

Kenneth Branagh

Has Another Cinematic Masterpiece in "Hamlet"

The first surprise in Kenneth Branagh's new film production of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is his shock of platinum hair. One can't resist the question: So, do blondes really have more fun?

"It was quite fun, yes," Branagh says with a laugh. "At least, you turn more heads, anyway. You resist looking in the mirror, you are so different. Of course, for [playing] Hamlet, it's not very original."

But Hamlet productions are not judged by their tow-headedness alone and Branagh, recognized as this generation's foremost director of cinematic Shakespearean works, has engorged this 4-hour version of the Bard's most quoted play with plenty of everything, including stellar cast, swank costumes, sumptuous sets, breathtaking swordplay—even panoramic shots of marching armies. Scene after climactic scene breathes new life into this bone-chilling epic of incest and murder within a mist-shrouded late 19th century Elsinore.

Branagh feels that this Victorian time warp lends itself well to castle connivery, evoking a contemporary sense to the classic tale while retaining the traditional plot.

"I personally find it hard to accept 20th century Shakespeare, because we've had 100 years of films now, and people didn't talk that way. But look a little further back and you're not sure how people spoke, so Shakespearean language doesn't sit so uncomfortably," he explains.

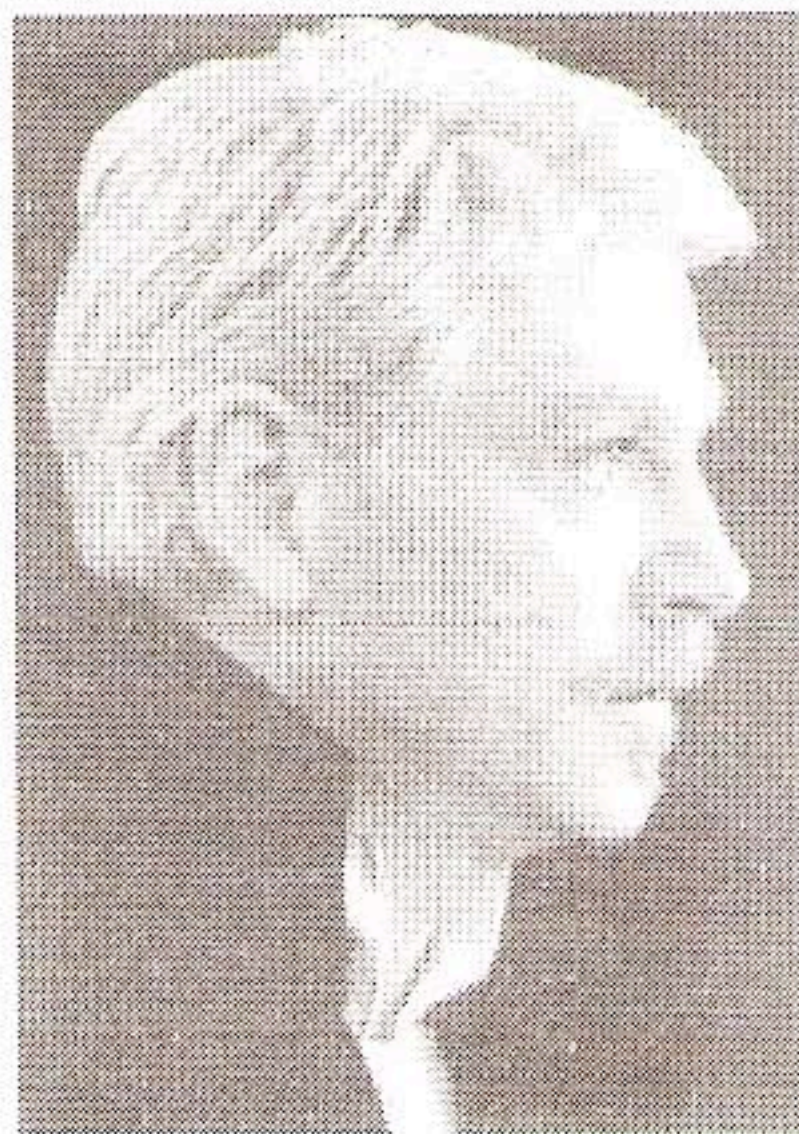
"The medieval look for Hamlet—the woe'd look, if you like, the 'sack top' look—it does not tell stories to me in the same way. The Elizabethan period doesn't do it for me either. But in this kind of world, it seemed a good place for that story to be set...It was a period in history when a lot of Europe was wronged by a few large, extended royal families, often intermarrying with arranged marriages to try and protect boundaries which were always changed anyway. We borrowed from a pretty incestuous and excessive world: the Czarists, the royal family, you know, the Romanovs, the Hapsburgs—both of which had the elegant looks: the women and the men both looked marvelous."

Other filmed versions included those of Burton, Chamberlain and Mel Gibson. Why would filmgoers sit through this new, unabridged version?

"It seems to me that there is something people enjoy about watching stories of royal families. They get a vicarious thrill, from the glamour of it," reflects Branagh. "They are so bloody shocked to find out these people are human, flesh and blood; they have perfectly normal human problems which are amusing to see worked out because they are under the spotlight."

These other recorded versions of Hamlet were ignored in his research for the production, including the rare—and rarely seen—Richard Burton teleplay.

"I got a hold of it, and every screen version, and every television version I could. Sally Burton, his widow, let me have a copy of it...It was screened for just one day in America, and it had a massive, massive audience...But you know, I got them and I never looked at them. The one thing we wanted to avoid was anything that's been done before. It's just too confusing, once you started working on this. You just start listening to the voice—" He drops into an imitation of Burton's nasal tones as Hamlet. "It's pretty amusing to see the myriad ways in which these victims can be played."



BRANAGH AS THE GREAT DANE

As with previous films—"Much Ado About Nothing", "Dead Again," and "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein", Branagh does double duty, both in front of and behind the camera. His first such attempt, "Henry V," garnered such kudos as a Best Director Academy Award nomination, a Best Director Award from the National Board of Review, and the New York Film Critics' Best Director Award. Although he insists this Wellesian trait was never a planned career move, it has given the renowned stage actor a veritable cinematic showcase—one that is coveted by other Hollywood leading men.

The work is arduous, he says, but certainly rewarding. "When you just act in a production, you have time to worry: you rehearse a scene, you wait for two hours, they light you, you come back and do it, you have two hours to whip yourself and be over-anxious. With directing, I am sometimes hopefully distracted by the many other problems you are forced to solve during that two-hour lighting phase. When you get to the acting, you intentionally arrive unencumbered by overworry. It's exhausting overall, of course, but you put yourself in that position, so you get on with it."

While Branagh has directed himself in numerous films, he relies on old friend and former Royal

Academy of Dramatic Arts colleague, Hugh Cruttwell, for a second opinion during filming. "He's seen my work since I was seventeen," he explains. "He first auditioned me as Hamlet. All the films in which I've directed myself, he's been there specifically to look after my performance. He's a brutally honest man, and he has no awe of me whatsoever."

Branagh's version eschews the melancholy indecision that haunts the Hamlets of past productions. Says Branagh: "It's not a problem of decisiveness about the rightness of it, or that it should be done...My view is that he is a man who does make up his mind the instance he is told his father was murdered. But, basically, there is a deep-seated moral revulsion against the act of killing. He essentially ducks the question [even after] he's just heard the proof. [Because Claudius is praying] he rationalizes his way out of it: 'I'll find a better time to do it.' Killing is a tough bargain; he might release his dad [from purgatory], but he's bound to go down there."

Hamlet's guilt over this lost opportunity to avenge his father's death surges forth in a heated confrontation with his mother, played by a passionate Julie Christie. Explains Branagh as he mimics Hamlet's derision: " 'Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Married-in-a-month Woman, Mrs. Lucky-to-have-the-same-job, darling'. If Hamlet had been able to take over, she'd have been the queen mum—not something she'd have particularly enjoyed, I think."

Throughout rehearsals, Branagh had the cast scrutinizing the royal family's murderous motives.

"I'd ask: 'How would you kill someone in your family?' We got very specific about it. Everyone had to choose someone. People got very squirmy about it," Branagh says chuckling. "No one wanted to do it with a knife or a dagger, or anything like that. No one was too dramatic, or wanted to do it in any way that would involve them with the physical process in, perhaps, seeing blood, or the writhing of the person. They all favored poison, while [the victim] was asleep or something; something they could take before they were in bed, and leave it alone."

Besides this current screen release, Branagh can soon be seen in "Shakespeare's Sister", where he plays a Catholic priest. He will also star in "The Gingerbread Man", a courtroom drama penned by bestselling author John Grisham.

With his new, well-toned physique—displayed marvelously in the swashbuckling scenes—will Branagh now consider a Hollywood hardbody role?

He guffaws heartily. "If I can get to wear white leather breastplate all the time, I'd be very happy. It would be far less work then. I do get asked to do action pictures—usually as the director, not to be the sweaty pectoral boy. But who knows?"

While Branagh is very grateful for Hollywood's acceptance of his cinematic vision, he has encountered some wariness. "They sometimes assume I'll come in with great fat texts, the complete Shakespearean works under my arm, and I'll get very wordy, when really, I should be going, 'Hey, you m—f—, get out of my way!' With that, he spews off an imitation of a realistic-sounding semi-automatic rifle. The man has Hollywood pegged.