



# HAMLET

## MEL GIBSON TACKLES SHAKESPEARE'S GREAT DANE



**F**rom road warrior to Danish prince. Over the past decade, there's no denying Mel Gibson has come a long way from those post-apocalyptic Mad Max days, proving time and again that his talents extend considerably beyond his looks. So it was not surprising that after shooting three action movies back-to-back (*Lethal Weapon 2*, *Bird on a Wire* and *Air America*) Mel was ready for a change of pace. But Hamlet?

"It was a question of whether I'd pick up the challenge or let it go by," reasons Gibson. "To be or not to be ... Hamlet, if I can put it that way."

He decided "to be," after having lunch with director Franco Zeffirelli, whose previous cinematic encounters with Shakespeare have included *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet*. The two exchanged their interpretations of the 400-year-old play and the next day Gibson was willing to don the doublet.

"I knew I would make a film of it one day," recalls the Italian director. "At the end of the '80s I finally said, 'I'm ready for Hamlet; if I don't do it now, I'll never do it.' And this was also because I saw an actor, Mel Gibson, whom I knew would be exactly right to play Hamlet. His strength in front of the camera, combined with his past performances on stage in Shakespearean and other classical plays, made him a perfect choice to be the Hamlet of the '90s."

Gibson's grip on The Bard goes back to his time with the State Theatre Company of South Australia, where he cut his teeth on the likes of *Henry IV*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*.

"Romeo was probably the role where I developed a grasp of Shakespeare's language as the blueprint of something that could take motion and have a life distinct

**Hamlet's stellar cast: Mel Gibson (above left), Helena Bonham Carter (top right, on stretcher), Glenn Close (far left), Alan Bates and Ian Holm.**

from the one it has on the page," Gibson explains.

Once he had secured Gibson, one of the world's reigning box-office draws, Zeffirelli proceeded to surround his tragic hero with a group of respected thespians, none of them strangers to Shakespeare, including Glenn Close as Hamlet's mother, Gertrude; Alan Bates as Claudius; Ian Holm as Polonius; Paul Scofield as the Ghost and Helena Bonham Carter as the fair Ophelia.

**Hamlet** began shooting on April 23, 1990 (which just happened to coincide with the anniversary of Shakespeare's birth) on location in the south of England. The start of principal photography followed several months of intensive preparation, during which time Gibson and his fellow cast members studied fencing and horseback riding and worked with a voice coach. A trio of historic ruins served as Elsinore, Hamlet's medieval home, while interiors were constructed at England's Shepperton Studios.

In an effort to turn a staged play into a living, breathing motion picture, Zeffirelli understandably took certain liberties, ones which might not exactly endear themselves to purists.

"Movies can tell so much in one shot that sometimes even Shakespeare's words become redundant," he explains. "My efforts were to keep the story clear without mutilating the original. We made some tough choices, and some may be controversial."

Ultimately, **Hamlet's** success or failure will lie on Gibson's shoulders. Like Kenneth Branagh before him, he's stepping into a role which, for the past four decades, has belonged definitively to the late Sir Laurence Olivier.

And while Gibson himself has referred to the vehicle as "kind of a no-win situation," his colleagues are rooting for him. Predicts *Air America* costar Robert Downey Jr. in a recent interview: "Either Mel will get an Academy-award nomination or it will be the first time Shakespeare ever grossed \$100 million."

—Michael Rechtshaffen

