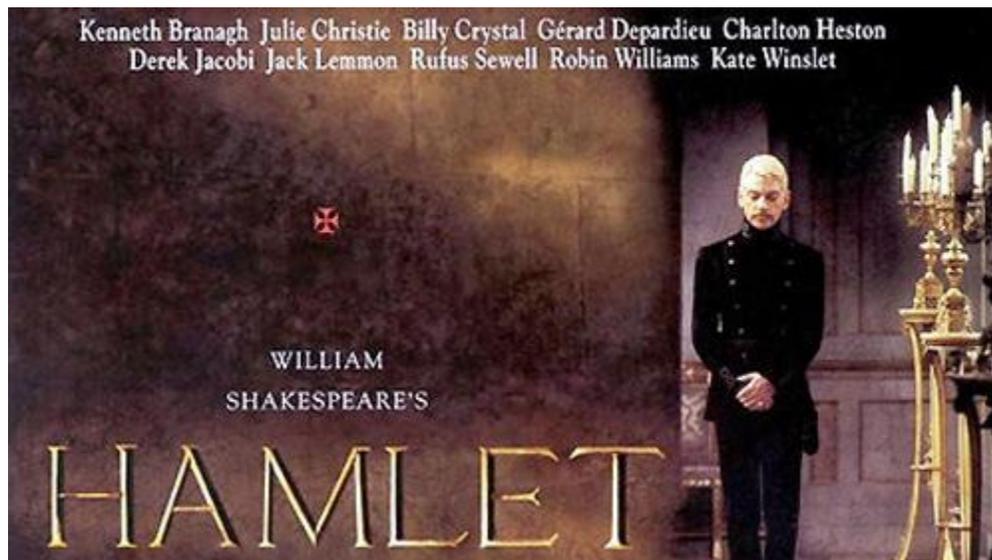


## *Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet: Twenty Years On.*



### *A Review by Garry Victor Hill*

Produced by David Barron. Adapted for the screen and directed by Kenneth Branagh. Production Design: Tim Harvey. Editing: Neil Farrell. Photography: Alex Thomson. Music: Patrick Doyle.

Length: 242 minutes. A Castle Rock Entertainment Feature. Warner Brothers Distribution. BBC and Turner Inc. Cinematic Release: 1996  
 Rated PG "Parents Strongly Cautioned"

Rating \*\*\*\*\* 90% Available on video and DVD in both full and edited versions.

### *Cast*

Hamlet: [Kenneth Branagh](#)

Ophelia: [Kate Winslet](#)

Gertrude: [Julie Christie](#)

Claudius: Derek Jacobi  
Polonius: Richard Briers  
Laertes : Michael Maloney  
Horatio: Nicholas Farrell  
Marcellus: Jack Lemmon  
Bernardo: Ian McElhinney  
The Player King: Charleton Heston  
The Player Queen: Rosemary Harris  
Rosenencrantz: Timothy Spall  
Guildenstern: Reece Dinsdale  
Fortinbras: Rufus Sewell  
The Ghost: Brian Blessed  
The First Gravedigger: Billy Crystal  
The Second Gravedigger: Simon Russell Beale  
Osric: Robin Williams  
Reynaldo: Gerard Depardieu  
The English Ambassador: Richard Attenborough  
Francisco: Ray Fearnon  
Cornelius: Ravil Isyanov  
The Norwegian Captain: John Spencer-Churchill.  
Anthony: Denzil Washington (?) unbilled

Also appearing in brief flashbacks are Judy Dench, John Gielgud, Ken Dodd and John Mills

Twenty years makes a good timespan to judge the merits of a film. Publicity, contemporary reviews, awards and commercial results have all faded and no longer

clutter what we see: the film stands on its merits and hopefully stands above the things that usually date the transient, the trendy and the shallow. This is not a perfect film, but it has great lasting value and stands above its time.

Somebody very wise (if now forgotten) originated the comment that anybody who plays Hamlet cannot totally succeed, but they cannot totally fail either. The same applies to making a film version. One reason for this idea is that the role can be interpreted so many different ways. Over the last seventy years the major English language cinematic portrayals have been by Laurence Olivier (1948), Nicol Williamson (1969), Mel Gibson (1990) and Kenneth Branagh (1996). Each one finds a different emphasis. Olivier's Hamlet is a lethargic observer who has a smug self-confidence as he thinks he is in control, while he sinks further into delusions and a lack of control. Williamson gives a performance that also while cerebral, becomes almost the exact opposite: his Hamlet appears as pensive, fatalistic and dominated by a sense of approaching tragedy. Gibson was often derided as a movie action hero going out of his depth. In reality he started as a fine Shakespearean stage actor in Australia. His Hamlet is a man of action caught up in a web where action is not enough and he senses this. He flounders as he strives for a victory against an intangible sense of tragedy, rather than resolving a tangible problem.

Branagh does things differently. Initially he seems a troubled innocent going through a rough patch before going on to a bright future. With the giving of the message by the ghost what had been a few uneasy thoughts grow into an obsession, one that almost destroys his sanity. He is suddenly learning that evil exists underneath respectability and that it is close to him. Like Olivier's Hamlet, he thinks he has control behind the scenes when he does not. Branagh's performance also resembles Olivier's, in that in both depictions they are almost unaware of the havoc they are causing. Branagh's performance differs in that while Olivier presents a languidly fatalistic observer, Branagh's is hyperactive. He acts like a frenetic adolescent, frequently extemporising what he says or does next, he veers between fits of temper and near catatonia. He plots murderous revenge while going into a childhood state of humour and exuberance, as if the whole situation concerns a game. He then swings into melancholic moments of retreat and reflection. He thinks all these actions and changes are pretence, which in a mad way they are.

The first three versions all share a great fault: they omit or reduce to very little the role of Fortinbras. Shakespeare made mention of him in the first scenes as

a threat to Denmark and characters mention him several times in the play before he appears in the last scene. Fortinbras will sometimes appear to conclude the film with a stage piled up with dead royalty. This scene appears as so dramatic that the thoughts of the audience usually do not go to what happens next? This is also clearly because only a few minor players are left alive, but in life something always happens next. Shakespeare did know that and that life cannot be a vacuum. This is why he has Fortinbras appear at the end to take over Denmark and to restore needed order, which starts with the proper burial of the prince. He does more than this in Branagh's version. In the first scenes the guards mention (and Branagh shows) Denmark's preparation for war with Fortinbras over a territorial dispute. After negotiations Claudius thinks that Fortinbras has backed off, and with little thought gives him permission to march across his lands to attack Poland in Another supposed territorial dispute. When Hamlet hears from one of Fortinbras's soldiers of how Fortinbras is willing to sacrifice twenty thousand soldiers for a tiny piece of worthless Polish land he is stunned by the insanity of that and philosophises. He should have suspected, and analysed suspiciously, for Fortinbras obviously cannot really be so foolish as to do what his messenger states. The story given to Hamlet was a gambit. Denmark is the real target of conquest. If the royal family and the court were not so obsessed with Hamlet and his madness they would have at the least monitored Fortinbras's army and not been caught by surprise. If Hamlet was more level headed he would also have prioritised in better ways. A foreign army on national soil obviously has priority over avenging a dead father. The removal of even a usurping king should not be done in such a situation and by causing further disorder, will only increase the need for order, which Fortinbras personifies.

Branagh senses this need for order, which accounts for why he has filmed the ending the way Shakespeare wrote it, but using cinema to emphasise the point, cutting between the last duel scene and shots of Fortinbras's army approaching without any resistant leadership. Branagh does this, frequently alternating soundless shots with Shakespeare's dialogue to make his film different to the play, in several ways. We see that Hamlet and Ophelia are lovers, that moralistic Polonius is a hypocrite because he has a mistress, that Fortinbras is ruthless because Danish soldiers are murdered in his surprise attack and that the fate of Denmark, Claudius and Gertrude has its prototype with Troy, Hecuba and Priam and the Trojan horse.

In dialogue and included characters this is definitely the version most faithful to the original play, nothing has been edited out, no characters turned into composites, no modern linguistic additions or changes appear. What Branagh has changed is the era, going forward in time about three hundred years to a Ruritanian version of Denmark that looks like it saw the last of Napoleon but never knew an automobile. Snow drenched Blenheim Palace doubles for Elsinore. The setting does work: the film already has an operatic feel to it due to the performances, costumes and the music, which concludes with singing by Placido Domingo as the credits roll. With the royalist opulence that appears almost everywhere, the frequent histrionics and the Elizabethan language, the operatic treatment does not seem out of place. It is actually a help, giving credibility by providing a suitable genre with Hamlet's more loud, frenetic and intense speeches.



*Could operatic opulence be more obvious?*

The casting and the performances? Ah, here's the rub! Branagh has been mentioned, but the rest of the cast give mixed results. The problem is not that there

are bad performances, far from it, but there are too many of them, performances that is. Some celebrities are virtually extras. Walk on roles are given to some of the world's most famous faces and they all try so hard to shine in Shakespeare. After seeing several like that the impression develops that rather than watching or reviewing we are considering auditions or awards. Somebody has also cast some of the biggest scene stealers in entertainment in roles that they do well in, but those performances come at the cost of a film's diagetic effect. Rather than be drawn into Hamlet's world we sit back and think "Oh look who is playing the .... How well will he do the role?' Fortunately the key roles of Laertes, Horatio, Rosencratz and Guildenstern are played by not so famous actors who provide balance and restraint. For younger viewers who do not know the famous faces that will not be such a problem and this will look like an ensemble piece.



*Blenheim Palace is the major setting for the film*

Even so, some near perfect casting happens. Derek Jacobi (who in the 1980s played Hamlet in a television version) plays Claudius as a human rat, but one raddled with guilt and regret which he knows can only be useless as the past cannot be changed, a half-human, half-rat half caught in a trap indeed. Richard Brier as Polonius catches the truly annoying, foolish and loyal courtier's characteristics indeed. Heston and Harris as the players do well. Their characters give pensive performances, subtly is in the subtext, they express that they know they are on

dangerous ground and being used, but cannot say that. Julie Christie as Gertrude, Jack Lemmon as Marcellus, Billy Crystal as the Gravedigger, all bring a calm, slightly understated clarity to their roles. The lesser known actors also do not overstate their performances or come on with that mixture of rapid fire Shakespearean speech, over loudness and intensity in body language and facial expression that is a sure sign of badly filmed Shakespeare. These calmer moments are much needed in a play that has a great many loud, histrionic and neurotic speeches coming from Hamlet, Ophelia and Polonius. Fortunately these three also have their calmer, subtler moments in which wise thoughts surface to balance the wilder reactions.



*Hamlet's devouring obsession and Ophelia's fear are both very obvious here. Shakespeare is not always subtle.*

When Laertes and Claudius plot alone together every word is measured and clearly announced, being filled with the exactly required amount of mixed venom, hatred, slyness and calculated manipulation that makes the message of what is going on clear, but allows for subtlety and a subtext: more of the meaning is conveyed through faces than words. Similarly when Gertrude learns from Hamlet

that she has married her husband's murderer no rage, fainting or weeping, appears, but instead Christie swiftly conveys through body language and subtle soft tones the quick recovery from being stunned, a moment of regret and then the calm, quiet realisation that her husband is her enemy. From Christie's performance here we know her next acts will be withdrawal and like her son, she will put up a front to protect herself and bring Claudius down.

This sense of balance through contrast goes all through the film. Just as the white from snow and the black night that are dominating colours of the opening scenes start to become a visual strain, the scene changes to the bright soft colours of the opulent palace interiors. Just when those interiors give the visual equivalent of eating too much pavlova, the next scene is set in a starkly bare wintertime forest. Thrice the palace interiors alternate with bare exteriors. Branagh mixes several types of shots in the same way giving variety to a long film. He wisely avoids both extreme close ups and has few long shots. The former jar and add too much intensity to a story close to overfull of that characteristic. Long shots emphasise setting over character. That is fine if the film is about a setting, or if setting determines character, but few stories are more about characters determining their interreactions with each other and being nearly oblivious to settings than Hamlet.



In 1996 the virtues of Branagh's film were appreciated by critics – and those small segments of the public who got to see it upon its very limited cinematic release. Why this film did not get widespread distribution is a mystery. This puts it in the same category as *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles's *MacBeth*, *Seven Samurai*, *Ride the High Country* and *Major Dundee*. All of these were great films that hit post production problems that limited their initial success.

Thank the fates for DVDs.