

## ***Hamlet* (1948): A Few Facts, Some Trivial**

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0040416/trivia>

Laurence Olivier was 41 when *Hamlet* was released. Eileen Herlie, who played Hamlet's mother Gertrude, was 30, and Jean Simons (Ophelia) was 18.

With this film, Laurence Olivier became the first person ever to direct himself to a best actor or actress Oscar. Roberto Benigni in *La vita è bella* is the only other actor to achieve this feat.

This was the first film to win both the Academy Award for best picture and the Venice Film Festival Golden Lion Award for best picture; also, it was the first non-American film to win the Oscar for Best Picture.

One of the William Shakespeare purists who criticized this slimmed-down version of the play was Ethel Barrymore, who complained that it wasn't as faithful as the stage version produced on Broadway in 1922, in which her brother John Barrymore played Hamlet. Ethel Barrymore was the presenter of the Best Picture Oscar at the Academy Awards that year and was visibly shaken when she read out Laurence Olivier's name as the winner.

Stanley Holloway was an 11th-hour choice; the actor who was supposed to play the grave digger, F.J. McCormick, died shortly before filming.

With a budget of \$2 million, this was a very expensive production in its day.

Initially, Laurence Olivier was not keen on producing *Hamlet*. Although he wanted to repeat the success of *Henry the Fifth*, he found that the Danish play was the only really viable choice, as Orson Welles had just done *Macbeth* and was preparing *Othello*. By casting himself in the lead, however, he was able to secure the necessary financing.

This is the first of many films featuring both Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee. Cushing plays the comical Osric, and Lee plays a soldier.

This is the only major film version of *Hamlet* that entirely omits the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Laurence Olivier was severely criticized for leaving them out of the film, as they provide many opportunities for Hamlet to behave in a sarcastically humorous way toward them, and many felt that Olivier probably would have played these moments brilliantly. However, Olivier did retain a few of Guildenstern's lines ("put your discourse into some frame", etc.) and gave them to Polonius.

Laurence Olivier played the voice of Hamlet's father's ghost himself by recording the dialog and playing it back at a reduced speed, giving it a macabre quality.

Olivier was greatly influenced by the inventive camera effects that Orson Welles and Gregg Toland pioneered in *Citizen Kane*.

Sir Laurence Olivier didn't attend the Academy Awards ceremony in which he won two Oscars as he was performing in a play in London at the time with his wife, Vivien Leigh.

This is the first English sound film version of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Because they wanted to aim at a wider public in *Hamlet* than they had in *Henry the Fifth*, Sir Laurence Olivier and text adaptor Alan Dent modernized and/or clarified several obscure phrases in the play: "The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn" became "The cock, that is the herald to the morn", "recks not his own rede" became "minds not his own creed", "In the same figure, like the King that's dead" became "in the same figure, like the dead King Hamlet", and "It may be, very like" became "It may be, very likely", among others.

When the movie was released Laurence Olivier said it had been filmed in black and white for artistic reasons. The true reason, as he later admitted, was that "I was in the middle of a furious row with Technicolor."

The last scene to be filmed was the famous shot of Olivier jumping onto Claudius because it was so dangerous that Olivier might injure himself too badly performing the stunt to film any other scenes. Olivier was uninjured, but the stuntman doubling as Claudius was knocked out and lost two teeth.