priest), *The Players: a novel of the young Shakespeare*, and *The Physician of London* (American Book Award 1996). Her novels can be ordered through all bookstores, major online booksellers and through her web site at <http://www.cowell-clay.com>.

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