The return of the Bard

As the world goes virtual, we crave his earthy genius

BY JAY TOLSON

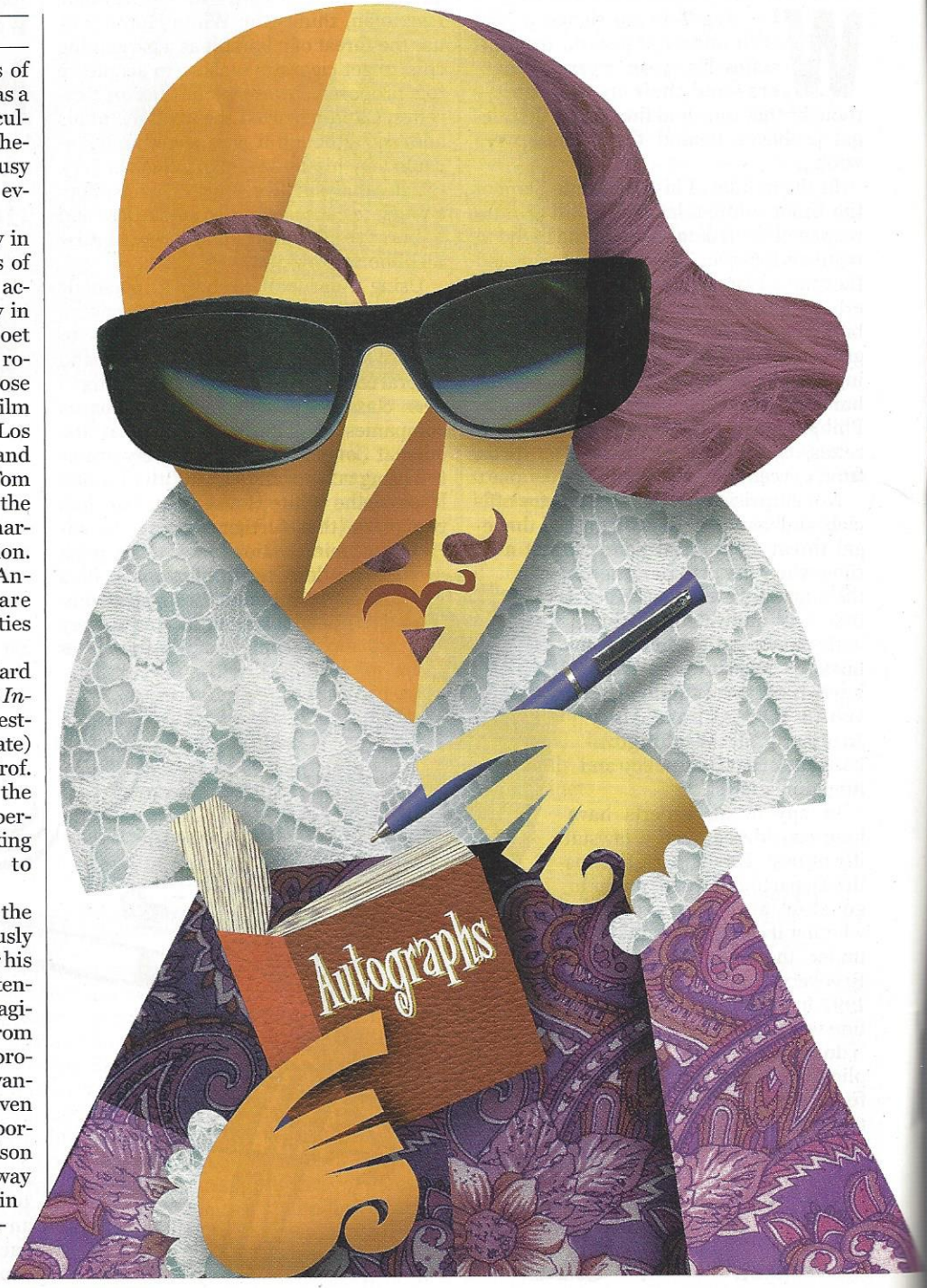
Count it as one of the surprises of our time: Shakespeare is back as a powerful force in American culture, not only in classrooms, theaters, and books but in the busy precincts of commerce, politics, and everyday life.

Signs of the return abound, notably in the success of recent film adaptations of his work—many featuring big-name actors and actresses—and most recently in the wildly popular movie about the poet himself, *Shakespeare in Love*. Funny, romantic, and very loose with the facts, the film was co-written by Los Angeles screenwriter Marc Norman and Britain's high genius of travesty, Tom Stoppard. Indeed, the broad humor of the film epitomizes the playful, populist character of the new Shakespeare contagion. "What Stoppard did," says John Andrews, president of the Shakespeare Guild, "is take Shakespearean liberties with Shakespeare's own life."

CULTURE

The earthy, passionate side of the Bard looms just as large in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. This unlikely best-seller (some 114,000 copies sold to date) written by Yale University English Prof. Harold Bloom shows readers that the Bard was supremely concerned with personality, with life—and not with making highly coded texts for pedants to deconstruct.

The playwright can still be found in the universities, of course, most obviously amid the pitched academic battles over his place in the curriculum. Far less contentiously, he has come back to life in imaginative new approaches to teaching, from innovative business courses to school programs that use his work to bring disadvantaged kids up to speed. There has even been a noticeable uptick of rhetorical borrowings from the Bard, both on Madison Avenue ("Something wicked this way comes," announces a Lexus ad) and in the windy halls of Congress (both pro- and contra-Clinton, as assiduous C-SPAN watchers might have noted). In



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short, because of our culture's strengths and frailties, Americans during the past decade have become more keenly appreciative of Shakespeare's power to limn the human predicament.

But was he ever gone? In a way, yes. You could say that Shakespeare began his quiet, semi-withdrawal from American life about 100 years ago, having enjoyed the limelight from colonial times through most of the 19th century. As historian Lawrence W. Levine points out in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America,* most domestic and foreign observers during the last century shared James Fenimore Cooper's judgment that Shakespeare was "the great author of America." Shakespeare was everywhere, and everywhere beloved, because he had not yet been sanctified as Art. His plays were sliced and diced and often

speare stopped in 1972." How sweet the irony, then, that the 1989 film version of *Henry V,* directed by Belfast-born *wunderkind* Kenneth Branagh, signaled the beginning of the Bard's return. No doubt the film moved from art house to the multiplexes in part because of its association with the West's triumph over a crumbling Soviet empire. But on its own dramatic merits, the film reminded Americans of the vitality that surges through Shakespeare's lines.

Ensuing films drove home the point: not only Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet* but Oliver Parker's trimmed-down *Othello,* Ian McKellen's spooky-powerful *Richard III,* and Baz Luhrmann's hyperkinetic *Romeo & Juliet,* among others.

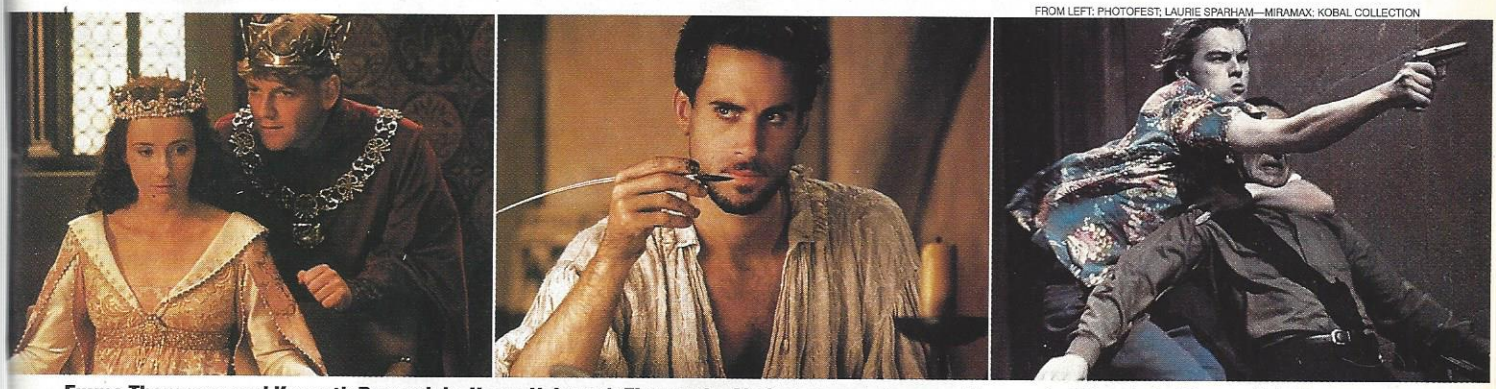
Yet this was not only an affair of celluloid. Yale's Bloom explains Shakespeare's

"How could anyone teach issues like ethics and leadership without using Shakespeare?" asks Prof. John O. Whitney of Columbia Business School.

And letting Shakespeare teach Shakespeare is what scores of teachers across the country have been doing in recent years. From New York City's Sharing Shakespeare project for students who are deaf or have limited proficiency in English to the Midnight Shakespeare program for would-be inner-city thespians in San Francisco's Gilman Park, kids are catching up and having fun by mastering Shakespearean roles.

Perhaps no program better typifies this trend than the one started 13 years ago by fifth-grade teacher Rafe Esquith at Hobart Boulevard Elementary School in Los Angeles. After classes every school day, Esquith brings together some 50 kids—all

FROM LEFT: PHOTOFEST; LAURIE SPARHAM—MIRAMAX; KOBAL COLLECTION



Emma Thompson and Kenneth Branagh in *Henry V,* Joseph Fiennes in *Shakespeare in Love,* and Leonardo DiCaprio in *Romeo & Juliet.*

followed by an easy-to-swallow farce. By such means of mingling high with low, Levine notes, "Shakespeare was not only domesticated; he was humanized."

Gentility abounds. But during the closing decades of the last century, things began to change. Arbiters of politeness and gentility built fences around the "classics," insisting upon purity of handling and presentation. Folks with dirt under their nails started to look elsewhere for their entertainment. Shakespeare's appropriation by the academy dealt a further blow to his popularity, particularly as the professoriate grew enamored of theories that told us how his work should be read and understood. Then came a band of politically correct academics declaring Shakespeare too dead, too white, and too male to be read at all.

The academy's baleful influence seemed for a time to reinforce a wider public indifference to things Shakespearean. So the bleak 1985 verdict of film scholar Jack J. Jorgens sounded plausible: "For all practical purposes, the making of feature-film versions of Shake-

return as a paradoxical result of the decline of literary life. "In the midst of a ruined high culture, there comes out a deep public love of Shakespeare . . . . Milton and Chaucer are doomed because they depend upon the mediation of scholars. But Shakespeare is invulnerable in the way are Austen and Dickens." The Bard's great humor is one thing that makes him invulnerable, says Bloom. But he also believes that we inhabitants of an increasingly virtual world find Shakespeare "the perfect antidote" to the impersonality of the digitized existence.

"People are getting past the 'shoulds' that used to stand in the way of reading and appreciating Shakespeare," says Peggy O'Brien, vice president for education at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. "There's something about owning this old great stuff that elevates us," she adds. "I've seen it happen so many times when you let Shakespeare teach Shakespeare." That's what professors at a number of business schools, from Harvard to the University of Texas, are discovering.

from homes where English is not the first language—to learn parts or play music for an unabridged Shakespeare production.

Esquith, who studied mathematics and science at UCLA and has never taken an acting or directing course, finds that his program brings countless benefits: "It's not really about acting. It's about language, working as a team. It improves the kids' skills in everything. It strengthens their minds." And not only that, Esquith adds; it makes them nicer people.

Esquith's reasons for choosing Shakespeare are equally revealing. "It's because he tackles the big issues—love, violence, jealousy, comedy, and humorous situations," he explains. "And he wrote about them in a language that nobody has ever duplicated."

And what about the alleged elitism or ethnocentrism of Shakespeare's works? "There's a whole battle going on in the universities about that. I just hope it doesn't come here." ■

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