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SHAKESPEARE AT THE CINEPLEX: The Kenneth Branagh Era

By Samuel Crowl

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In the decade since *Shakespeare Observed*, Samuel Crowl's perceptive study of Shakespearean performance, appeared, Crowl insists we've "witnessed the greatest explosion of Anglo-American films based on Shakespeare's plays in the hundred-year history of the genre."

That makes Crowl's new study—beginning where the earlier one ends, with Branagh's *Henry V*-- welcome and necessary. Crowl focuses on 15 Shakespeare films from the 1989 *Henry V* to Michael Almereyda's 2000 *Hamlet* bypassing bardolatrous spin-offs like Al Pacino's documentary *Looking for Richard* 1999's zesty *Ten Things I Hate About You* Peter Greenaway's self-indulgent *Prospero's Books* and Tim Blake Nelson's teen-pandering *O*.

Branagh receives the highest, though far from all, of Crowl's accolades. *Henry V* ended the "fallow period extending back to Polanski's 1971 Playboy *Macbeth* which despite an alluring Lady Macbeth doing her sleepwalking nude failed to entice audiences. Branagh's lively stew of sensibilities incorporates his Irish roots and American tastes, Olivier's respect for language, Orson Welles' artistic camera angles and Zeffirelli's visual romanticism. Like Shakespeare, Branagh weds "high art and popular culture... stealing good ideas from others, but linking them in surprising and original ways."

Branagh so suits Shakespeare's word to the action that even Marlon Brando would call *Henry V* "An extraordinary accomplishment of melding the realities of human behavior with the poetry of language." Branagh's *Much Ado* "the most successful version we have of a Shakespearean comedy on film," revived box office excitement for Shakespeare in Hollywood. His *Hamlet* is "film noir with all the lights on," defying film's convention of length and supplying a "stunning merger of text and technique" in the Ophelia-as-bait scene which, like the play itself, presents Hamlet with a hall of mirrors.

Some of Crowl's assessments seem odd, like his gushing over Glenn Close in Zeffirelli's 1990 *Hamlet* while failing to note that film's chief flaw: putting the text through a blender. Nor does he fully admire Trevor Nunn's 1996 *Twelfth Night*, lamenting a melancholy that is genuinely in the text.

Yet, his strongest censure falls where deserved. Oliver Parker's *Othello* finds the poetry "too big and dangerous for Parker's camera and too unfamiliar to Laurence Fishburne's training as an actor." Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* "has no feel for his Shakespearean material," and Ian McKellen's screenplay "is decidedly prosaic." Baz Luhrmann's "in-your-face MTV visual style...overpowers the language" of *Romeo and Juliet*. Michael Hoffman's gaudy *Midsummer Night's Dream* contains only one fine

performance, Kevin Kline's as Bottom, and it's utterly out of key with Shakespeare's character.

Crowl praises inspired attempts that achieve success. Ethan Hawke's performance in Almereyda's *Hamlet* captures a neo-1950s Dean-Clift-Brando "sensitive, brooding, inarticulate soul caught in a world whose values he despises." Almereyda shows "you don't need lavish production values to make a Shakespeare movie that's accessible and alive. Shakespeare's language, after all, is lavish enough." Crowl considers Julie Taymor's brilliant updating of Shakespeare's apprentice parade of carnage, *Titus Andronicus* to be not only similar to but superior to Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*.

Linking Shakespeare, Picasso, Beethoven and Charlie Parker, Wynton Marsalis recently stated, "Great art is not going to come to you. You have to come to it." Samuel Crowl once again provides an intelligent, informed study of several filmmakers who help to bring us there.

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