

Lights, Camera, Action!

Newest Hamlet is paranoid, not persecuted

By DAN MERKUR

The play Hamlet is discussed in countless literature courses as a timeless work, and yet there is a tremendous brouhaha every few years when some company presents an 'up-dated' production.

Personally, I don't think it is a contemporaneity that is lent the play. It is more of a revitalization; and not a revitalization from the last production, but rather from the countless literature courses that manage to destroy Hamlet as a work of art that is still powerful and moving, even though it is extremely dated.

On stage in recent years, Christopher Plummer has given a traditional performance; Richard Burton played it without costume; Richard Chamberlain walked gayly through it; and supposedly Nicol Williamson gave it guts with an earthiness seldom before seen in the Crown Prince of Denmark.

Trends in the British cinema these days are to the gutteral Billingsgate, West End and Chelsea accents frowned upon for so long. Whatever the Scottish equivalent is, Williamson's got it, and somehow the brogue of an Edinburgh laborer does not make Hamlet any more contemporary.

Whatever happened to what used to be called Shakespearean-trained voices?

This film version has been much faulted for Nicol Williamson. Let's face it, he's no looker, and he presents a very unlovely portrait of the prince. And if you don't like the lead character, how are you to like the play?

Olivier's Hamlet was neurotic, but because he was persecuted he was a sympathetic soul. Williamson's Hamlet is paranoid, not persecuted. My sympathies were with the people he persecutes. If the guards hadn't seen the ghost as well, I would have thought him quite mad. I just didn't like him well enough to get wrapped up in the play. The tragedy didn't touch me. It left me unmoved.

However, there is no denying I enjoyed the film, both as a film, and as a presentation of the play. Director Tony Richardson fulfills the early (Tom Jones) promise that he has hidden so well (Charge of the Light Brigade) of late; and there were a couple of innovations that gave the play new life.

Richardson filmed the production in close-up. Perhaps a dozen shots in the entire film contain more than a head-and-shoulders view of the subject.

Like it or not, this closeness gives the entire film immediacy, although it destroys the ordinary dramatic impact of a close-up in doing so. Even though the continual close-ups get a little boring as the film progresses, they are a lot better than watching a proscenium from the second balcony, like the Burton version, which was little more than a filmed play.

In contrast to the elaborate authentic



Nicol Williamson plays a paranoid Hamlet.

sets of Olivier's Hamlet, or the huge stylized sets of Orson Welles' Macbeth, the sets of this Hamlet are almost non-existent. Just a patch of wall here, an angle of a buttress there, perhaps part of a staircase — the screen is filled with blackness, with a spotlight on the actors, and the background almost totally obscured.

The effect is that of a soliloquy on a darkened stage — just the actor and you. Again the intimacy is forceful, but gets a

trifle boring as the film goes on.

Shakespeare is a very difficult proposition to film. When historically accurate (Olivier's Hamlet), it is ponderous. When authentically represented as a play (Reinhardt's A Midsummer Night's Dream), it is dull. When modernized (Burton's Hamlet), it is silly. When facetiously attacked (Olivier's Henry V) it is whimsical. Richardson's attempt doesn't succeed, but it does come closer

than many. Certainly that is to his credit.

There is some clever stuff done in reworking the book. The three hour play is cut to two, and some of the sequences are shuffled. The "to be or not to be" soliloquy is transferred to Hamlet lying in bed staring at the ceiling instead of the less believable formal soliloquy in the middle of the main hall.

I don't know how intentional this next point was, but for me, the common faces enhanced the production. Stars have the eyes of stars — perhaps in the screen's entire history James Stewart is the only person who made the top without having exceptional eyes.

All the greats have faces that centre about the eyes. One is constantly being drawn into the fantastic depth of the eyes of a Dietrich, a Garbo. So when you see a film star you come to expect something special about the eyes, the type of thing you don't see in home movies. And so when along comes a film like Hamlet where nobody has eyes that are special, the players remind you less of movie stars than of everyday people. Which makes the entire story more believable.

The acting is variable — Williamson is very fine, but the character he chose was a bad choice. I liked Lisa Buckit as Ophelia very much; Ophelia is finally believable as a person, which is something Jean Simon's total ingenue was not.

I was very surprised and very pleased to find Gordon Jackson as Horatio. His Horatio is a likeable, personable figure — one more likely to draw the audience's sympathy than Williamson's Hamlet.

The balance of the cast, with the exception of the grave-digger, are so uninspired as to make the author roll over in his grave. Which is one way to settle the Bacon versus Shakespeare dispute.

The duel scene, which in some productions is a major highlight, is quite dull. The swordplay is poor, and the entire sequence extremely brief. There is no tension or suspense; it is as if everything were preordained, and everybody knows the outcome, and so the actors just walked through the performances.

Other things like the very fine costuming and the exquisite photography are of great value. The art direction is quite competent and the cutting is clever.

It is an original and interesting attempt at Hamlet, which is often an absurdly cumbersome and difficulty-fraught production. It is a clever, though not totally successful, attempt at transferring a stage production to the screen. It is better than the Burton version, worse than Olivier's.

There is no denying how much life any production gives the book of a play, and as a production this one is worth seeing. There is a lot of madness, but there is some very fine method in it as well.

Cinema 2000

Incident is fascinating fear

By IVAN ZENDEL

The Incident, as the marquee says, is a film about violence.

It is concerned not so much with the violence of violence, but the fear inherent in violence. This is the first 'fact' of the film.

The second 'fact' is that it is playing at Cinema 2000, which as most of you will know is a closed-circuit videotaped theatre. The film is shown on 25-inch television monitors. This does essentially change the medium. Films cannot

be regarded simply as cinema, for in a very real sense they are TV.

The Incident happens in a New York subway car which is taken over by two young 'punks'. The film opens with these two mugging a man for eight dollars. They beat him viciously and decide to take the subway down to Times Square.

Carefully and slowly, the film sets up the other 16 characters. The first half of the film, in fact, is basically the background of each character as they go to the subway, but the characters fail to take on much more than one-dimension, first because of the necessity of keeping each characterization short, and secondly because the film is only really concerned with the emotions of each character directly before the incident.

The air of violence hangs throughout the first half of the film. Each of the couples in the film are at odds, but each couple seems to have endured the friction until now.

Then the two walk on. They 'reek' of violence and hate. What

unfolds is fascinating, almost clinically fascinating, fear — the fear of getting hurt, the fear of violence.

Of the three films shown so far at Cinema 2000, The Incident is the most suitable. Ironically it is also the most filmic, but the film comes across on the small monitors, because their relative tininess heightens the sense of being closed in. The narrow, almost subway-car-size of the theatre itself adds to the tension.

I enjoyed The Incident. It seemed to me a good documentary, rather than a good film. It does not have the power of something like The War Game, firstly because it does not mean to be a documentary, or to take on the trappings of a documentary, and without question, because the TV monitors tend to inhibit involvement.

But The Incident is definitely worth seeing and it will give you the first worthwhile chance to see the theatre itself — and they lowered the admission price to two dollars, too.

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