

Youth's anguish

Hamlet, from the play by William Shakespeare, adapted for the screen and directed by Michael Almereyda

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The director is cited elsewhere in the notes: “Global corporate power seems at least as treacherous and total as anything going on in a well-oiled feudal empire of Shakespeare's day.” He responded to an interviewer's question about his decision to “translate royal power to corporate” in the following manner: “There's still a class system in the world and in America, people who have things and people who don't. And people who have things tend to make sure they keep having them and controlling them, aligned with corporate power, which is so overarching that you can't even attack it without becoming part of it...”

Because an individual has some insight into the nature of contemporary society is no guarantee he'll stage or film a 400-year-old play in a meaningful fashion, but it's not the worst starting-point.

Hamlet is a vast and apparently all-encompassing work. There is no definitive version. The play, suggests literary critic and historian Harold Bloom, “is a reflecting pool, a spacious mirror in which we need must see ourselves.” This is a bit pompous, but probably true. The best productions take aspects or sides of the play and fold them into pressing contemporary social, psychological and aesthetic needs. We are continually discovering that it is a modern work.

Almereyda for his part has seen the play as the tragedy of idealistic youth caught up and destroyed by official greed and corruption. This is a legitimate interpretation, although it has its limitations. Ethan Hawke as Hamlet is at odds with a harsh, insensitive world: Manhattan's Lower East Side versus Wall Street. Ophelia (Julia Stiles) is a victim too, not so much of Hamlet as of her spying, prying father Polonius (Bill

Murray), her well-meaning brother Laertes (Liev Schreiber) and all their useless, common sensical advice. This Hamlet does love Ophelia, but everything and everyone gets in the way.

A strength of this film is its emphasis on Hamlet's general and unrelenting unhappiness with the state of things. At the beginning of the piece his father has died and his mother has rather hastily married her brother-in-law. Anyone might be made upset by this, but it seems difficult to blame Hamlet's universal disgust (“How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world!”) and his early musings on “self-slaughter” simply on that recent turn of events. The discovery or the discovery of the possibility that a murder has taken place hardly darkens Hamlet's view of Denmark, and the world:

Hamlet: Denmark's a prison.

Rosenkrantz: Then is the world one.

Hamlet: A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o'th' worst.

In a sense, Hamlet begins the work with the knowledge that the operations of the court (or here, the boardroom) constitute criminal activity; that his father was murdered by his uncle—and he's not absolutely certain that has taken place until nearly two-thirds of the way through—underscores a truth he has already intuited.

From the outset Hamlet's consciousness and personality, the degree to which he sees into the essence of things, render a peaceable, complacent existence an impossibility. In fact, Almereyda makes the following speech into a prologue: “What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in

faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god—the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?”

Hamlet represents the principle of unfolding consciousness (“a breaking wave of sensibility, of thought and feeling pulsating onward,” as Bloom nicely puts it)—although largely *unconscious* of its effects—as perpetual subversion and threat to the established order. Remember Claudius: “How dangerous it is that this man goes loose!” Hamlet is the personification of Shakespeare's art or the work of any great artist, in that sense. All his words and actions have serious and even fatal consequences, although he might wish they didn't. His tragic fate is that he can't stop from getting to the bottom of things, come what may.

Almeryda has carved out his particular *Hamlet* from the larger body of Shakespeare's play and carried it through rather effectively. (It's quite a different work than Kenneth Branagh's four-hour version released in 1996, stronger in many regards, in my opinion, weaker in certain others.) I have no objection to images of modern offices and bedrooms, video stores, museums and such juxtaposed with the language of the play. The anguish and insight are real, that's the main point. In general, the discussion as to whether Shakespeare should be done in modern or period dress, or whether American or British actors should speak the lines, is tedious and unfruitful. The thing that's needed, above all, is a purpose. Most productions of Shakespeare's plays on both sides of the Atlantic are ritualistic, a going through the motions. I was moved in general by Hawke's *Hamlet*, which is not a tour de force performance, but an element of a calm, serious approach to the play.

I suspect that some of those who criticize Almeryda's film on the grounds that it desecrates or distorts a classic are angry and uncomfortable, in fact, because his *Hamlet* takes anguish seriously as a modern condition of the young and sensitive and places it in definite surroundings. The filmmaker can be forgiven much, but perhaps not for shooting Claudius (Kyle MacLachlan), Hamlet's antagonist, against one of those giant electronic billboards across which stock prices are racing. That's an identification certain people could have done without. More generally, it is perfectly

acceptable to discuss Hamlet's “catastrophic consciousness of the spiritual disease of his world” as long as history and social life are left out of it.

In taking the part, so to speak, of the Lower East Side, Almeryda of course adopts the weaknesses of that subculture as well: its tendency to pose and mistake style for substance, its self-consciousness, its “cool” affectations. At times, Hawke with his video gear, tinted glasses, unfashionably fashionable wool cap and world-weary good looks is a bit hard to take: a trifle spoiled, a trifle self-pitying, a trifle self-righteous (precisely as novelist John Updike chooses to depict him, a peripheral character, in his recent *Gertrude and Claudius*). And the characterizations of Claudius and Gertrude (Diane Venora) and their milieu are perhaps correspondingly “unfair.”

After all, it is very nearly true, as Bloom suggests, that Hamlet “knows that the corruption is within him as much as in the state of Denmark.” He tells Ophelia: “I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant knaves, all. Believe none of us.” This element of self-indictment and self-disgust is absent, or at least not spelled out as it might be. The failure of this Hamlet to criticize himself speaks to the tendency of an entire generation to let itself off too lightly, to be a little pleased with itself.

Nonetheless, taken “for all in all,” Almeryda's film seems legitimate to me, justified by contemporary life and the play itself, at times quite powerful and beautiful, one of the better American films of the year.



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