

Anonymous (2011)

Riveting historical drama about the real authorship of Shakespeare's plays

Very few commoners of his time are as well-documented as **William Shakespeare**. There seems little good reason to doubt that he wrote the plays performed under his name. If he had been an ordinary playwright, there would be no controversy over their authorship. But he was the **greatest of all writers in English**, in some ways the engine for the language's spread around the world, and one of the supreme artists of the human race. He was the son of an illiterate, provincial glover, an itinerant actor in a disreputable profession with no connections to royalty. Surely such an ordinary man could not have written these masterpieces. There is a restlessness to reassign them, and over the years, theories have sprung up claiming the real author of the plays **Edward de Vere**, the 17th Earl of Oxford.



Despite being a minority, those who question the authorship of Shakespeare's plays and sustain this theory are **tenacious and passionate**. Though a surfeit of facts are against them, they are able to make some good points that the opposition has difficulty countering or debunking. From my perspective, it's a matter of little concern whether the canon we identify

with William Shakespeare was scribed by the Bard from Stratford or whether the author was indeed Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. What is important is that the plays exist and they are among the best written in the history of the English language. You perhaps know little enough about Shakespeare and next to nothing about the other candidates. You might, on the contrary, think it an intellectual provocation to doubt such an authorship. **But that's no reason to avoid this marvellous historical film**, which I believe to be profoundly mistaken anyway. Because of the ingenious screenplay, precise direction by Roland Emmerich and casting of memorable British actors, you can walk into the theater as a blank slate, follow and enjoy the story, and leave convinced if of nothing else that Shakespeare was a figure of compelling interest.

SYNOPSIS

Perhaps surprisingly, *Anonymous* opens in the **present day**, with narrator **Derek Jacobi** taking the stage to provide a quick primer on the tenets of Oxfordianism. We are then thrown back more than four centuries to the **waning years of Queen Elizabeth's court**. Here, Edward de Vere (**Rhys Ifans**), the Earl of Oxford, is presented as the very template of genius. His manner, his breed and bearing, his authority, his ease in the court of Elizabeth conspire to make him a qualified candidate for the authorship of the plays. He was so well-connected with the crown in fact that the movie speculates he may have been the lover (**Jamie Campbell Bower**) of the young Elizabeth (**Joely Richardson**) or one of the illegitimate sons of the older Elizabeth (**Vanessa Redgrave**). Not both, *I pray ye*.



Unfortunately, de Vere is unable to publish plays under his own name because such an avocation is unworthy of an Earl. He therefore chooses playwright Ben Jonson to be his stand-in. However, when Jonson waffles, one of his actors, William Shakespeare (**Rafe Spall**), steps into the breach, and man, the guy's really got everything against him : he is drawn a notch of two above the village idiot. Witless and graceless, there is definitely no whiff of brilliance about him.

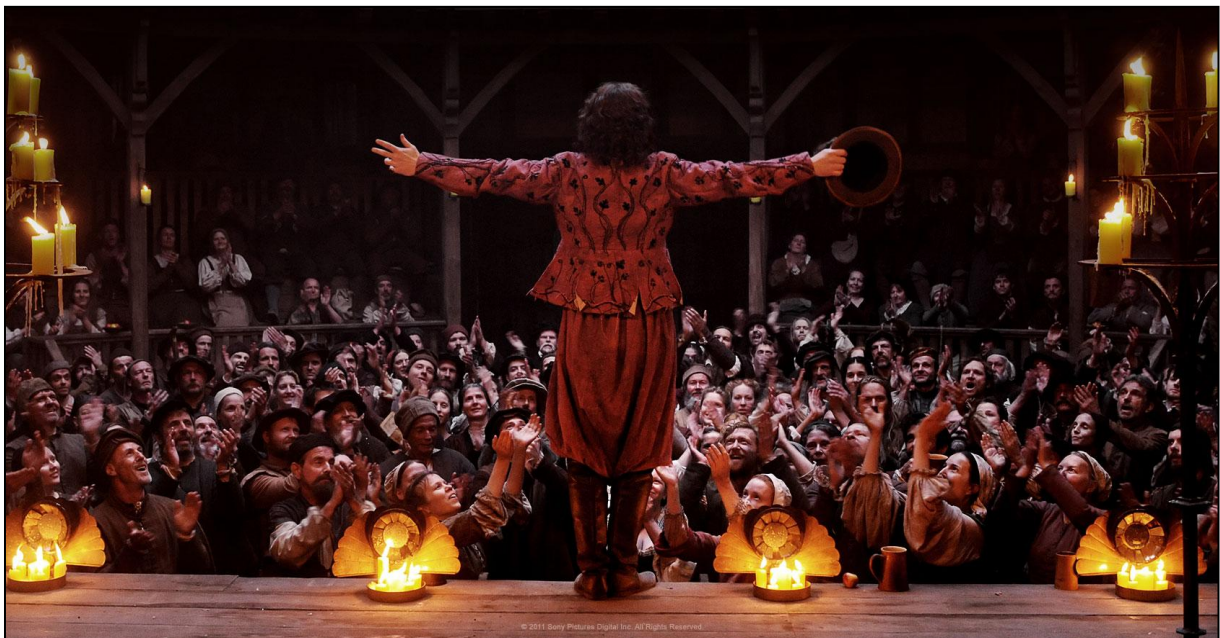


Meanwhile, as Elizabeth approaches the end, various candidates for the next king of England come to light. The favourite is James VI, the **King of Scotland**. He is favoured by Elizabeth's closest advisors, William Cecil and his son Robert. The other main contender is one of Elizabeth's supposed illegitimate sons, the Earl of Essex (**Sam Reid**), a hothead who is supported by de Vere and several other influential nobles.

REVIEW

- **A rich, ingenious and adequately dark screenplay.** For the most part, *Anonymous* functions as a cross between *Elizabeth* and *Shakespeare in Love*, with all the political machinations, skulduggery, and opportunism one expects from such a story. The film also plunges us into the rich intrigue of the first Elizabethan age, including the activities of the Earl of Essex, whose plot to overthrow the queen led to the inconvenience of beheading.

- **An excellent cast.** Devoid of splashy Hollywood stars, it features Rhys Ifans in the lead role. Vanessa Redgrave offers a strong and regal portrayal of the fading queen, who maintains an aura of quiet authority even as her physical and mental capabilities decline. The rest of the cast is comprised of excellent actors such as Joely Richardson and Rafe Spall. And let's not forget two of my favourite actors, **Jamie Campbell Bower** as young de Vere and **Xavier Samuel** as Southampton, are in it too !
- **A superb production design.** Incredibly for a film shot mostly on German soundstages, and for a director best known for disastrous blockbusters such as *Godzilla* or *2012*, *Anonymous* richly evokes the London of its time, when the splendour of the court lived in a metropolis of appalling poverty and the streets were ankle-deep in mud. Next to this dark portrait of dirty streets, packed bars and brothels, violent entertainment involving bears and dogs, the wealth and ornate clothing in the royal court, its pompous foolishness and self-serious masquerading seem all the more outrageous and devoid of any depth. The re-creations of **The Globe** and **The Rose** theaters are especially well done. They provide a sense unlike that of any other movie of what it was like to see a play in these settings. The groundlings could almost reach out the players, and in the box seats, such as Oxford himself could witness the power of his work.



- **Shakespeare's beautiful language.** *Anonymous* also treats us to a highlight reel of Shakespeare's greatest hits, from the witches in *Macbeth* and "Et tu, Brute" in *Julius Caesar* to the "To be or not to be" soliloquy in *Hamlet*.

CONCLUSION

All of that makes *Anonymous* a splendid experience : the dialogue, the magnificent acting, the realist and bluffing reconstruction of London, the **lust, jealousy and intrigue**. Vanessa Redgrave is magnificent as the waning Elizabeth, mastering both sides of her character : the strong side, but also the more fragile, vibrating and feminine side.



THE LESS GOOD

The major drawback of *Anonymous* is the lack of **pace and coherence within its screenplay**. One gets easily lost in all this going back and forward in time. The other is linked to its main characters. To show a merciless and opportunist Shakespeare, devoid of any talent or personality, an unprincipled schemer who is in the right place at the right time and is able to pull off the charade despite the fact that he's an illiterate moron, was a very daring idea, and some might find it intellectually appalling. Moreover, he's not the only key character to be represented counter his popular image. The Queen herself, often viewed as chaste and virginal, is here hot-blooded and sexual, having borne at least three illegitimate sons and having a dark secret concerning one of them. One can never be sure where the limit is between **imagination and calumny**...