

All Is True

Sir Kenneth Branagh has had a most varied career since he gained fans in the 1987 television series “Fortunes of War” with then-wife Emma Thompson. After that exposure, he made a splash on the big screen at only 29, directing and performing the lead in a stirring version of “Henry V.” Since then he has taken on (acting and directing) five other major Shakespearean works, from “Much Ado About Nothing” (1993) to “Macbeth” (2013). Now, he has decided to take on the very Bard himself, this time in a fictionalized (though based on real historical facts) speculation on the last years of Will himself, retired from playwrighting and settled back in his manorial house outside Stratford-on-Avon.

We find Shakespeare in 1613, accepting the end of his writing career but content to tend a garden and reacquaint himself with his wife, Anne Hathaway (Judi Dench), his older daughter Susannah (Lydia Wilson), now married to a clergyman, and his younger daughter Judith, (Kathryn Wilder) a spinster. Most importantly, he mourns for his son, Hamnet, dead in 1595 at 11 years old and, in his father’s eyes, a budding literary genius. We see a most domestic Will, at table and church, gardening and musing, readily leaving his stage world behind. Typical of his musing is when a young man, an evident fan, queries him with “How did you know?” and he says he basically created his vast and complex worlds within his own luxuriant imagination. He then advises: “consider the contents of your soul; whatever you write—all is true.”

The drama of the piece, what there is of it, comes with a revelation that the juvenile verses of Hamnet which he admires come not from the beloved son, but from Judith, the long-neglected daughter. Worse, he learns that his son’s death, for which he was not present, was not caused by “the plague” but by another more sinister means. It’s enough to spur a tirade from the playwright, his only explosive scene, and a departure in tone for a movie that is mostly stately and elegiac.

The most striking scene in “All Is True” comes when two master actors, Branagh and Ian McKellen, as Henry Wriothesley (the 3rd Earl of Southampton), converse at Shakespeare’s manse about their long history. A big fan, the Earl opines that Shakespeare possesses “the finest, most complex mind that ever existed in this world.” It is a masterful set-up, with the two actors in alternate close-up, steady camera capturing their weathered faces softened by firelight as they reminisce about a major sonnet. It is the well-known Sonnet 29, beginning “When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s’ eyes...” which whispers of a long ago relationship between the two men, and which both performers get to recite in quiet perfection.

One could question the casting of Dench as Anne, who, though she was eight years older than Will, hardly matches the 25 years or more difference that lies between Dame Judi and Sir Kenneth. It doesn’t much matter, however, the colored wigs and makeup do their work, and Dench comes off fine as the feisty, long-suffering counterpart to the testy genius. One is reminded again of the amazing fact that Anne Hathaway, an illiterate provincial, was the bedrock of the greatest literary figure of the English language.

With “All Is True,” Branagh again tarts and directs, but he has worthy collaborators in scenarist Ben Elton, cinematographer Zac Nicholson, and music director Patrick Doyle, who has worked with Branagh since “Henry V.” Elton, a long-time

comedy writer in Britain, has assayed Shakespeare most effectively in the lively TV satire "Upstart Crow," a delightful mock of Will's career. Here the tone is much more plaintive rather than droll, incorporating touches of wit and wisdom but also serious dramatic episodes. Nicholson pairs sun-splashed garden scenes with somber, even melancholic interiors, lit only by candle light, as Stanley Kubrick did famously years ago in his historical epic "Barry Lyndon." Doyle contributes a score which is unobtrusive and sober, emulating the music of the period without quoting it.
(The film is rated "PG-13" and runs 101 minutes.)

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