

## REVIEWS OF ALMEREYDA'S *HAMLET*

### I.

**“A Hostile Takeover of Hamlet; Ophelia’s Wried like Linda Trip,” Andrew Sarris, *New York Observer*, May 15, 2000**

... Shakespeare’s dramatic and poetic genius becomes a distraction from the director’s visual improvisations with all the updated media technology at his disposal. Though the state of Denmark-about which there is something rotten-becomes the Denmark Corporation fighting a hostile takeover by the Norway Corporation and its chief executive, Mr. Fortinbras, the American cast is still saddled with the original text, which means that the lines are read for the most part with more feeling for the angry-stepchild plot than for the iambic pentameter.

The old question arises: What is Shakespeare to cinema and what is cinema to Shakespeare? We have been told often enough that if Shakespeare were alive today he would be in Sundance with a script and a cell phone. Also, it can be argued that by jazzing up an old chestnut as if it were some sort of video game, more young people will become familiar with a great literary landmark of Western civilization. Yet as a reviewer for a teen-age magazine remarked, this latest update of *Hamlet* will never replace *Cliffs Notes*.

As for Mr. Almereyda’s claim to our attention as a low-budget innovator in the medium worthy of a retrospective at the Anthology Film Archives, I must confess total ignorance of his past decade’s output that has caused Film Comment to lionize him as “indie-cinema’s best-kept secret.” Nonetheless, Mr. Almereyda, a bit like Woody Allen, has developed a talent for persuading interesting performers to work for beer-and-pretzel money. Hence, any project with Ethan Hawke as Hamlet, Kyle MacLachlan as Claudius, Diane Venora as Gertrude, Liev Schreiber as Laertes, Julia Stiles as Ophelia and Bill Murray as Polonius is not without some iconic anticipation apart from the inevitable derision to be expected from American Anglophiles brought up on the Knights and Dames of the British stage peerage....

Though Basil Sydney’s Claudius in Olivier’s *Hamlet* (1948) is still the Claudius to beat, Mr. MacLachlan’s runs a close second for his originality in stressing the womanizing side of the character over the traditional pseudopatriarch. Ms. Venora tries hard to make new sense of Gertrude, but the bizarre staging of the big scenes defeat all her efforts.

Mr. Schreiber seems too levelheaded as Laertes to play the hothead, and Ms. Stiles still looks like a comer, particularly by keeping a straight face as Ophelia when Mr. Murray’s Polonius wires her for her meeting with Hamlet as if she were Linda Tripp.

On the whole, however, Mr. Almereyda has created some interesting effects with a wide variety of mirrors, screens and natural reflections, thus magnifying the central character by the sheer multiplicity of his likenesses in both real and virtual reality. The director is astute also with his deployment of paparazzi in the certification of today’s media mania over celebrities as the equivalent of yesterday’s crowd scenes under the balconies on which crowned heads waved and ruled for centuries. A more cynical reviewer than I might itemize also the suspiciously prominent product placements over the dazzling Manhattan nightscape. As it is, I still like to give struggling artists the benefit of every doubt.

### II.

**“A Simpler Melancholy,” Elvis Mitchell, *New York Times*, May 12, 2000**

"It is curious; one never thinks of attaching 'Hamlet' to any special locale," the critic Kenneth Tynan once wrote of Shakespeare's tragedy, and the director Michael Almereyda has brilliantly seized upon that by rooting his voluptuous and rewarding new adaptation of the play in today's Manhattan. The city's

contradictions of beauty and squalor give the movie a sense of place -- it makes the best use of the Guggenheim Museum you'll ever see in a film -- and New York becomes a complex character in this vital and sharply intelligent film. Mr. Almercyda contours the material to his own needs, even though he was inspired by the 1987 "Hamlet Goes Business," a deadpan update by the renegade Finnish director Aki Kaurismaki. This "Hamlet" is also set in the corporate world, where Claudius (Kyle MacLachlan) has risen to the top of the Denmark Corporation. ...

Mr. Almercyda has created a new standard for adaptations of Shakespeare, starting with an understanding of the emotional pull of the material that corresponds with its new period and setting. Hamlet's soliloquies are now interior monologues except for the "To be or not to be" speech, which he delivers in a Blockbuster video store, using the blue in the company logo and the word "Action" emblazoned on the shelves to fit in with the mood and color of the rest of the picture.

The director's rigorous trimming has a boldness and vivacity that makes this version exhilarating while leaving Shakespeare's language and intent intact. The use of colors -- its palette is red, green and the aforementioned blue -- is a visual manifestation of the streamlining. This movie will send shivers of happiness through audiences because it's one of the few American productions of "Hamlet" constructed around the rhythms of the actors, giving each scene a different pulse.

Mr. Almercyda plays to his performers' strengths, and it's awe inspiring. The truly revelatory performance comes from the ravaged dignity that Bill Murray lends Polonius, a weary, middle-aged man whose every utterance sounds like a homily he should believe in and perhaps did many years ago. Mr. Murray takes the bemused hollowness he first discovered in sketch comedy and gives it a worn, saddened undercurrent; it's what those bullying cynics he plays in comedies would be like in real life after about 20 years. The speech Polonius gives to his son, Laertes (Liev Schreiber), has a truth that "Death of a Salesman" can only aspire to and certifies Mr. Murray -- who's been giving fully shaped performances in bad or little-seen movies for years -- as one of the finest actors currently working. "Madam, I use no art at all," he says at one point, and it's true; he uses apparent artlessness to achieve art.

It's not just Mr. Murray and Ms. Venora who are worth watching. Mr. MacLachlan's Claudius has a hail-fellow-well-met shallowness, a blandness tinged with creeping ambition. Mr. Schreiber is all lovely Old World elegance; he uses his resonant, trained voice to find the injured quality of lines like "You wound me, sir," and offers a classical turn in the midst of the modernity. Steve Zahn plays Rosencrantz as slacker-weasel with a blurry twang that is just what's called for here. And Karl Geary is a steadfast, affecting Horatio.

Conceptually, "Hamlet" has all the goods and then some. Oddly enough, the title character is a little lacking in complication. Mr. Hawke's laudable commitment to the project was obviously responsible for getting it made, and his feline transparency would appear to be right for a Hamlet wrestling with the urge to kill Claudius and avenge his father's death.

But this Hamlet, wearing knit caps that make him look like a lost member of the Spin Doctors, is mired in an arrested adolescence that infantilizes him. For this conception to be fully realized, Hamlet's interior monologues shouldn't so fully mirror what's going on with him outwardly; a contrast would have provided some tension. Mr. Hawke's moping slows things down too much, and a clip from a James Dean movie playing behind him emphasizes the self-pitying aspect.

Julia Stiles plays Ophelia, and this may be the first time in her brief film career that this wildly talented young actress has seemed immature. "Hamlet" exploits her youth effectively: Polonius laces up her sneakers as he addresses her. But Ms. Stiles seems too much a child and often can't get her footing as the production sprints past her. Her natural onscreen empathy does allow for several moments that get under the skin: Ophelia plunges into an azure pool, imagining her death; she's often photographed at some of the most beautiful fountains and water spouts in New York. And when distraught, she dissolves into sobs, flinging

Polaroids as if they were flower petals; it's heart-rending. The scenes she has with Mr. Hawke with a conventional and definable give-and-take also serve her well....

### III.

**“Nothing rotten at Denmark Inc., Strong acting, style power 'Hamlet's' millennial make over,” Wesley Morris, *San Francisco Examiner*, May 19, 2000 (excerpt)**

If a soulessness creeps into Almereyda's "Hamlet," it's more because the bounty of this project is richer than he's prepared to tackle. Its timelessness and timeliness seem to be dueling for primacy as though one or the other has to win. Is the film the moodiest, most atmospheric, audacious Ethan Hawke movie ever - or an inventive recalibration of Shakespeare to comment on a corporate culture? Sometimes the film manages to be a heated synthesis of the two, perhaps aided by Almereyda's minced, pan-and-scan handling of the text versus Kenneth Branagh's four-hour letterboxed version.

But it seems to be Almereyda's wish to turn the play less into a diatribe against consumerism (although there is some inspired product placement) and more into a love sonnet for New York, an organism here as temperamental and somber as the players populating it. The characters often speak in hollow spaces where the acoustics seem to give the words lives of their own. Bill Murray, doing a beautifully solemn rendition of Polonius, gives the "brevity is the soul of wit" speech on the deck of the indoor pool in Gertrude (Diane Venora) and Claudius' penthouse overlooking Central Park and the phrases bounce off the windows. His language is measured, the insouciance in the monologue dried into the business of his daughter Ophelia's (Julia Stiles) affair with their son. Polonius is a clown who's traded the circus for fatherhood and an Alfred Dunhill suit. Ophelia, who is wiretapped and forced to end things with Hamlet, begins unwinding inside the spirals of the Guggenheim Museum, her shrieks reverberating through the coiled space like electricity.

Ophelia seems more the pawn than she's been before. Stiles looks tortured, despondent, angry, feral on the inside, her words hardened into wood. Outfitted in downtown Euro-chic (tiny T-shirts, nylon parachute pants and a messenger bag), she's like a gorgeous piece of mise-en-scene. Shepard, on the other hand, unlocks the text with patient, hushed danger. He gets behind the words and pours gasoline over them, then rocks the Ghost's fury and betrayal.

The interplay of location and language gives the play its umpteenth life. It's "Hamlet Unplugged," stripped-down and heady. And as a cosmetics-first experiment in atmosphere, "Hamlet" is almost daring. Almereyda, who has done some groundbreaking work with a Fisher-Price Pixel-Vision video camera, encourages his crew to emphasize the upscale glamour as a counterpoint to the ugliness in the story, though Hamlet's fencing duel with a fire-breathing Laertes (Liev Schreiber) and the gunplay that ensues is almost ruinous, too indulgent by half.

But Almereyda does a wonderful thing with the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, using the words of pacifist Buddhist guru Thich Nhat Hanh ("You need others to be") - who appears in a video monitor - in order to combat Hamlet's sullen-murderous-suicidal thoughts. Shakespeare's ideas of ontology and existentialism are pitted against the Zen variations. But what difference does it make to a Hamlet who spends his evenings alone, trolling the aisles of his local Blockbuster, waxing about "the insolence of office?" He's the only guy in the store who refuses to go home happy.

### IV.

**Stephanie Zacharek, “Hamlet,” *Salon*, <http://www.salon.com/entertainment/movies/review/2000/05/12/hamlet/index.html?CP=SAL&DN=110>, August 2000**

Michael Almereyda's somber, gorgeous, darkly glittering "Hamlet," set in New York in the early days of the 21st century, is so perfectly modern, and yet so mindful of the tradition of the play, that it seems to exist in two worlds at once. There's no sense that the narrative texture had to be jazzed up in order to make the

material seem relevant to a modern audience. If anything, Almereyda's "Hamlet" is a meditation on the timelessness of the material. It's deeply inventive within the framework of the story, and it's funny in unexpected places. Every actor involved rises to the challenge of the language (Almereyda has streamlined the play for the screen but hasn't updated the text), although not every performer comes at it in an expected, or officially sanctioned, way.

But oddly enough it's the picture's visuals -- its mournful, glassy Manhattan high-rises; its limos and Town Cars with their mirrorlike flanks -- that make it feel most like "Hamlet." The picture carries a slight pall over it; the overarching sense that something is terribly wrong hovers in the air like a swarm of muted surveillance helicopters. It's as much a tone poem in honor of "Hamlet" as it is a raw interpretation of it, but it shines as both tribute and treatment.

## V.

**"Hamlet (2000)," James Berardinelli, <http://www.reelviews.net/movies/h/hamlet2000.html> (excerpt)**

Those who are familiar with *Hamlet* will have no problem following this version. However, anyone drawn to the story by the promise of a young, happening cast will find themselves lost early with little hope of recovering as the proceedings continue. Almereyda pares the content down to a bare minimum. In its entirety, without intermissions, "Hamlet" generally takes between 3:50 and 4:15 to perform (depending on the production). This movie clocks in at a relatively skinny 1:53. Obviously, something is missing.

Almereyda's style is low-key, and this approach saps the play of its energy. In contrast to Kenneth Branagh's glorious, full-length *Hamlet*, which contained moments to cause nape hairs to stand on end, this interpretation comes across as lifeless and plodding. Branagh's version may have lasted a full four hours, but Almereyda's seems to be the longer of the two adaptations.

To tell his *Hamlet*, Almereyda retains Shakespeare's dialogue (except for the inclusion of the "Welcome to MovieFone!" spiel, which I'm pretty sure wasn't in the original). Most of the best-known lines are there; alas, poor Yorik doesn't get his moment in the spotlight. The setting has been shifted to New York City in 2000. "Denmark" is the name of a corporation, not a country, and Claudius is the CEO. Computers and video cameras are commonly employed. In fact, when the ghost of Old Hamlet first appears, he is seen on a security monitor. And the final duel takes place with guns as well as swords.

This approach will immediately draw comparisons to the Ian McKellan/Richard Loncraine version of *Richard III*, Baz Luhrman's *Romeo + Juliet*, and Julie Taymor's *Titus*, but there is a key difference. Those films set the play in surrealistic, dream worlds, while Almereyda's *Hamlet* tries to place events in a modern-day pseudo-reality. For the most part, it doesn't work. The old style English loses its impact when delivered in Blockbuster aisles and on New York City streets. The whole thing is too jarring.

For the most part, the cast is disappointing, as well. Ethan Hawke essays a bland, uninvolved prince. Julia Stiles is flat as Ophelia. Bill Murray's Polonius is stiff and unyielding. And neither Diane Venora nor Kyle MacLachlan, as Gertrude and Claudius, generates much interest. In fact, the only actors to deliver compelling performances are Liev Schreiber (as Laertes) and Sam Shepard (as Old Hamlet).

Although it's virtually impossible to make a bad movie based on a play as strong as "Hamlet", Almereyda almost succeeds. This interpretation has a few strengths, but, on par, the weaknesses outweigh those. Anyone with a real interest in seeing a filmed version of the play can go to their video store and rent Branagh's version - nothing before or since has topped it, especially not this plodding, trendy adaptation.

## VI.

**Review, Carol Rocamora, February 19, 2001 (excerpt)**

And still, there are more things in heaven and earth that are dreamt of in (our) philosophy. Michael

Almereyda's ingenious film adaptation shows us the infinite possibilities for future Hamlets, still maintaining (though again reducing) the poetry while setting it in a contemporary forest of steel and glass on Park Avenue. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark Corporation, and Ethan Hawke, the son of the slain CEO, is called home from college to set it right. Hawke's hip Hamlet, in ski cap and shades, sees his world through a digicam. As he wanders through the Blockbuster Video's action aisles, taping his own "to be or not to be," we catch a vivid glimpse, in his lens, of millennial man hopelessly alienated by technology and a menacing, monolithic corporate culture. The all-star cast is hip, too, with Kyle MacLachlan as a cunning Claudius and Diane Venora as a stunning Gertrude, driving around town in a black stretch limo (Venora once played Hamlet herself at the New York Shakespeare Festival in the 1980s). Bill Murray's Polonius is droll, Liev Schreiber's Laertes is affecting, Sam Shepard's ghost is beguiling and the ubiquitous Julia Stiles, as Ophelia, drowns sensationally in the Guggenheim Museum pool. It's a slick, spectacular Hamlet, with a proud, vulnerable pop-culture prince at its epicenter.

## VII.

**“Hamlet,” Dennis Harvey, *Variety*, Jan. 30, 2000 (excerpt)**

In recent years, what once seemed a revisionist interpretation has become something of a convention: playing Shakespeare's least active protagonist as a virtual dynamo of indecision. Onscreen, Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh both emphasized Hamlet's youthful vigor, impetuosity and aggression. As one might expect, Ethan Hawke offers a somewhat different take --- hoo boy, his Dane is thinky and then some. In fact, he is the very model of a modern moping malcontent. This slacker prince forms a sinkhole at the center of adaptor-helmer Michael Almereyda's otherwise compelling contempo update. Conceptually vivid, if schematic, and bolstered by some fine support performances, pic ends up a sporadically striking framework for an oft-ludicrous, immediately postdated portrait...

His Hamlet inhabits a self-parodying middle ground. This Dane sulks in regulation black, shades and a grunger's knit cap, with three-day goatee. His signature sad-puppy expression suggests no thought more pained than "I can't believe you hated my guitar solo." The language sits uneasily on his tongue, with "To be or not to be" delivered in a just-rolled-outta-bed Malkovich mumble that defies close listening. When he pumps up the volume for later tantrums, it feels like Method hot air. Stiles, no stranger to teen-angst Shakespeare (e.g., "10 Things I Hate About You"), likewise flounders in petulance; at least her schoolgirlish Ophelia meets a visually arresting end. Murray again drags star baggage into the character-actor realm --- his comic humiliation is peerless when Polonius "narcs" to his bosses, but elsewhere a wiseguy distance rings false. Schreiber has recently played an acclaimed stage Hamlet himself. This may explain why Laertes comes off as a whiner and nag, in pic's most stilted turn.

On the plus side, Venora (a legit Ophelia --- and cross-dressed Dane) is striking as a Gertrude who's more "suit" than mother, yet guilt-free as either. Casting MacLachlan as duplicitous corporate smoothie Claudius is a brilliant stroke; ditto Shepard, a typically recessive actor who's seldom exhibited such force.

## VIII.

**“Get Thee to Moombe,” Peter Rainer, *New York Magazine*, October 30, 2001 (excerpt)**

Denmark here is not a country but a megaconglomerate whose CEO, Claudius (Kyle McLachlan), has the square-jawed forthrightness of a captain of industry. In other words, he's already a villain even without the added bonus of being the murderer of Hamlet's father. Hamlet is a tatty romantic who slumps his way about the city in a furiously alienated funk. He's the most grad-student-ish of all movie Hamlets, and also, I believe, the youngest: a *Reality Bites* Hamlet and a hippie Hamlet, too, with some James Dean thrown in. (Dean's image is invoked in the movie.) The more one sees of this loquacious moper, the more he resembles a refugee from the counterculture wars. Corporatism in this movie is the big bad wolf. At large in a global media culture, Hamlet is as dewy a rebel as any flower-powered precursor. A would-be digital filmmaker, he fights

the enemy with its own weapons: His version of *The Mousetrap*, the play-within-the-play that captures Claudius's conscience and leaves him aghast, is rendered here as a movie-within-a-movie.

If the success of any *Hamlet* ultimately rests on the quality of its lead performance, then Almereyda's version is middling. Hawke isn't terrible. His lines are delivered unaffectedly, in a way that allows the poetry to come through without seeming either too familiar or arch. Plus, as he also demonstrated in Richard Linklater's neglected *Before Sunrise*, he has a scruffy, moonstruck quality that works well all by itself. But it's difficult to find a way into Hamlet's torrential musings in a production as overstocked as this one. Hawke doesn't have the formidableness to break through the jabber of experimental-film imagery and shock cuts and surfaces reflecting back on surfaces. Maybe no actor could have broken through. But what is missing from this performance, and this production, is the sense that Hamlet is, as Mark Van Doren wrote, "trying to be more than a man can possibly be."

...There are still plenty of reasons to check out this new *Hamlet*. There's a marvelous mad scene in which Ophelia (a Fiona Appleish-looking Julia Stiles) screams like a banshee within the coiled tiers of the Guggenheim. If Ethan Hawkes's performance doesn't carry the day, there are others that do, chiefly Liev Schreiber's elegantly seething Laertes, Sam Shepard's rude, startlingly present Ghost, Diane Venora's Gertrude, and (yes) Bill Murray's Polonius. Murray gives his lines a slightly skewed twist that makes them seem both eccentric and naturalistic. His Polonius is a voluble old fud who is also immensely touching; his murder is the only time in the film when one feels a life has been taken away. Diane Venora is the cast's most experienced Shakespearean performer -- she once played the Melancholy Dane for Joe Papp and recently returned to Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival as Gertrude opposite Liev Schreiber's Hamlet -- and she demonstrates yet again that she is one of the most gifted (and underused) actresses around. Her Gertrude is both solicitous and passionate, a queen gravely troubled by what is going on all around her and inside herself. She is a worthy counterpart to Hamlet, and her depth-charged brooding makes it clearer than ever how closely blood-linked this woman is to her son. For all of Almereyda's nouveau overconceptualizing, his *Hamlet* ultimately comes down to a story about a boy and his mother.