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Review of Hamlet

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Hamlet

(Warner Home Video, 8.14.2007)

Hamlet is the best of the five Shakespeare adaptations by Kenneth Branagh—and not just because it is the best of the plays the writer-director-actor has brought to the screen. Branagh shot *Hamlet* in 70 mm. to give it an epic visual scope to match the thematic content, and the 1996 film looks wonderful in its first appearance on DVD.

In addition to presenting what many consider an intimate drama in a widescreen (2.20: 1) format, the most unusual aspect of this production is that it's uncut. This is the complete text of Shakespeare's play, running 242 minutes, what Branagh calls "the entirety version." The most unusual aspect of the DVD is that Branagh and fellow commentator, Russell Jackson, find something interesting to say for most of these four hours. Jackson, a Shakespeare scholar who has advised Branagh not just on his literary films but on all of them, speaks not as a dry academic but as someone intimately involved in all aspects of a production. Frequently saying "we," Jackson seems to be Branagh's co-director.

Hamlet was the first film shot in 70 mm. since Lean's beautiful but inert *Ryan's Daughter* in 1970. Branagh not only exploits the widescreen with plenty of exterior scenes, especially the slow advance of the army of Fortinbras (Rufus Sewell), but in the interior scenes, shot in massive Blenheim Palace. (Branagh doesn't acknowledge the likely influence of Kurosawa in the army's attack on Elsinore.) The enormous rooms of the palace help in underscoring the fragile psyches of the tortured souls scurrying about.

A hall of mirrors conveys how the characters are mere reflections of their true natures. Branagh, as Hamlet, delivers the "To be or not to be" speech into one of these mirrors, as if the paranoid prince is trying to convince himself of the validity of his words. (The director comments on the importance of the mirrors, windows, and doors throughout the film.) There are also long tracking and dolly shots which, Branagh says, made the actors nervous about screwing up takes of five minutes or longer.

Branagh's commentary considers his visual style in detail. My only quibble is that he had the great Alex Thomson (*Excalibur*) light most of the interiors too brightly to give the images what Branagh calls "richness in definition." I find this brightness not only glaring but inconsistent with the play's psychological uncertainties. Our Kenny does, however, know how to use his frames. After *Hamlet*, I watched *Dead Again*, my favorite Branagh, and was amazed at how conventional most of the compositions are, with editing supplying much of the visual pizzazz. Hamlet's dispatching of the villainous Claudius (Derek Jacobi) seems to be an homage to Jacobi's gruesome death in *Dead Again*.

Branagh, who played the role on stage in 1988 and 1992, says he disagrees with Laurence Olivier's famous interpretation of the character as a man who could not make up his mind. With his hair dyed blond, as with Olivier's version, Branagh presents Hamlet as an intense swashbuckler, especially in the charging-up-the-staircase showdown with Laertes (Michael Maloney). It's a bit of shock to see Branagh's athleticism here and then his much-less-trim appearance in the introduction.

Adept at playing weak, indecisive characters, Jacobi is brilliant as the comparably assertive Claudius. Branagh decided to become an actor after seeing Jacobi's Hamlet when he was fifteen. Incapable of giving a bad performance, if we don't count *The Holiday*, Kate Winslet is outstanding as Ophelia. It's a brilliant touch to have her straightjacketed for the mad scene, diminishing her beauty so that we can concentrate on her mental state. Branagh invited controversy by inventing a flashback of Hamlet and Ophelia making love. Did it really happen or is it the characters' imaginations, we are meant to ponder. There is some discrete, alas, nudity.

The all-star supporting performances are more problematic. Gerard Depardieu, as Reynaldo, struggles with his dialogue and loses. Jack Lemmon, as Marcellus, is still playing his patented insecure American everyman. Worst of all is the insufferable Robin Williams as Osric. Mincing and grimacing, he is a major distraction during the duel. The equally insufferable Billy Crystal is surprisingly adequate at the first gravedigger. Unlike Williams he is aware that he is not on the screen alone and plays well off Simon Russell Beale, as the second gravedigger. As the Player King, Charlton Heston is a revelation, commanding the screen with his physical presence and authoritative voice, completely without the smug self-satisfaction displayed in most of his starring roles. Chuck told Kenny that he never received better reviews.

Despite a few dead spots, Branagh's *Hamlet* is probably the best of the conventional adaptations of the play, seemingly breezing through its four hours. My favorite part is Hamlet's meeting with the ghost of his father (Brian Blessed) in a magic, evil forest reminiscent of those in the Universal horror movies of the thirties and forties. My favorite version, however, remains Michael Almereyda's 2000 updating of the tragedy, which captures more of the play's psychological nuances. For once, Ethan Hawke's creepy self-regard seems appropriate.

In addition to the introduction and the outstanding commentary, the extras include a making-of and a promo made for Cannes, with Branagh and cast discussing what they were trying to do.—Michael Adams