

Hamlet (2000)

No matter how his world and language is sliced and diced in popular art, William Shakespeare's essence somehow remains invulnerable, endlessly adaptable and wonderfully serviceable. He has been, if you think about it, the hottest screenwriter of the last few years, with a dozen or more movies made of his plays. Major commercial films have been made recently of *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Richard III*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Twelfth Night*, plus two versions of *Hamlet*. Another *Richard III* was wonderfully deconstructed in Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard*, the *Taming of the Shrew* was transmogrified into the teen comedy *Ten Things I Hate About You*, and the Bard himself was the whimsical subject of the sprightly *Shakespeare in Love*.

And he just keeps trucking in an new adaptation updated to more modern times. A new *Hamlet*, starring young Ethan Hawke, uses contemporary New York to stand in for medieval Denmark. Abridged yet again, much of Shakespeare still shines through.

The modernistic *Hamlet* is wryly reinvented: Hamlet, a brooding video artist, returns to his home in New York from college (Wittenberg, remember?) to mourn his dead father and to groan at the usurpation of his father's position as CEO of the Denmark Corporation by his perfidious uncle Claudius (Kyle McLachlan). Hanging out at Manhattan's Hotel Elsinore, he loses interest in one-time flame, the slightly punkish Ophelia (Julia Stiles), daughter of the CEO's principal advisor Polonius (Bill Murray). Then the ghost of his father (Sam Shepard) materializes out of a Pepsi machine... well, you know how the story goes.

The modern touches can seem either logical or precious: Claudius and Gertrude (Diane Venora) gliding around in limos with bodyguards (our current version of royalty); Ophelia listening in to Moviefone or tossing Polaroids rather than flower petals into a pond; Hamlet himself downing Carlsberg beers at a pub; making a video to expose his parents rather than using traveling players; and wandering among the "Action" videos in a Blockbusters when delivering his famous soliloquy. The fact is that most of these contemporary equivalents devised by director Michael Almereyda work rather well. Any tendency you might have to snigger is usually brought up short by the singular language, that indelible language which the director, thankfully, uses as written.

Since the movie comes in just under two hours, much of the text is, of course, cut (Kenneth Branagh's film version of the play in 1996 included every word and ran four hours). There are famous chunks missing--e.g., nothing of the traveling players remains, there is no rediscovery of Yorick's skull--but they are not strongly missed; the drive of the drama and the potency of the words remain compelling and carry you along one more time.

Hawke might not have the best delivery of Shakespeare's poetry, but he is an appropriately morose, put-upon princeling. It occurred to me that another young cast member, Liev Schreiber--who plays Laertes--could have made an even more effective Hamlet, given both his considerable bearing and a striking timbre in his voice. Most of the cast members do very creditable jobs, notably Bill Murray, a nice surprise as the chiding, slightly out-of-it Polonius, and Venora, able to shift nicely from semi-wanton to

agonized mom. Given its youngish cast, its high-tech look, its ominous music (by Carter Burwell), its glossy New York settings, the film is obviously made to appeal to youthful audiences. There are worse ways for them to be introduced to the Bard.

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