



Council Chamber of the Town Hall, 104 Ferguson St, Williamstown, 7.30pm, Wednesday 25th February, 2026.

The Bard would love this *Shakespeare*

By **RENE RODRIGUEZ**
 Herald Movie Critic

Where did William Shakespeare get his ideas? The makers of *Shakespeare in Love* don't claim to know, but they do have a great time speculating — especially about his paean to love, *Romeo and Juliet*.

That might make it sound like *Shakespeare in Love* would be enjoyed only by English lit majors — and, indeed, the more familiar you are with the Bard, the wittier the ingenious screenplay by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard will seem.

But all the homework *Shakespeare in Love* requires is a passing familiarity with *Romeo and Juliet* (just having seen the recent Leonardo DiCaprio-Claire Danes version is enough for the movie to work its sublime magic on you).

Set in 1593 London, the film catches the playwright (Joseph Fiennes) as a rising, but not yet respected, artist on the verge of his great breakthrough. Theater owner Philip Henslowe (Geoffrey Rush) is leaning on Will to hurry up and finish his latest “crowd-tickler,” so he can pay off some impatient loan sharks. But Will is suffering with a formidable case of writer's block: No matter how hard he tries, he can't quite make his work in progress — *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter* — click.

“I have lost my gift,” the distraught writer confesses to his shrink (they called them “princes of psyche” back then, the movie imagines). What Will needs is inspiration — and he finds it in the form of Viola De Lesseps (Gwyneth Paltrow), a beautiful young woman with a

passion for the arts and a yearning for romance (“I will have poetry in my life, and adventure, and love, most of all love!” she exclaims).

She's a boy

Viola wants to be an actress at a time when women weren't allowed near a stage. So she disguises herself as a boy named Thomas to audition for the role of Romeo, and impresses Will enough to bag the part. Smitten with the writer, she later introduces herself to him out of male drag, and he, too, is instantly lovestruck. But what if he discovered his new lead actor is really a girl?

Director John Madden (*Mrs. Brown*) has great fun with the gender-bending stuff (in one *Twelfth Night*-ish scene, Will confesses his love for Viola to Thomas, unaware they are the same person). Then, he lets Will learn the truth, to allow the story to move on to more fertile ground.

Shakespeare in Love wants to show how real life influences the creative process, using one of the great literary works as its guinea pig. We see how Will's work is shaped by the most casual conversations (including one with his rival, Christopher Marlowe, played by Rupert Everett); by hammy actors demanding more dialogue (like Ben Affleck's surprisingly funny turn as the Elizabethan superstar Ned Alleyn); by Viola's penchant for standing on her balcony at night and pining for her beloved.

Secret romance

Making things difficult for the lovers is the imperious Lord

Wessex (Colin Firth), to whom Viola is betrothed by order of Queen Elizabeth (Judi Dench) herself. But the need to keep their romance a secret just makes Will and Viola's passion burn brighter (in one swooningly romantic scene, they rehearse the play's dialogue while lying in each other's arms in bed, perfectly aware of how well *Romeo and Juliet*'s longing mirrors their own).

Paltrow has never been more radiant than she is here, playing the kind of unimaginably lovely, winsome muse that would inspire a man to write a masterpiece (“I would not have thought it! There *is* something better than a play!” she exclaims after making love to Will for the first time.)

Fiennes (younger brother of Ralph) plays the budding genius with a touching vulnerability and a likable haplessness that brings Shakespeare's mythic aura down to a personable, human level. Together, they send this wildly creative comedy spiraling into heights so exhilarating that even the Bard would have given it a standing ovation. Don't miss it.



SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE

(R)

Cast: Joseph Fiennes, Gwyneth Paltrow, Geoffrey Rush, Colin Firth, Judi Dench, Ben Affleck, Rupert Everett. **Director:** John Madden. **Producers:** David Parritt, Donna Gigliotti, Harvey Weinstein. **Screenwriters:** Marc Norman, Tom Stoppard.

A Miramax Films release. Running time: 114 minutes. Brief nudity, sexual situations.

To see, or not to see, 'Shakespeare'.

I want to say that "Shakespeare in Love" is a near-perfect romantic comedy, but I can't find a flaw to make it near-perfect. I wanted to say that its flaw is that it is clear that the main characters are perfect for each other from the beginning of the film, but this movie is much too smart for that.

The film was co-written by the playwright Tom Stoppard, who is no stranger to Shakespeare. While his "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" turned "Hamlet" literally on its side by examining it from the point of view of two characters who are little more than plot devices, "Shakespeare in Love" has license to turn what is now the legend of William Shakespeare on its side. The writers manage to plant enough clever references into the movie to keep die-hard Bard-philes happy (how many now-famous lines did "Will" actually hear just by walking down the street?), while keeping the film light enough to make it accessible to most anyone (check out the opening scene as Will goes to a 16th century therapist). The film's screenplay doesn't end at clever word-play, there is cross-dressing, mistaken identity, and the "haunting" of one character by a "ghost". The characters are placed in situations worthy of the Bard's own comedies.

It is this film's startling intelligence and the wonderful performances by all those involved that make it soar above any romantic comedy in recent memory to the fairy tale heights of a film such as "The Princess Bride". Gwyneth Paltrow, too often wasted in movies that require her to be fought over by suitors, is finally given a role in which she can positively shine. As Viola Lesseps, a woman determined to perform on the male-dominated stage of the late 16th century, she provides the muse that Joseph Fiennes' blocked Bard needs to pen "Romeo and Ethel: The Pirate's Daughter" - the working title for what will become the greatest love story of all time.

Mr. Fiennes is also given the chance to finally show the acting chops that were not on display in this year's "Elizabeth". He is not the only hold over from that earlier film. Geoffrey Rush, also in "Elizabeth" displays a heretofore unseen comic ability, and Dame Judi Dench steals every scene she's in as the virgin Queen herself. It is clear that everyone in the film is having a great time with the material, and it is contagious. As the film leads to a touching climax which never stoops to a quick resolution, we have not learned so much about the Bard himself (the film is only loosely based on historical events) as we have about how much is missing from most of the cookie-cutter romantic comedies in theatres today

bigpicturebigsound.com By Joe Lozito 

WFS SUPPER ROSTER 2026

MONTH	MEMBER(S)	MONTH	MEMBER(S)
February 25 <i>Shakespeare In Love</i>	DIMI	March 25 <i>Oscar Nominated Short Films</i>	ANN LINK
April 29 <i>Jojo Rabbit</i>	DERYN GRIFFITHS	May 27 <i>42nd Street</i>	JAYNE & MARY
June 24 <i>Signorinella: Little Miss</i>	MARGARET & ALLAN	July 29 <i>Midnight Special</i>	SUE SEARLS & JANE DUFTY
August 26 <i>Don's Party</i>	JANE DUFTY	September 30 <i>Trumbo</i>	ROBYN & KEN HANSEN
October 28 <i>O Brother, Where Art thou?</i>	THE BIRAM FAMILY	November 25 <i>How to Steal A Million</i>	ALL HANDS ON DECK!

Starbox Results

	5	4	3	2	1	Average
The Poseidon Adventure	17	11	4	0	0	4.4

To watch a trailer (& read more) head to the 2026 program on our website

[https://: www.williamstown-film-society.org](https://www.williamstown-film-society.org)