Most Shakespearean off-\-shoot films are so far removed from anything the Bard could have conceivably imagined that it is truly astonishing. Although the purist might find just reason to tremble in revulsion, filmmakers are not without interest.

Of these oddities, one of the more interesting—and, perhaps, more dignified—is director George Cukor’s _A Double Life_ (1947).

Review

_A Double Life_ tells the story of Anthony John (Ronald Colman), an English actor who’s become one of Broadway’s most popular performers. We learn that John has resigned himself to starting almost exclusively in farce and light comedy.

When approached by his producer to star in Shakespeare’s _Othello_, John grows nervous, remarking that he’d rather not. Through John’s former waitress Brita (Signe Hasso), we find out that John has an intense, almost monomaniacal way of slipping into a character.

Anytime he has taken on a role of tragic proportion, the psychological strain has led to his blurring of the real and the illusory, his inability to distinguish between his art.

The audience becomes witness to some of his bizarre behavior, such as his imagined transformation into the Moor that he sees reflected in a shop window.

He soon meets a young waitress (Shelley Winters) whom he initially mistakes (surprise, surprise) coincides with the climax of Shakespeare’s play. John explodes in a rage of all-consuming jealousy, mirroring the jealous passion of _Othello_.

He storms out into the night, again finding his way to the apartment of the young waitress whom he subsequently murders by strangulation. His choking of the waitress upon her large bed directly recalls the strangulation that John’s psychology and background. Furthermore, we are asked to suspend disbelief and become oblivious to questions about Anthony John’s psychology and background.

Yet, we are left with too many unanswered questions about Anthony John’s psychology and background. To be sure, we are left to wonder what is real and what is illusion. Where is the line between thoroughly textured, superior drama and simplistic, mediocre melodrama.

Whereas _A Double Life_ is ultimately driven by plot, further exemplified by character; whereas _A Double Life_ is limited by facile depictions of human psychology, _Othello_ is liberated by its depiction of human passion and fragility. Where _A Double Life_ is merely of its time, _Othello_ is for all time.

Film noir based on Shakespeare’s _Othello_ is worth a look

By Oliver Spivey

A Double Life, starring almost exclusively Shakespeare-influenced noir, _House of Strangers_ [1949], the shadowy, rain-slicked streets through whose waylaid stum- bles are mazes of menace; each jagged silhouette be- comes an externalization of his deeply perturbed psych- ic. Light and shadow are used effectively upon Col- man’s face at key moments, further impinging the duality of his personality. Cukor uses a visual device commonly found in noir films of the period: the mirror motif. The sugges- tion is easily understood: this man is of a double na- ture. In addition to this, the mirror motif clearly justifies the film’s title, while also underscoring that old notion of art holding a mirror up to life.

The mirror/doppel- ganger motif is far from gone in movies, and can be seen in something as recent as Darren Aronofsky’s _The Black Swan_, another movie concerned with a performer losing sanity in pursuit of the perfect performance. The difference between Shakespeare’s _play_ and Cukor’s film is the differ- ence between thoroughly textured, superior drama and simplistic, mediocre melodrama.