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A Seasoned Hamlet: A View Through Sir Kenneth Branagh's Hourglass

Станеску Віорел. Змужнілий Гамлет: погляд крізь пісочний годинник Кеннета Брани.

Ні Шекспірові, ні Кеннету Брані не бракує уваги критиків, і якби хтось захотів переглянути всі наукові статті, присвячені «Гамлету», йому б знадобилося для цього ціле життя. Втім, один аспект Бранової екранізації «Гамлета», а саме вік Принца Данського, ніколи не обирався предметом аналізу. У цій статті досліджується створений К. Браною образ змужнілого, але бадьорого Гамлета, при цьому простежується його формування та сприйняття критикою. Крім того, у ній висвітлюється мотивація К. Брани щодо збереження оригінального хронометражу п'єси та коментується вибір виконавців.

Поряд із віком Гамлета в статті аналізується динаміка розвитку персонажів у Брановій екранізації. Відтак, простежується зв'язок між віком головного героя та його реакціями на події, що відбуваються навколо. Аналізується також особисте ставлення кінорежисера до Гамлетової кремезності, а також засобів, якими він увиразнює надмірну повноту Принца.

У статті широко використовуються критичні матеріали, а також сонети, що допомагає провести необхідні аналогії та проілюструвати ідеї.

Ключові слова: Вільям Шекспір, Кеннет Брана, Гамлет, фільм, вік Гамлета.

I. Introduction

Much has been said regarding Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film *Hamlet*, a portrayal of the renown Shakespearean masterpiece *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in hefty measures of praise and reprimand alike, augmenting its curious status of a film both daring and unapologetically adamant in preserving the formula of the original play. As far as my own criticism goes, I can only hope the present article will provide an even modest enrichment to the existing humbling amount of feedback, mainly by tackling the director's distribution choices, particularly that of Hamlet, played by Kenneth Branagh himself.

The inception of Branagh's cinematic *Hamlet* can be traced as early as 1975 when the artist, then aged 15, witnessed his future friend and frequent collaborator, both on stage and in film, Derek Jacobi perform the role of the Danish prince, flaring young Branagh's interest for pursuing a career in acting, which would eventually guide his steps towards the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London, at the ripe age of 18. At 23, he was already a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company¹. Consequently, romantics could be tempted to say it was Hamlet who chose Kenneth Branagh to retell his tale, his entire fruitful and, at times, controversial career culminating in 1996 with the ambitious project estimated at an overwhelming 18 million U.S. Dollars. Perhaps no better words than Shakespeare's illustrate their relationship, as seen in the form of Sonnet XV:

*When I consider every thing that grows
Holds in perfection but a little moment,
That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows
Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;
When I perceive that men as plants increase,
Cheered and cheque'd even by the self-same sky,*

¹ *The New York Times*. Retrieved from:
<http://www.nytimes.com/movies/person/82784/Kenneth-Branagh/biography>,

*Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
And wear their brave state out of memory;
Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,
Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay,
To change your day of youth to sullied night;
And all in war with Time for love of you,
As he takes from you, I engraft you new².*

Indeed, everything seemed, at various points in Branagh's life, to stir him towards Hamlet. In 1994, his critical reception appeared to go sour, when his attempt at portraying Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was met with harsh reviews, earning him the unenviable honour of having directed one of the year's worst rated films³. His ensuing performance from 1995, *Othello*, in which he was cast as Iago, also fell short of expectations. A foreshadowing of his intentions of enacting *Hamlet* emerged that same year, under the guise of *In the Bleak Midwinter*, a film with a plot centred around a declining actor, surprisingly not played by Kenneth Branagh, who takes a daring step to revitalize his career by opting to (...) *direct and play the title role in a provincial production of Hamlet over the Christmas holidays. After auditioning a motley assortment of performers, including a children's hand puppeteer and a maniacal ventriloquist, Joe assembles a cast of six (to play 24 roles) and carts them to a village called Hope, where they set up shop in a drafty old church*⁴. As such, the film partially fits the role of an allegory of Branagh's own life at that moment, with the notable exceptions that his *Hamlet* was a long shot from being modestly financed, he had

² *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, The Arden Shakespeare Third Edition, ed. Duncan-Jones, Katherine, – China, 2007, p. 141.

³ *The New York Times*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.nytimes.com/movies/person/82784/Kenneth-Branagh/biography>,

⁴ Holden, Stephen (1996, February 9) A Winter's Tale (1995), Film Review: Why Must the Show Go On? That Is the Question! *The New York Times* Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A04E0DF1539F93AA35751C0A960958260>

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a plethora of talented and reputable actors to choose from and the royal court was placed in none other than the radiant Blenheim Palace. In all fairness, the location's luxurious interior does emanate a dwarfing sentiment of Divine Grace.

The roots of Branagh's *Hamlet* are the living proof that even the most harrowing artistic trials can bear exquisite fruit, if accompanied by an iron will and genuine passion for the Bard's work, whose plays invariably reverberate at the pinnacle of expression and creation.

II. An Aged Prince

There has been much speculation regarding Hamlet's age in the play, Professor A.C. Bradley observing: *It has been suggested that in the old play Hamlet was a mere lad; that Shakespeare, when he began to work on it, had not determined to make Hamlet older; that, as he went on, he did so determine; and that this is the reason why the earlier part of the play makes (if it does so) a different impression from the later*⁵. Concerning Hamlet's age, as implied in the Second Quarto, to which Kenneth Branagh's script remains for the most part faithful, he notes:

Q2 says:

(1) The grave-digger came to his business on the day when old Hamlet defeated Fortinbras:

(2) On that day young Hamlet was born:

(3) The grave-digger has, at the time of speaking, been sexton for thirty years:

(4) Yorick's skull has been in the earth twenty-three years:

(5) Yorick used to carry young Hamlet on his back.

*This is all explicit and connected, and yields the result that Hamlet is now thirty*⁶.

What is, the reader may ask, the relevance of the Danish

⁵ Bradley, A.C., *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Macmillan and Co., London, 1919, p. 407.

⁶ Ibid.

prince's age to Branagh's performance? Simply put, Branagh was 36 the year he starred as Hamlet, noticeably over the prince's intended age. Hence, we can no longer speak of a man whose anger is impacted by a struggle between youth and maturity, but rather of an individual locked in confrontation with his own destructive mortality. Hardened by age and strife, Branagh's Hamlet is one of matured viciousness, a touch more grim than the original, not a pup learning how to bite, but a wounded wolf. To viewers, his appearance and tone emanate not recklessness as much as a carefully calculated insanity: *Not a whit. We defy augury. There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be.* (Hamlet, Act V, Scene 2)

Roger Ebert, acclaimed Chicago Sun-Times film critic, also commended Branagh's vigour, stating: *As for Hamlet, Branagh (...) has no interest in playing him as an apologetic mope. Branagh is an actor of exuberant physical gifts and energy (...). Consider the scene beginning "Oh, what a rogue and peasant knave am I ...," in which Hamlet bitterly regrets his inaction. The lines are delivered not in bewilderment but in mounting anger, and it is to Branagh's credit that he pulls out all the stops; a quieter Hamlet would make a tamer Hamlet.*⁷

Not only does Branagh cement mature dominance in Hamlet's voice and visage, but also shows it in his actions, to the point his behaviour turns violent. As one witnesses the scene of his tormenting Ophelia, cleverly shot through a two-way mirror, being given the intimate impression of prying, he is shocked to see Ophelia's face forced against the glass, her terrified expression trying to find an escape. We become acquainted with a Hamlet not to be taken lightly, rampaging in his vengeance.

⁷ Ebert, Roger, (1997, January 24), *Hamlet* Retrieved from: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hamlet-1996>

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Yet, there is something in this brooding, menacing, wrathful, at times indelicate Hamlet that resonates with the modern man, the man bound by chains he cannot see, in a dynamic age that sees his soul bare. Branagh himself declared, in an interview for the National Public Post Radio, that Hamlet's obliviousness stemmed from a baleful self-absorbtion, increasingly common in *this end of the century* (...), *especially post-Freud and post-all the sort of psychoanalysis that we have as part of our sort of daily bread and butter. It's on television; it's in self-help books in libraries. We're all somehow trying to find ourselves.*⁸ Even his love for Ophelia is a clash, stumbling from one misstep to another. He draws attention specifically because, in a contemporary fashion, he is more than he is expected to be. For such reasons, some are inclined to believe theatre critic Dominic Cavendish' statement of Kenneth Branagh's having eclipsed Lawrence Olivier in bringing Shakespeare to the cinema-going masses.⁹

III. Cast and Dynamics

To say the cast of *Hamlet* is stellar would be no exaggeration, and it is stellar for good reason – by allotting renown actors to even minor roles, Branagh manages to skilfully pull overlooked scenes into the spotlight. For instance, who would suspect the acclaimed French actor Gerard Depardieu to settle for the humble part of Reynaldo? Though it may initially pass for overkill, the director's choice gives unforeseen depth to the frequently overlooked character, namely turning a complacent lackey into a menacing chameleon. It is indeed difficult not to take Reynaldo seriously

⁸ host Gross, Terry (1996, December) Fresh Air Interview Transcript, *National Public Radio* Retrieved from: <http://www.branaghcompendium.com/artic-npr96.htm>

⁹ Cavendish, Dominic (2013, July 4) Kenneth Branagh: lost Shakespearean? *The Telegraph* Retrieved from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/william-shakespeare/10120995/Kenneth-Branagh-lost-Shakespearean.html>

and question his ulterior motives. Obedient as he may seem, the viewer finds himself incapable of dismissing the possibility of a silent clash between him and Polonius.

Another minor role is that of the gravedigger, portrayed by Billy Crystal, whose quirks seem to fit the character less like a glove and more like a noose. It is unclear whether Billy Crystal is playing the gravedigger or things are the other way around, to the extent of a demonic possession. As author Deborah Cartmell describes, *A shot of Yorick still alive playing with Hamlet as a child follows the gravedigger's identification of Yorick's skull by the buckteeth that still remain in it: baring his teeth in imitation of the buckteeth of the skull, the gravedigger (Billy Crystal), hands the skull to Hamlet.*¹⁰

Speaking of Yorick, few could make a better match than comedian Ken Dodd, the very personification of a benign jester. With his kind expression and playful demeanour, he perhaps depicts the very noble traits that Hamlet holds dear. The image of his remains is not only the defilement of his weathered skull, but that of the kindness in the Danish prince's heart. His memory is that of common, unassuming humanity. By urging the gravedigger to unearth more skulls, Branagh's Hamlet may have been probing the past for answers, only to find that graveyards make apathetic aides.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are themselves skillfully brought to life by Timothy Spall and Reece Dinsdale, two veteran actors more than capable of sustaining the tempestuous relationship with Branagh's fiery prince. Facing his dark figure against the pristine snow, they hopelessly try to worm their way into an universe where they don't belong.

Although not one of the riveting renditions he has remembered by, Robin Williams' Osric is both witty and soldierly, plunging into death with vehemence, devoting his final moments to warn of the impending danger posed by

¹⁰ Cartmell, Deborah, *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., Chichester, 2012, p. 231.

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Fortinbras' army. In this regard, he honours his own pursuit of duty, one different from that of the Danish prince. Similar to the actor, Osric flaunts a gentle form of courage, that of a wise and old soldier.

Considering the impressive energy that only this sample of minor roles delivers, it should come as no surprise that casting a titan such as Derek Jacobi in the role of Claudius is bound to stir things up. As Roger Ebert said, *The role of Claudius (Derek Jacobi) is especially enriched: In shorter versions, he is the scowling usurper who functions only as villain. Here, with lines and scenes restored, he seems more balanced and powerful. He might have made a plausible king of Denmark, had things turned out differently.*¹¹ What makes his depiction unique is, once again, in Ebert's words, that *this production shows Gertrude (Julie Christie) as lustfully in love with Claudius. By restoring the original scope of Claudius' role, Branagh emphasizes court and political intrigue instead of enclosing the material in a Freudian hothouse.*¹² Occasionally, Hamlet's stand-off with his uncle hints at Branagh's own friendly rivalry with Jacobi for the crown, with the very man who revealed Hamlet to him.

Kate Winslet's impressionable Ophelia doesn't go much beyond the original, succumbing to the pressure of the royal court. Rejected by the love of her life and crushed by her father's murder, she drowns much sooner than the moment she offers her body to the waters. Her ordeal is nothing more than a gradual asphyxiation, socially and romantically.

Her father, Polonius, played equally brilliantly and despicably by the senior Richard Briers, uses his position as Lord Chamberlain to the fullest – he allies himself with Claudius to keep Hamlet under close watch, eventually dying while doing so. The tension between him and Hamlet may

¹¹ Ebert, Roger, (1997, January 24), *Hamlet* Retrieved from: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hamlet-1996>

¹² Ibid.

stem from Briers and Branagh's close collaboration, an honed manifestation of an experienced team.

Laertes follows in Hamlet's footsteps, swiftly returning from Paris at the news of his father's murder. Nothing other than Hamlet's blood can sate him, and Michael Maloney shows just that. Protective of his sister and viciously faithful to his filial duty, he joins his father's ally, Claudius, to slay Hamlet. Though lacking Branagh's vigor, Maloney manages to keep up, offering a compelling performance.

After aiding Branagh in his *Winter's Tale* and *Othello*, Nicholas Farrell takes on the guise of Horatio, Hamlet's trusted friend and one of the survivors of the bloodbath. His virtue follows him throughout the film, finally absolving him of the bloodbath.

Unlike most adaptations of *Hamlet*, Branagh's includes Fortinbras, played by Rufus Sewell, the driven prince of Norway, perhaps a mere embodiment of equity, a representation of the one's past, which cannot be evaded – King Fortinbras' demise, at the hand of Hamlet's father, leaves the young Hamlet to atone for his parent's sin, making the prince of Norway's quest one of biblical connotations. His military incursion, driven by a filial mission very much similar to Hamlet's, not only pressures the entirety of the characters, but also offers a much-needed catharsis, essentially cleansing the stage of wrath, perversion, and corruption, reinstating a pace of normality.

IV. Conclusion

Without doubt praiseworthy and certainly intricate, Branagh's film makes a bold statement – if it's not broken, don't fix it. Just as Hamlet finds himself unable to cope with the change in his life, so does Branagh refuse to let *Hamlet* be altered, creating what may just be the most memorable screen version of it yet. His age does drift from the original, but, then again, maybe that's how the original really is, like good

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wine, better in time. Branagh's journey and encountered obstacles gave him a special understanding of Shakespeare's play, making Roger Ebert state the following: *One of the tasks of a lifetime is to become familiar with the great plays of Shakespeare. "Hamlet" is the most opaque. Branagh's version moved me, entertained me and made me feel for the first time at home in that doomed royal court.*¹³

Having had his fair share of doomed courts, Branagh was able to empathize with the prince's plight, proving once more the resourcefulness of his genius. With a team comprised of veteran actors of worldwide fame, he made the best out of a late-blooming Hamlet. Instead of slicing the play up, he declared that *even though we may not literally understand it, I think that's fair enough. There's a great deal in the play that, I think, because it's a classic and has withstood 400 years of people throwing themselves at it, that resists definitiveness. There is mystery in there, and that mystery – Hamlet says to Guildenstern "You would pluck out the heart of my mystery." "No will pluck out the heart of Hamlet, the play's mystery. But on the way, you can – you can, if you serve, as we do in this one, the whole text up, I think that intuitively, the audience respond to it in a very mysterious way. And I think that that's a magical, magical thing which we underestimate because we so want to nail everything. What kind of Hamlet is it? What's his motivation? What does it mean? Can I have it in three sentences please. It's not possible, and that's very exciting.*¹⁴

A mature Hamlet for a mature audience, capable of taking all of it in. It should only be fair we ask no further, and let Hamlet himself ponder the sense of his existence.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ host Gross, Terry (1996, December) Fresh Air Interview Transcript, *National Public Radio* Retrieved from: <http://www.branaghcompendium.com/artic-npr96.htm>