

REVIEWS OF OLIVIER'S *HAMLET*

BOSLEY CROWTHER, *HAMLET*, *NEW YORK TIMES*, SEPT. 30, 1948

It may come as something of a rude shock to the theatre's traditionalists to discover that the tragedies of Shakespeare can be eloquently presented on the screen. So bound have these poetic dramas long been to the culture of our stage that the very thought of their transference may have staggered a few profound die-hards. But now the matter is settled; the filmed "Hamlet" of Laurence Olivier gives absolute proof that these classics are magnificently suited to the screen.

Indeed, this fine British-made picture, which opened at the Park Avenue last night under the Theatre Guild's elegant aegis, is probably as vivid and as clear an exposition of the doleful Dane's dilemma as modern-day playgoers have seen. And just as Olivier's ingenious and spectacular "Henry V" set out new visual limits for Shakespeare's historical plays, his "Hamlet" envisions new vistas in the great tragedies of the Bard.

It is not too brash or insensitive to say that these eloquent plays, in their uncounted stage presentations, have been more often heard than seen. The physical nature of the theatre, from the time of the Globe until now, has compelled that the audiences of Shakespeare listen more closely than they look. And, indeed, the physical distance of the audience from the stage has denied it the privilege of partaking in some of the most intimate moments of the plays.

But just as Olivier's great "Henry" took the play further away by taking it out into the open—and thereby revealed it visually—his "Hamlet" makes the play more evident by bringing it closer to you. The subtle reactions of the characters, the movements of their faces and forms, which can be so dramatically expressive and which are more or less remote on the stage, are here made emotionally incisive by their normal proximity. Coupled with beautiful acting and inspired interpretations all the way, this visual closeness to the drama offers insights that are brilliant and rare.

Further, a quietly-moving camera which wanders intently around the vast and gloomy palace of Elsinore, now on the misty battlements, now in the great council chamber, now in the bedroom of the Queen, always looking and listening, from this and from that vantage point, gives the exciting impression of a silent observer of great events, aware that big things are impending and anxious not to miss any of them.

Actually, a lot of material which is in the conventional "Hamlet" text is missing from the picture—a lot of lines and some minor characters, notably those two fickle windbags, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. And it is natural that some fond Shakespearians are going to be distressed at the suddenly discovered omission of this or that memorable speech. But some highly judicious editing has not done damage to the fullness of the drama nor to any of its most familiar scenes. In fact, it has greatly speeded the unfolding of the plot and has given much greater clarity to its noted complexities.

Hamlet is nobody's glass-man, and the dark and troubled workings of his mind are difficult, even for Freudians. But the openness with which he is played by Mr. Olivier in this picture makes him reasonably comprehensible. His is no cold and sexless Hamlet. He is a solid and virile young man, plainly tormented by the anguish and the horror of a double shock. However, in this elucidation, it is more his wretched dismay at the treachery of his mother than at the death of his father that sparks his woe. And it is this disillusion in women that shapes his uncertain attitude toward the young and misguided Ophelia, a victim herself of a parent's deceit.

In the vibrant performance of Eileen Herlie as the Queen is this concept evidenced, too, for plainly she shows the strain and heartache of a ruptured attachment to her son. So genuine is her disturbance that the uncommon evidence she gives that she knows the final cup is poisoned before she drinks it makes for

heightened poignancy. And the luminous performance of Jean Simmons as the truly fair Ophelia brings honest tears for a shattered romance which is usually a so-what affair.

No more than passing mention can be made at this point of the fine work done by Norman Wooland as Horatio and by Basil Sydney as the King, by Felix Aylmer as Polonius, Terence Morgan as Laertes and all the rest. Perfect articulation is only one thing for which they can be blessed. A word, too, of commendation for the intriguing musical score of William Walton and for the rich designing of Roger Furse must suffice. In the straight black-and-white photography which Mr. Olivier has wisely used—wisely, we say, because the study is largely in somber mood—the palace conceived for this "Hamlet" is a dark and haunted palace. It is the grim and majestic setting for an uncommonly galvanic film.

II. http://www.dvdmoviecentral.com/ReviewsText/hamlet_1948.htm

Review by Michael Jacobson

"This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind..." comes the voice of Laurence Olivier, introducing his spectacular, though sometimes controversial adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. To see this film is not to witness the Bard in his pure form, but rather, a smartly trimmed, stunningly photographed and remarkably uniquely cinematic re-telling of the oft-called greatest play in the history of the English language.

In other words, Olivier instinctively used the power of filmed images to comment upon his action, reflect his characters' states of mind, create and sustain atmospheres and cut right to the heart of Shakespeare's tragic Dane. To watch this movie unfold is truly to experience cinematic bliss at its most eloquent. Notice, for example, the ever present mist in the outdoor scenes, particularly in the opening moments as the watchmen confront the ghost of Hamlet's father. A little mist was not uncommon in black and white productions to keep scenes from looking too monochromatic, but here, the mist is alive, and heavy, and almost suffocating. Certain shots show the figures so enveloped by it, they appear to float within the frame, with no boundaries on any side.

Consider also how Olivier and his director of photography Desmond Dickinson used their settings and the interplay of light and shadows to create images of remarkable depth. The focus penetrates deep into the darkest crevices of Elsinore, and concentric arches are so framed as to naturally lead the eye further and further back until your mind is convinced there's nothing further to see. Olivier's Danish castle is not the luxurious palace of a mighty ruler, but rather, as cold, dark and foreboding as a sepulcher. Which is fitting enough, considering how many deaths will take place there over the course of the story.

These elements also seem to comment on the action and characters. Notice during the scene where Hamlet confronts Ophelia (a beautiful and surprisingly blonde 18-year-old Jean Simmons): the girl is framed by gently curving arches. The possibly mad prince is framed within jagged, angled ones, whose lines are made even more extreme via the camera placement. It makes for a keen interpretation of Hamlet's increasingly wretched state of mind.

The camera itself becomes like an ominous character, with its deliberate, consistent moves within unfolding scenes, constantly changing the points of view within single shots. It makes the viewer feel like a stalker haunting this troubled family, and adds to the sense of foreshadowing. An excellent example is when Hamlet hires the traveling players to put on a specially commissioned production for his uncle Claudius (Sydney) and his mother Gertrude (Herlie). Most are probably familiar enough with the classic play to know that Hamlet's father was murdered by Claudius, who then took both his throne and his wife. Hamlet re-creates the murder in his play, and when he does, notice how the camera focuses on the action of the play from the

left side, and keeps it in focus while moving in a semicircular pattern around the room. At the point when the camera is directly in front of the staged action, we are seeing the enacted murder framed to the left and right by the figures of Claudius and Gertrude, whose backs are to us. Simple words cannot express how effective these visuals are.

In addition to his direction and bringing the screenplay to life, Olivier also delivered an Oscar winning performance in the title role. His Hamlet seems unusually reserved at first, but this leads gradually into a more startling sense of undoing toward the end. He internalizes much of the conflict, until it's no longer possible, and it pours forth with incredible emotion. His entire cast is equally up to the challenge, each reflecting equal amounts of Olivier's singular vision and the Bard's words and characters.

So why the controversy? Though the film was initially well received, even taking home a Best Picture Oscar, it became more 'chic' in later years to criticize elements of the picture. Many have complained that the Bard's work was butchered by Olivier. Gone are key characters, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Fortinbras. Almost gone, save for a few, are the touches of humor Shakespeare was famed for sprinkling in his plays. Missing are some of the most famous quotes: "a little more than kin, and less than kind," "the lady doth protest too much, methinks," as well as at least one of Hamlet's most insightful monologues. As Kenneth Branagh's later epic production would prove, you really need about four hours worth of film to touch on everything in the play. Two and a half hours requires some surgical attention. Olivier himself referred to his film as more of "a study in *Hamlet*" than a straight re-telling, but it didn't prevent some critics from unleashing a bit of acid in his direction...even complaining that at age 40, he was far too old to play the great Dane.

Still, Olivier had a great understanding of the Shakespearean text, and in altering the original play for his movie, his motivation was not to cut down the Bard, but rather to concentrate on the most cinematic aspects of the story. He chose to focus on the internal conflicts that drove and molded the leading character: how he goes from melancholy prince to dark avenger over the course of the tale. I find that his "study" in the character of Hamlet to be more complete and in-depth than any other film or stage version I've ever witnessed. And one must also remember that Olivier had a knack for transforming the Bard into cinematic visions that could never have existed on the stage. You can also study his ground-breaking adaptation of *Henry V* (also available from Criterion) to gain even more appreciation of Olivier's unique visions.

I love Shakespeare, and when I read his works, I treasure every moment, every word, and every character. Which is why I'm glad the task never fell to me to bring one of his works to the screen. Yes, the purist might be a little distracted over the cuts and changes made in this film, but one needs to watch this production not with an ear for Shakespeare, but with an eye for cinema. Those who do so will find that Olivier's *Hamlet* really does rank amongst the best film adaptations of the Bard ever created...and for my money, one of the movies' all time great achievements overall. ...

Summary:

Hamlet is a cinematic treasure that no serious film lover should miss. It was unavailable for home viewing for many years, but Criterion has once again come to the rescue of DVD fans by not only presenting this title to us, but with a restored video and audio transfer that should be considered one of the industry's standards for older movies for years to come. Quality, thy name is Criterion!

JAMES BERADINELLI, REELVIEWS, [HTTP://REELVIEWS.NET](http://reelviews.net), SEPT. 26, 2010

A glance at the IMDb listing for "Hamlet" turns up in excess of 70 entries, which is an indication of how popular a subject matter this most honored of Shakespeare's plays has been for cinematic adaptation. From the early silent era (1900) until today, versions of *Hamlet* have been sliced, diced, and re-worked into nearly

every permutation possible. Stars of the highest magnitude have played the role, sometimes transforming a movie into a vanity production. Yet, of all these *Hamlets*, two stand out above the others: the 1948 Laurence Olivier version - the only Shakespeare film ever to win the Best Picture Oscar - and the 1996 Kenneth Branagh interpretation.

Considering that 90% of those seeing any production of *Hamlet* will know the story at the outset, the key to an adaptation's success is what the director does beyond the dialogue. That's one area in which Olivier's 1948 version excels. The actor/filmmaker's decisions regarding the text have been the subject of much debate over the years. He cuts about 40% of what's in the unabridged version, including all scenes featuring Fortinbras, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. The result is a streamlined *Hamlet*, with an unwavering focus on the lead character's internal turmoil and his interaction with Claudius (Basil Sydney) and Gertrude (Eileen Herlie). One potential negative of excising Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is that these two are responsible for a lion's share of the comedy. Without them, *Hamlet* is a dark affair. Olivier attempts to lighten things a little by making Polonius (Felix Aylmer) more fatuous than is normally the case and by playing up the silliness of Osric (Peter Cushing). In general, however, this is one of the gloomiest versions of *Hamlet* to be

Oftentimes, movie versions of *Hamlet* come across as little more than gussied up transfers of the play from stage to film. That's not the case here, where Olivier opens things up considerably, utilizing many of the photographic advances evident in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (including deep focus), occasionally panning from one room to another in Elsinore Castle, thereby emphasizing the size of the sets, and using the black-and-white imagery and shadows to give *Hamlet* an ominous feel. (At the time, Olivier argued that the use of black-and-white was an "artistic choice." In later years, however, he admitted that it was influenced by economics and a dispute he was involved in with Technicolor.)

Although the central story of *Hamlet* - that of an indecisive prince wavering between avenging his dead father, who may have been murdered by his uncle, or moving on with his life - remains at the core of the movie, some of the areas Olivier has elected to highlight deserve mention. Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia (Jean Simmons), which in some other interpretations has been emphasized as a tragic love affair, is downplayed here, with thought of any true affection being dismissed after Hamlet's angry, bitter "Get thee to a nunnery" speech. On the other hand, Olivier is fascinated by the Oedipal potential in the relationship between Hamlet and his mother - something he italicizes by having them kiss on the lips several times. Adding to the odd nature of this pairing is the fact that, at the time of filming, Olivier was 40 and the actress playing Gertrude, Eileen Herlie, was 11 years his junior. Even makeup can't conceal the obviousness that she is not old enough to be his mother.

For the cast, Olivier for the most part drew on actors with both stage and screen experience, and it shows in the quality of performances. All of the principals give quiet, intense portrayals that capture the essences of their characters without the tendency to go over-the-top that occasionally mars cinematic adaptations of plays (especially Shakespeare). Olivier won a deserved acting Oscar for Hamlet (he was also nominated for Best Director); no one before or since has equaled his interpretation. There are numerous standout scenes for Olivier, but three of the most memorable are the scathing "Get thee to a nunnery" exchange with Ophelia, the confrontation with Gertrude after Polonius' stabbing, and the famous "to be or not to be" soliloquy. The cadence with which Olivier delivers Shakespeare's lines is so perfect that we sometimes forget we're listening to antiquated English.

The other actor to earn a nomination was Jean Simmons. It was her only Oscar chance in the Best Supporting Actress category (she would be nominated, but again would not win, as Best Actress in 1969 for *The Happy Ending*). Eileen Herlie, who plays Gertrude, has the distinction of having portrayed the same character in two different films. She returned to the stage and screen in the 1964 Richard Burton version of *Hamlet* to once again play the title character's mother. This time, at least she was older than her male co-star (although only

by seven years). A number of future recognizable names have small parts in *Hamlet*: Peter Cushing is Osric, the fop who delivers the challenge to spar with Laertes; Christopher Lee is a spear carrier; Patrick Troughton, Patrick Macnee, and Desmond Llewelyn are all members of the acting troupe that visits Elsinore....

Oliver's *Hamlet* has a gothic, almost film noir appearance. Branagh's is bright and colorful, making use of the full Technicolor palette. Despite having opened up the production for the cinema, Olivier retains a sense of the intimacy of the stage; Branagh's interpretation is larger-than-life, extending to the way it was filmed - the last (to date) motion picture to be lensed in 70mm. Olivier hints at a possible sexual connection between Hamlet and Gertrude; for Branagh, the more traditional Hamlet/Ophelia liaison is used. Olivier's screenplay cuts close to 40% of Shakespeare's dialogue; Branagh opts for the full text, including scenes that are often excised. Olivier keeps the story in the original period; Branagh time-shifts it to the 1800s. Olivier's ending is in line with that of most versions of the play; Branagh has a radical re-interpretation. And so on...

For me, Branagh's *Hamlet* represents the ultimate screen adaptation of the play; it's hard to imagine anyone doing a more vivid, rousing job of breathing life into what may be the English language's greatest contribution to the stage. However, by viewing the equally artistic and accomplished Olivier version, it is possible to appreciate how great the differences can be even between masterpieces. Olivier's *Hamlet* is not the same as Branagh's, nor is it akin to the latest Broadway interpretation (likely star-studded) or the most recent one at the local high school (likely not star-studded). All *Hamlets* are not created equal and, when it comes to cinematic entities, Olivier's is near or at the top of a very crowded field. What's more, it has retained that coveted position for more than 60 years since the Oscars recognized it as such.

DAVID KEHR, *HAMLET*, CHICAGO READER, DEC. 12, 2006

Laurence Olivier's famous 1948 interpretation of Shakespeare's play suffers slightly from his pop-Freud approach to the character and from some excessively flashy, wrongheaded camera work. It ends up on the opposite side of the soundstage before the speech is over, leaving Olivier a dim glow on the horizon line.

GA, *TIME OUT*, FEBRUARY 20, 2008

Despite winning several Oscars, Olivier's (condensed) version of Shakespeare's masterpiece makes for frustrating viewing: for all its 'cinematic' ambitions (the camera prowling pointlessly along the gloomy corridors of Elsinore), it's basically a stagy showcase for the mannered performance of the director in the lead role (though he's ably supported by a number of British theatrical stalwarts). Not half as powerful as Kozintsev's marvellous Russian version.