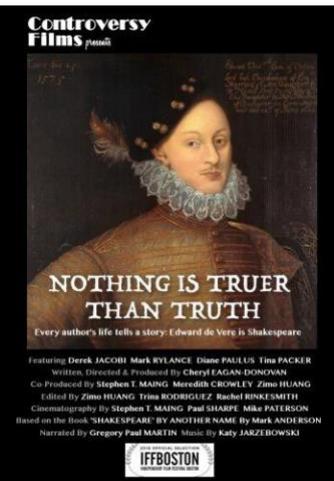


Reviews

Nothing is Truer than Truth

Film by Cheryl Eagan-Donovan

Review by Tony Herbert



I first saw the film *Nothing is Truer than Truth* by Cheryl Eagan-Donovan, with much enjoyment and indeed admiration, at the recent annual meeting of the De Vere Society. I was with fellow Oxfordians, none of us presumably believing that the businessman and property investor from Stratford-upon-Avon had anything to do with writing the plays of Shakespeare and almost all of us, I imagine, believing that Edward de Vere was the likely author.

I have now been watching the film again, trying to see it from another perspective – from the viewpoint of a conventional Stratfordian or a

member (quite well-represented among my friends) of the ‘What does it all matter?’ school of thought.

Does the film make a convincing case? The first thing to say is that – to my mind, mercifully – it wastes almost no time on the Stratford businessman. This does obviously mean that it doesn’t deal with what I think are the killer reasons for doubting his authorship (the absence of letters, the lack of any eulogies on his death, etc, etc – we all know what they are). The film is about the 17th Earl of Oxford and very good it is.

It deals in rich and wonderful detail with his life, particularly his time in Italy, as well as his troubled marriage to Anne Cecil and, crucially, his sexuality; linking so many aspects of it with the plays and the sonnets. I

kept thinking of Orson Welles' splendid remark that, if you don't think that Oxford wrote the plays, you've got "some awful funny coincidences to explain away."

It is good to see such an array of distinguished people prepared to speak up, particularly **Derek Jacobi** at his measured and authoritative best. It is noticeable that so many of these people are North Americans, something started of course 150 years ago by Mark Twain. Are Americans more open than we Brits to looking critically at our jointly inherited mythologies? It was fascinating to see the contribution of the current 18th Baron Burghley (also the Marquess of Exeter) speaking in his soft Canadian accent.

It is difficult to deal properly with the rich detail that the film manages to cover. An obvious focus is Italy: Venice, the identification of Portia's villa in exactly where it is said to be in *The Merchant of Venice* (as of course described in Richard Roe's masterly book); the location of the sycamore grove in Verona mentioned by Benvolio in *Romeo and Juliet*; the painting by Titian that alone has the features described in *Venus and Adonis*; and of course the influence of the *Commedia del Arte*.

As already mentioned, the film rightly focuses on the author's sexuality, something that obviously was obscured and denied in days gone by but which can now be openly and properly explored. One of the questions that gets asked is: why the pseudonym? The snobbish point that aristocrats didn't get mixed up with public theatre is hard for us give much weight to these days. The political dangers involved in writing about the murder of reigning monarchs are easier to relate to. Keeping one's distance from the executioner's block must have been good strategy. But the deception survived well after Oxford's death, when



certainly that risk had gone away. Yet the desire to draw a veil over the homosexuality could easily have continued, particularly - as the film points out - if the Earl of Southampton had anything to do with it.

One of the more difficult questions is: why does it matter? No one can deny that the most important thing is to appreciate the works for what they are. But both Mark Rylance and Derek Jacobi say clearly that for them it does matter. Derek Jacobi is eloquent about what he describes as the richness evident in the background to why the plays were written: the politics, the political satire, even the propaganda. They were “commentaries on life as it was being lived.” And Mark Rylance has a lovely remark about unwrapping the plays from the “protective duvet that the Stratford case has put around them.”

Finally, our own Alexander Waugh gives us a taste of his powerful theory, well known to DVS members, that the author is actually buried in Westminster Abbey, alongside Francis Beaumont, Chaucer and Edmund Spenser. He invites the authorities in the Abbey to investigate.

As I said before, I’ve been watching the film for a second time, wearing the hat of a Stratfordian – even though I don’t find that the hat fits me very well. Am I even more convinced? How can one not be? I certainly come back to agreeing whole-heartedly with Orson Welles: there are an awful lot of coincidences to explain away.

Editorial note

Nothing Is Truer than Truth will be released in the U.K. and Europe later this year. For more information and to book a screening, contact the director at <https://www.controversyfilms.com>".

