

"Was Shakespeare English?" offers a fresh, daring and controversial view of the great playwright's identity. Russian-born, London-based director Alicia Maksimova, takes us on an enthralling voyage from the Strait of Messina to Venice, Verona, Stratford-upon-Avon, and back to Sicily for a mesmeric finale on the little Aeolian island which inspired *The Tempest*. Enticing travelogue, beautifully shot and provocatively argued, this bold docu-journey offers a Shakespeare who is both a hot potato for our times and a supreme artist for the ages.

97 minutes, 2016.

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Alicia Maksimova has created a masterpiece. I say this not as casual praise, but because I realise that her film, once seen, can only be considered a masterpiece. Let me back up my assertion so that it doesn't appear to be a generic celebration.

First of all, the film is moving because of its visual beauty, its splendid images at times reminded me of the shots of English country houses in Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*.

It's the evidence of the profound sensitivity and artistic flair of this director, a sensitivity that makes the very essence of beauty resonate in the soul of the spectator.

Besides being aesthetically ravishing, the film has also a very substantial content, for it engenders the thought-provoking, Hamlet-like doubt as to whether Shakespeare was or was not English. By the end of the film, the crescendo of information turns the doubt into an almost-certainty, or even a certainty without the 'almost'.

All of this is told with a light touch, by a romantic spirit which is also disenchanted and non-dogmatic, addressing in a most reasonable way even those who are resolutely 'Stratfordian' – as long as they remain open to dialogue.

I do believe that even the Stratfordians, upon watching this film, may well entertain the doubt - not to be voiced aloud - that Shakespeare might not have been English.

That they will never admit this possibility is to be taken for granted – we know the reasons why, or could imagine them, once we take into account that 'brand Shakespeare' generates more than five billion pounds per year for England and Stratford.

But then, for us, at least for me, the fact that they will never admit it means nothing.

Anyway, as the film suggests, sooner or later "truth will out" and the truths conveyed by the film's unfolding are not shouted but softly whispered. This augments their power, just as the delicate crescendo of a violin, augments the power of the images. Here we find a message that transcends its apparent subject, thereby making a documentary film rise above impersonal reporting to become sheer art. It will never become dated, as it conveys a universal message that goes beyond the stated topic by means of the multiple shades of meaning delivered by the unfolding visuals.

Every image flows as if untouched by time and becomes a tale in its own right, a tale not about a particular topic but about life itself, in its multiple iridescent shades, a life that finds a joyful expression also in the smile of a Gypsy who happily plays his accordion on the streets of Venice, heedless of the future, and maybe also of the past, and living in his eternal present.

In all of this, the presence of the author in the film, especially when counterpointed by the voice of the violin, is akin to that of a mystical siren who sings her truth.

The elegance of her movements, her mysterious silence, her measured pace, her appearing always from the back and never facing the camera - all of this increases the drama of the truths she is unveiling. But since her features remain unseen, this implicitly suggests that there are

mysteries that can never be totally revealed. There's a 'veil' that hides every truth, her presence in the film seems to say, and this veil never drops completely.

Of the truth we seek, whatever it is, there will always remain a residue beyond our grasp, just as the face of the director, which we can imagine but are not destined to know.

What we do get to know is the historical reality conveyed through concrete facts recounted in the film.

This is an outcome ensured through a careful historical reconstruction. For instance, refuting those who maintain that Shakespeare did not know Italy well – a recurring theme in the writings of many English scholars – the film does provide actual evidence to the contrary, and this is the crux of the question.

This is another important lesson of the film: there may well be many different versions of the same reality, but what does count is that which emerges from the facts - facts which have only one possible interpretation.

Among the many examples we could give is that the first-ever monument erected in Stratford was to a man named 'Shaksper' (not Shakespeare) holding in his hands a sack of grain and not a pen. The sack of grain was later replaced by a pen and an inkwell. If you go about falsifying the facts in this way, how can you expect to be believed? Which truth do you intend to stand for, you Stratfordians? From the very beginning, seeing Shakespeare, a gift of the gods, as a lucrative business, you have piled mystification upon mystification.

You have created a convenient and self-serving narrative to dish out to naive visitors eager to hear about Shakespeare's genius.

Are you really telling the truth about a man, William Shaksper that is, who in his memorial effigy was depicted holding a sack of grain in his hands, and not a pen? How could this man be the great playwright William Shakespeare? Could it be that the latter had nothing to do with Stratford? To the tacit questions raised by the film - tacit, yet hard-hitting - Stratford has no real

answer, and carries on as unperturbed as the water which flows down the placid Avon river.

As we switch from one perspective to another, as we come closer to the truth or find ourselves further away from it, the music track marks such transitions and underlines to perfection the contrast between the Italy of Shakespeare and the Stratford of Shaksper: the former is cultured and profound, infused with history and art, the latter is anonymous and dull. 'How could a genius ever be born in such a place?'

Charlie Chaplin once asked of Stratford. Once again, the images, deftly combined with the thematic changes between the scenes, convey a depth of meaning.

And now, from Stratford we arrive in Venice, where we find the author playing the piano with quiet intensity highlighted by her mysterious and discreet charm, as if her physical presence adds power to the truth she is revealing.

From there we move to a sequence including a shot of a small wooden post sticking out of the shimmering water of a canal – and then the director reappears, this time on a wooden bridge, as if to reaffirm, with the same intensity with which she plays the piano, that truth will sooner or later come out for all to see.

A very beautiful film, well researched and profound, but neither elitist nor snooty; emotionally moving, simple despite its complexity, and therefore clear and accessible, and at the same time challenging and gripping, inviting one to reflect on its subject and put forward with elegance where nothing is taken for granted.

For all that, the film establishes irrefutable facts, such as the existence of waterways which in the 1500's connected Milan with the sea, a fact mentioned by Shakespeare in *The Tempest*. Here is an instance of one of those truths rejected and even mocked by the Stratfordians.

As a final gift, the author reappears at the end of the film as a splendid sea goddess, before melting into the air - just as time, in *The Tempest*, dissolves all things, leaving only the 'naked truth'. A truth that, once again, cannot be grasped completely. Darkness shields her naked

body, of which we can glimpse only the outline but not the details.

In these images we find strong allusions to Giordano Bruno's philosophical conceptions, his Caravaggio-like displays of light and shadow and in particular his 'shadows of ideas'.

It is not by chance that Bruno turns out to be a central presence in Shakespeare's texts, most notably *The Tempest*.

Thus ends the film, with visuals of a siren contemplating the ever-shifting waves of the sea, their infinite variations of colour, thereby reinforcing yet again the notion that nothing is ever firmly 'established'.

The romanticism of the sunset suggests that everything slips away as the light fades - that light which, as Bruno teaches, has always been the principal symbol of truth.

The sound of the violin accompanies the story, engulfing us with emotion, and the piano notes sustain it, providing a harmonic confirmation that this journey has been a marvellous canto.

A hymn to dispassionate and unprejudiced research, that is the essential message of Shakespeare and even more so, of his exclusive personal teacher, Giordano Bruno. This is also the primary message of the film which will surely lead to its major success among all those who reject dogmas and choose free thinking.

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