A FESTIVE PREVIEW OF THE KENNETH BRANAGH *HAMLET*

CO-SPONOSORED BY

CastleRock Entertainment
The Folger Shakespeare Library
The Shakespeare Guild
The Smithsonian Associates

Sponsors' Reception and Dinner at the
Smithsonian Castle

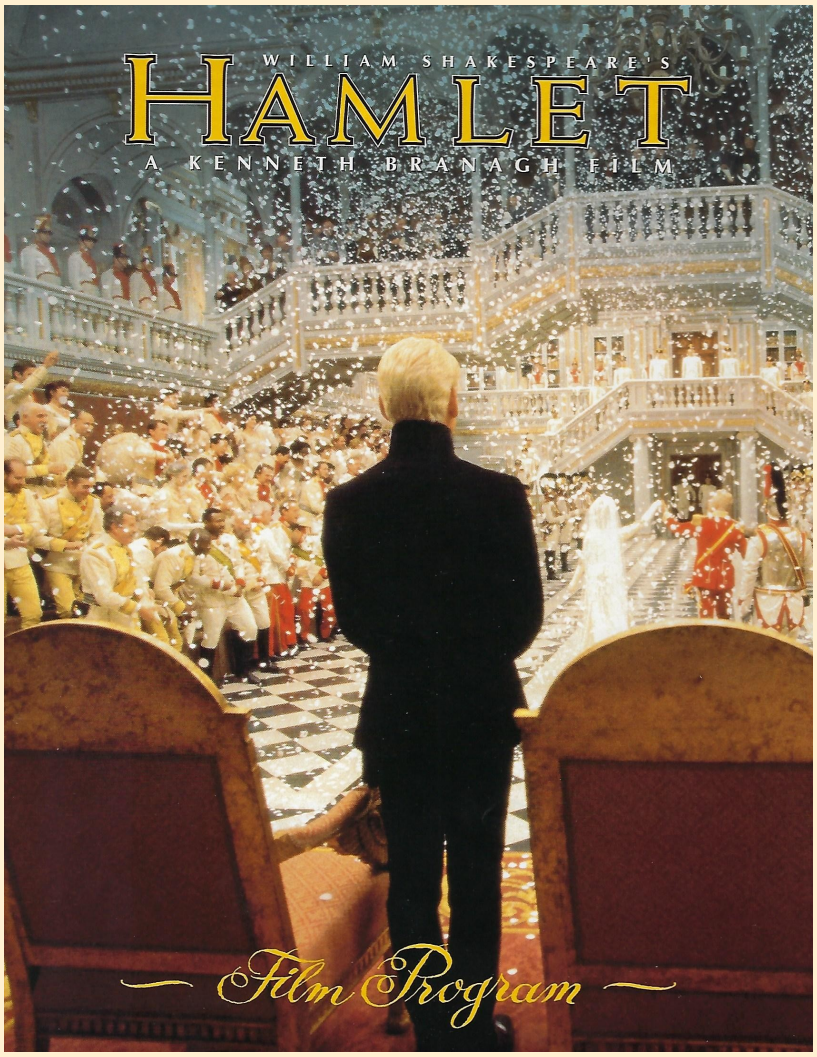
Friday Evening
December 20, 1996

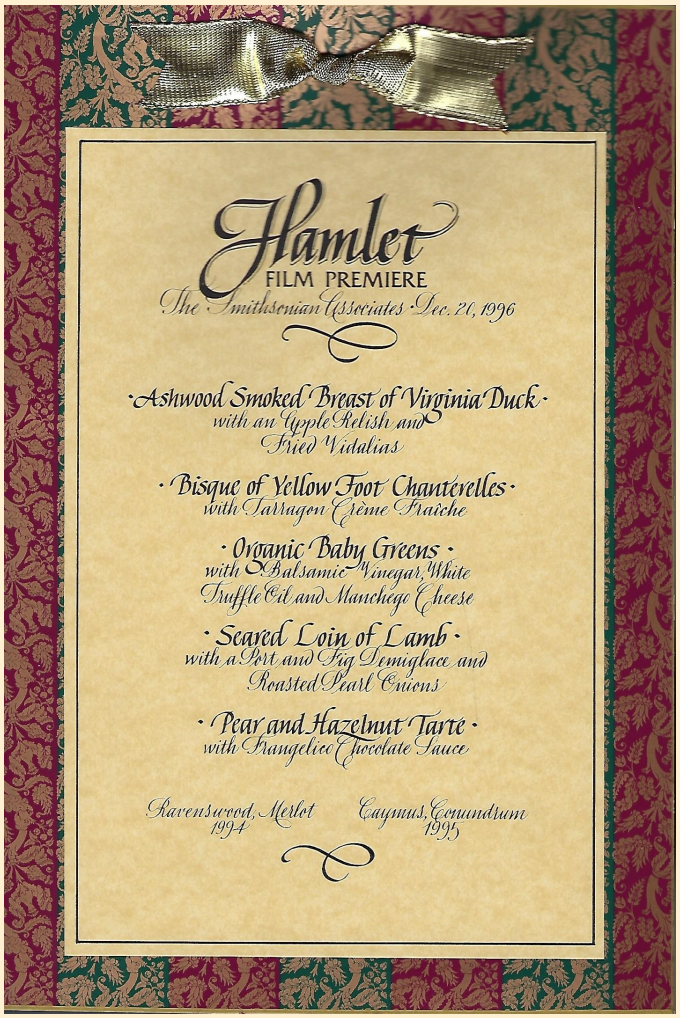
Symposium at the Smithsonian's
Museum of Natural History

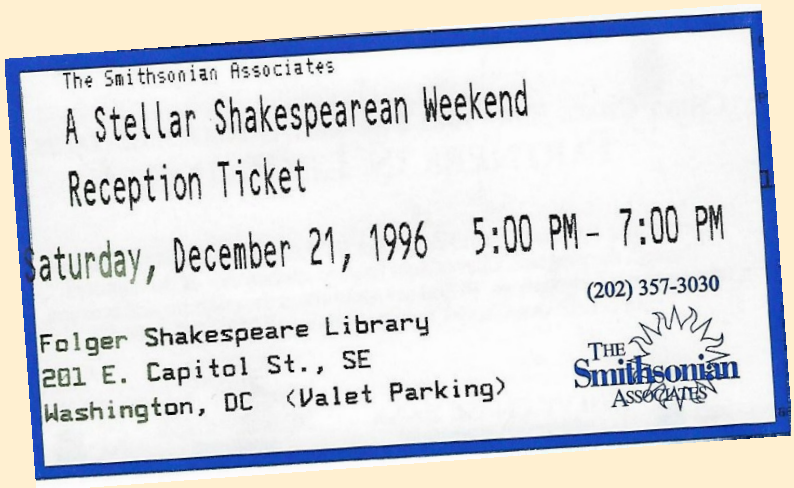
Reception at the
Folger Shakespeare Library

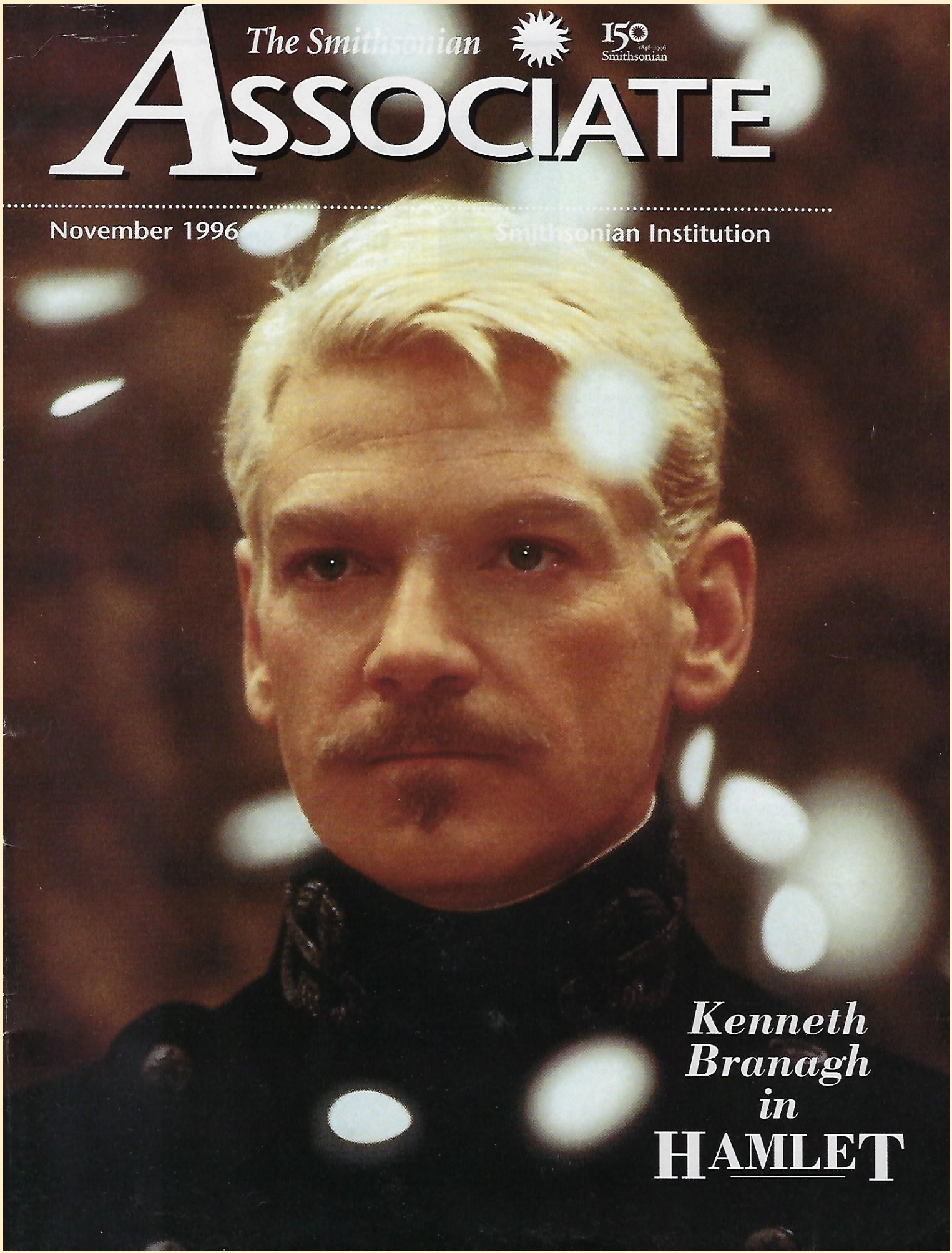
Screening at the Smithsonian's
Museum of Air and Space

Saturday Afternoon and Evening
December 21, 1996








The Smithsonian
ASSOCIATE
150 1846-1996 Smithsonian
November 1996
Smithsonian Institution
Kenneth Branagh in HAMLET

A Stellar Shakespearean Weekend

Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*

Washington Premiere of a Castle Rock Entertainment Presentation

With Special Guest Kenneth Branagh

Fri., Dec. 20, 7:30 p.m. to 12 midnight
Film Introduction by Kenneth Branagh, 7:30 p.m.

Director Kenneth Branagh, having already established himself with *Henry V* and *Much Ado About Nothing* as one of the leading talents at adapting Shakespeare's plays to film, has assembled an outstanding cast of European and American actors for his new feature film, *Hamlet* (237 min., color, 1996). The film, which is shot in glorious 70mm and features the full text of the original play, stars Branagh as Hamlet, Julie Christie in the role of Queen Gertrude, Sir Derek Jacobi as Claudius, rising star Kate Winslet as Ophelia, Gerard Depardieu as Reynaldo, Robin Williams as Osric, Charlton Heston as the Player King, and Jack Lemmon as Marcellus.

PHOTOS BY ROLF KONOW. COURTESY CASTLE ROCK ENTERTAINMENT.

Special guests Kenneth Branagh and (schedule permitting) Sir Derek Jacobi will be present for the screening.

Langley Theater, National Air and Space Museum

Shakespeare and the Art of Adaptation

HALF-DAY SEMINAR: Sat., Dec. 21, 12 noon to 4 p.m.

In conjunction with the Washington premiere of Kenneth Branagh's long-awaited *Hamlet*, this half-day seminar features a lively roster of scholars, directors, producers, and commentators discussing the artistic dynamics of translating a Shakespearean dramatic text into film. From the finest details of staging, to the treatment of Shakespeare's textual ambiguities, the program offers a multifaceted perspective on one of the ultimate challenges of literary adaptation. The program highlights the works of Kenneth Branagh along with excerpts from other classic film adaptations by Polanski, Welles, Zeffirelli, and Kurosawa, offering an exciting comparative dimension.

- 12 noon to 2:30 p.m. **Panel Discussion and Film Clips**—The moderator is **Susan Stamberg**, cultural correspondent, National Public Radio. **Panelists: Robert MacNeil**, president of MacNeil/ Lehrer Productions; **Michael Kahn**, artistic director of the Shakespeare Theatre; **John Andrews,** president of The Shakespeare Guild; and **Mark Olshaker**, producer of the documentary *Discovering Hamlet.*
- 2:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. **Break**
- 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. **Director Kenneth Branagh** discusses the making of *Hamlet* and takes audience questions.

Baird Auditorium, Natural History Building

FILM PREMIERE AND SEMINAR ONLY:
CODE: 1L0-380
Resident Members $65; Gen. Admission $87

FILM PREMIERE/SEMINAR/FOLGER RECEPTION WEEKEND
CODE: 1L0-379
Resident Members $110; Gen. Admission $155
Program subject to change.

Cosponsored with The Shakespeare Guild and the Folger Shakespeare Library. Special thanks to the Shakespeare Theatre.

Individual tickets to each event will go on sale in December on a space-available basis only for the following prices:
Film Premiere—Resident Members $15; Gen. Admission $20;
Seminar—Resident Members $50; Gen. Admission $67;
Reception—Resident Members $55; Gen. Admission $75

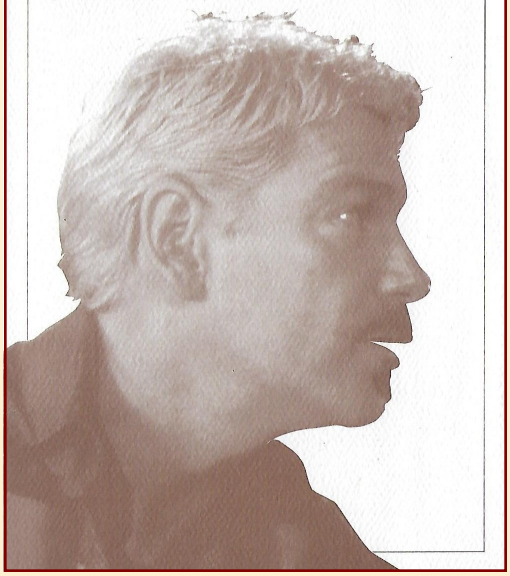
Reception in the Folger's Old Reading Room

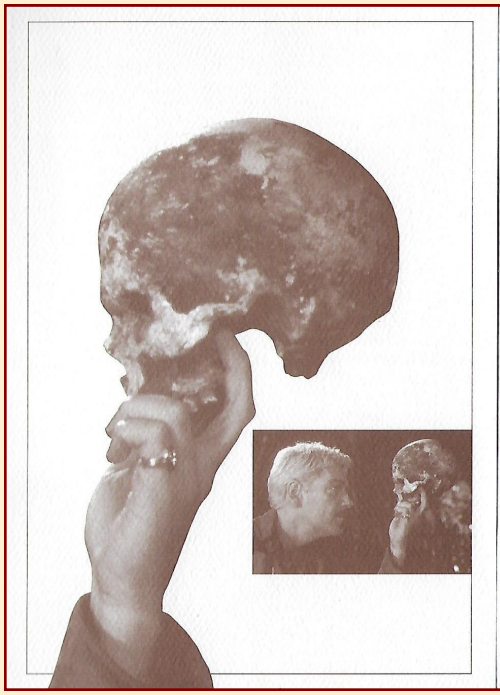
Sat., Dec. 21, 5 to 7 p.m.

In honor of Kenneth Branagh and this very special film premiere and seminar weekend, the Folger Shakespeare Library's Old Reading Room, modeled on the Tudor style of Shakespeare's day and rarely opened to the public, hosts a buffet reception (bar included).

201 E. Capitol St., S.E.
Valet parking is available.

A Stellar Shakespearean Weekend





The Smithsonian Associates
The Shakespeare Guild and
The Folger Shakespeare Library

cordially invite you to

A Stellar Shakespearean Weekend

Featuring

WASHINGTON'S PREMIERE
of a Castle Rock Entertainment Presentation of
Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet

A SEMINAR
"Shakespeare and the Art of Adaptation"

A RECEPTION
The Folger's Old Reading Room

$110 per person
R.s.v.p. enclosed

Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*

With Special Guest Kenneth Branagh

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Baird Auditorium, Natural History Building

ROLF KONOW

TO ME OR NOT TO ME: Branagh has lots of stars and spectacle, but he's the show

CINEMA

The Whole Dane Thing

At four hours, Branagh's *Hamlet* is a brisk affair

HERE'S THE MOST ECLECTIC CAST IN movie history—Julie Christie, Billy Crystal, Gérard Depardieu, John Gielgud, Rosemary Harris, Charlton Heston, Derek Jacobi, Jack Lemmon, John Mills, Robin Williams, Kate Winslet and the Duke of Marlborough, to name but a dozen—in the second longest film released by a major studio (after *Cleopatra*). If Kenneth Branagh doesn't win an Oscar for his four-hour, uncut *Hamlet*, he should at least cop a Chutzpah Award.

To his credit, the actor-director-adapter approached this job not as a solemn duty or an egotistic stunt, but in the sensible belief that the greatest work in dramatic literature damn well deserved to be filmed in full. Next to this, all other movie versions, from Laurence Olivier's to Mel Gibson's, seem like samplings—a Reduced Shakespeare Company run-through of *Hamlet's* greatest hits.

Big and pretty, vigorous, thoughtful, this *Hamlet* expands the story with helpful flashbacks; Yorick, Priam, Old Norway come alive as if from a vivid history book. The full version restores Shakespeare's emphasis on court politics, with whispers of intrigue that establish Hamlet and Laertes as potential usurpers of Claudius' throne, and massed armies behind Hamlet. Here he might be a Henry V who's gone just this side of bonkers.

This version is strongest where most shorter productions fail: in Act IV, where, in Hamlet's absence, Ophelia goes picturesquely mad while the star gets to catch his breath. Winslet's decline is an edifying horror show; Christie gives all her urgent glamour to Gertrude's one big speech; and Michael Maloney's subtle power as Laertes makes him a kind of good twin to the melancholy Dane. Hamlet, after all, hates his stepfather because he seduced the lad's mother and killed his father. But Laertes has similar reasons for hating Hamlet, and here he has the same carnal, bloody and unnatural itch for Ophelia that Hamlet has for Gertrude.

The cast is mostly excellent, with Crystal a nice surprise as the gravedigger and Richard Briers rescuing Polonius from amiable fuddery; this old man is as much plotter as plodder. If there's a lapse, it's in the central performance. Spuming his lines with catarrhal intakes of breath punctuating the bolts of rhetoric, Branagh is a whiz at making the poetry colloquial and intelligible; he spits out the 400-year-old verse like a rapmaster. But he can't so easily make it poetic.

He has spoken admiringly of Shakespeare's business sense, and he has it too; he also possesses Olivier's keen ambition, the entrepreneurial magnetism that attracts the brightest lights of Britain and Hollywood to his projects. What's lacking in this merchant of culture is Olivier's danger, the preening beauty and sweet delirium that makes an actor a star. Those are precisely the qualities that keep this admirable Hamlet—and *Hamlet*—from being a thrilling one. ***—By Richard Corliss***

Mrs. Miller Is Now Hamlet's Mom

JULIE CHRISTIE DOESN'T LIKE SHAKEspeare. So when Kenneth Branagh wanted her for his lush new *Hamlet*, she was disinclined to accept. "I just find Gertrude such a weird part. And I didn't know if I wanted to get into all that emotionalizing," says the actress whose cool presence lit up classic films like *Dr. Zhivago* and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* but who hasn't been seen much onscreen since the '60s and early '70s. Friends changed her mind about Gertrude. "I'm ever so glad they did," she says.

The second coming of Christie: Julie as Gertrude

But don't expect her well-reviewed turn as Hamlet's mom to herald a full-scale return to film for the still winsome 56-year-old. "I'm not really a suitable person to be an actress," she insists. "I can't bear attention. But I've no qualifications to be anything else." Christie says she's innumerate, has spatial dyslexia and memory problems, so careers she'd prefer, like biology, are out of the question.

Fortunately, she can be lured back to film for the right director. While on location in Newfoundland with Alan Rudolph for *Afterglow*, she took the plight of the local Inuit people to heart and is now campaigning on their behalf. An inveterate lefty, she plans to leave Britain for somewhere like-minded, France or Spain. "I won't see my own history being dismantled in front of my own eyes." ***—By Belinda Luscombe***

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46: 3 No. 230 "Knowing I lov'd my books, he furnished me. . ." Fall 1996

Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* Launched at National Air and Space Museum

John F. Andrews (The Shakespeare Guild)

A Stellar Shakespearean Weekend, co-sponsored by Castle Rock Entertainment, the Smithsonian Associates, the Shakespeare Guild, and the Folger Shakespeare Library, turned out to be quite an extravaganza, with two sold-out screenings of *Hamlet* in the 480-seat Langley Auditorium at the National Air and Space Museum on Wednesday night, December 18, and Friday night, December 20, a four-hour "seminar" (answering to Kenneth Branagh's epic, four-hour cinema) in the 565-seat Baird auditorium of the Natural History Building on Saturday, December 21, and a bustling two-hour reception, following the seminar, that filled the Great Hall and the Old Reading Room at the Folger.

In a particularly appropriate gesture, the Library devoted one of its exhibit cases to the *Hamlet* printings that underlie the Branagh script: the 1623 First Folio (whose rendering of the drama served as control text) and the 1604/5 Second Quarto (whose version was used to augment Folio readings in passages such as the 4.4 encounter between the Prince and the army of his Norwegian counterpart).

The Folger's gift shop was well supplied with W. W. Norton's handsome paperback edition of the *Screenplay, Introduction and Film Diary* for the show. It is beautifully illustrated and annotated (at times with Branagh comments that turn out to be intriguingly incompatible with what one observes in the film), and I strongly recommend Russell Jackson's engaging, witty account of the day-to-day experience of the production team. Readers will enjoy a leitmotif that resulted from the fact that *101 Dalmatians* was being shot at the same time as *Hamlet* on a neighboring sound-stage at Shepperton Studios. And they'll be tickled by the chronicler's parenthetical asides: "(Question: How do you address a screen legend? Answer from camera crew, a mixture of deference and familiarity: 'A bit to the left, please, Chuck, sir'.)"

Hamlet reflecting

Photo Credit: Peter Mountain ©1996 Castle Rock Entertainment

In addition to the *Weekend*'s public events, there was also an elegant private dinner on Friday night at the Smithsonian Castle. During the meal Kenneth Branagh and Derek Jacobi were positioned at the two ends of a long table, and between courses a gracious, affable Branagh made the rounds and chatted with everyone in the room. We were amused to learn that this not-so melancholy Dane's next project will take him to Savannah; he'll appear as a Southern lawyer in a movie scripted by novelist John Grisham.

Saturday Seminar

In the absence of television journalist Robert MacNeil, who had expected to chair the opening session of the Saturday seminar but was compelled to change his plans, Marc Pachter, a cultural historian from the Smithsonian, served as moderator. Mr. Pachter was joined initially by Michael Kahn (who has directed several stage *Hamlets*), Mark Olshaker (novelist, biographer, and producer of the PBS Video documentary *Discovering Hamlet*), Gail Paster (Professor of English at George Washington University and Associate Editor of *Shakespeare Quarterly*), and me. After a short break midway through the discussion a previously unannounced participant, Sir Derek Jacobi, joined the panel, to the accompaniment of voluminous applause.

Mark Olshaker - who had taped rehearsals and recorded interviews with all the principals in a 1988 Renaissance Theatre Company staging of *Hamlet,* in which Derek Jacobi, functioning as director for the first time in his career, mentored a youthful Branagh in his initial attempt at the title role - declared the new film "a palpable hit." His colleagues quickly signaled their concurrence.

Michael Kahn marveled at the "extraordinary daring" of an "uncut *Hamlet*." He commended Branagh for his attention to "the political dimensions" of the drama - something that is difficult to achieve in films, such as the '40's Olivier version, that omit most if not all of the references to Fortinbras. He said that Branagh had come up with "smart answers to the tough problems" in the received tradition. He noted with approval that Branagh's Hamlet was "not Oedipal," and that there were no suggestions of a sexual attraction between the hero and his mother. He called the use of flashbacks a "brilliant" touch, and one that makes this rendering of the tragedy unusually accessible. And in response to the observation by another panelist that Branagh's cast was extraordinarily diverse, he praised the filmmaker's commitment to including "persons of color."

Gail Paster focused on the great "presentation of language" in the film and predicted that this *Hamlet* would be memorable, among other things, for the clarity and eloquence of its treatment of Shakespeare's verse. Then, drawing attention to its visual reminders of *Dr. Zhivago* (not least among them the prominence of Julie Christie, who plays an affecting Gertrude in her first Shakespearean role), Paster dubbed Branagh's wide-screen, larger-than-life salute to Shakespeare's text a "*Hamlet* for lovers of Russian fiction."

While I seconded Gail's emphasis on the panoramic sweep of the Branagh film, I thought it appropriate to balance what she had said with a remark about the director's frequent resort to extreme close-ups. This, I said, would make the film appealing on video. And it seemed to me to be of a piece with the energetic, passionate protagonist in what I categorized as an "in-your-face

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IONA COLLEGE 1940 NEW ROCHELLE, N.Y. certa bonum certamen

Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*

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Hamlet." I went on to laud the special effects that Branagh employs in 1.5, where the sky-blue eyes of the Ghost (Brian Blessed) seem astonishingly spectral in their translucence, and where the flames and smoke emerging from the fissures in a quaking earth hint that this apparition may be the kind of spirit that the Prince's companions warn him to shun. I took issue with the kudos Michael Kahn lavished on the use of flashbacks, and I argued not only that the Ghost's description of the poison's effect upon him is far more "horrible" than any visualization of it on film could possibly be, but that when we see Claudius (Derek Jacobi) do the deed the Ghost narrates we are led to believe in the spirit's "honesty" at a moment when the dramatist appears intent on keeping theater patrons, if not Hamlet, in doubt about "some necessary question of the play."

During the exchanges that ensued, many of them prompted by penetrating queries from the audience, it became clear that the most provocative choices in the film were (a) the decision to portray the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia (Kate Winslet) as one that had been physically consummated - a difficulty for those who find it hard to believe Laertes' sister capable of deceiving both him and the father she seems disinclined to disobey, a plus for those who feel that only a more knowing, autonomous heroine will be credible to today's moviegoers - and (b) the decision to make Polonius (Richard Briers) more "plotter" than "plodder" (to borrow an antithesis from Richard Corliss' occasionally bizarre review in the January 13th *Time*) and to stress his seedy cynicism among other things by inserting a silent prostitute into the scene, 2.1, in which the councilor instructs Reynaldo (Gerard Depardieu) on how to "find directions out" with Laertes (Michael Maloney) - rather than the foolish, prating pomposity that Hamlet goes out of his way to ridicule.

After the panel had compared the latest *Hamlet* with clips from several of its predecessors - most notably the features produced by Laurence Olivier (1948), Grigori Kosintsev (1964), and Franco Zeffirelli (1993) - Marc Pachter hypothesized that with Kenneth Branagh's film we have entered a new, post-Freudian era in which it is no longer obligatory for interpreters of the tragedy to seek for hidden motives that contradict the title character's stated intentions. Like Michael Kahn, I found much to welcome in such a notion, and in support of it I singled out two of the most telling moments in Branagh's *Hamlet*: (a) the Prayer Scene, 3.3, where we are offered no encouragement to infer that the protagonist delays Claudius' execution for any reason other than the vengeful purpose he cites, and (b) the Prince's narrative in 5.2 about the fates he has arranged for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, where Horatio's noncommittal reaction suggests that his own "conscience" may be a bit more scrupulous than that of a friend who comes across at this juncture as ruthless.

Jacobi as Panelist

Upon the arrival of Derek Jacobi, the topic shifted to a veteran Hamlet's views about the work of a distinguished protegé. Jacobi gave high marks to the man who had persuaded him to try his hand, for the first time, at being the Prince's adversary. He pointed out that, with three weeks of rehearsal prior to the start of filming, a cast that had been a trifle apprehensive at the beginning was exceedingly well prepared for the cameras. And Jacobi said that the more he got into the psychology of Claudius the more he had come to regard the usurping monarch as "a winner" and, at least at the outset, a well-intentioned, polished statesman who is both wiser and more effective than the ruler he has supplanted. Jacobi depicted Claudius' opening speech as "a miracle of diplomacy, one of the great thank-you addresses of all time," and he said that he had concluded that the King is taken by surprise when he discovers he cannot escape his guilt or evade its consequences.

When one of the panelists reminded him that Shakespeare's character was not the first Claudius he had played, Jacobi quipped that, yes, he had pretty well managed to "corner the market on Claudii." When he was asked if there had been any Claudiuses he had especially admired on those occasions when he had taken the role of Hamlet, Jacobi said that the most believable and attractive one he could remember was Patrick Stewart's in the 1981 BBC Television production.

In reply to a couple of queries about how to approach the language in a play such as *Hamlet*, Jacobi replied that, for him, the secret was to forget that the words were written by Shakespeare. He asserted that many actors - and above all many American actors - are too reverential when they come to classical scripts. They think that performing the Prince of Denmark is "like acting the Bible." They need to develop "a healthy disrespect for iambic pentameter." And they need to remind themselves that there is nothing sacred about the punctuation to be found either in the early printings or in modern editions that derive from them. To illustrate his point Jacobi recalled a Benedick soliloquy in 2.3 of *Much Ado About Nothing*, where he had altered a comma to introduce a second question into the passage: "It seems her affections have their full bent. Love me? Why? It must be requited."

When asked why works such as *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Romeo and Juliet* adapt so readily to film and television, Jacobi responded that "Shakespeare was one of the world's great screenwriters," an artist who would be perfectly at home in the twentieth-century entertainment industry.

Branagh Interview

This remark provided a fitting segue for the interview that made this *Weekend* truly stellar, a one-hour conversation between actor, director, and producer Kenneth Branagh and National Public Radio's award-winning special correspondent Susan Stamberg. After the standing ovation that greeted Branagh's entrance had subsided, Stamberg commenced with a quotation from a wag who had labeled the title character of *Hamlet* "a depressed man in tights." Branagh chuckled over what he acknowledged to be a neat formulation; then he went on to observe that in fact the hero we meet in the opening scenes of Shakespeare's play is not a melancholic by nature. He is deeply disturbed, of course, but there are good reasons for what his elders regard as an antisocial disposition. And why does the Prince's unruly manner attract so much notice? Because it represents a radical shift from the graceful, decorous, and noble bearing that Hamlet's friends have long associated with him. The protagonist's situation is not one that lends itself to "normal" behavior - or, for that matter, to "conventional acting possibilities."

Noting that the set of this *Hamlet* is dominated by mirrors, Stamberg asked what it all meant. "A bloody technical nightmare, that's what it all meant." With this riposte, Branagh launched into an analysis of the camera angles that had to be devised - or avoided - to negotiate a multiplicity of reflecting surfaces. Branagh then proceeded to talk about the mirrors as symbols of opulence, vanity, narcissism, and "an atmosphere of incipient paranoia."

He followed with a few words about the use of Blenheim Palace for the exterior location shots. He said he wanted to suggest that the action of *Hamlet* transpires in "a place where the fates of nations are decided," and that Blenheim's own history would help to convey that notion.

When Stamberg asked Branagh about his orientation to the text, the actor said he had wanted to use all of the poet's words, if possible, in an effort to prevent the constricting, and distorting, that becomes inevitable when a script is cut. "We tried to get ourselves out of the way of the play. We wanted to release as much of the play as possible."

Stamberg mentioned that objections had been raised to some of the flashbacks. In defense of the one that occurs in 1.5, Branagh said: "Because the Ghost's narrative is so long, it seemed to cry out for illustration." The director noted that he also thought some visual aids would help the audience "feel the urgency of Hamlet's mission."

Observing that the film has been rated PG-13 ("pretty good for thirteen-year-olds"), Stamberg asked Branagh if he thought that it was a good idea for young people to be exposed to the flashbacks that show Hamlet and Ophelia making love. Branagh smiled and said that if he were a thirteen-year-old who'd been dragged to a bloody four-hour *Hamlet*, he'd be very grateful for an occasional nude scene. He went on to say that in his opinion the intensity implied by a sexual relationship with the Prince would make Ophelia's "descent into madness" seem more plausible later in the action.

Stamberg asked Branagh how long he had been interested in *Hamlet*. He said that he had become aware of the role at the age of eleven, when he had watched a television rendering in which Richard Chamberlain - then internationally celebrated for the series about Dr. Kildare - played the title role. Several years later, when he was auditioning for admission to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, Branagh admitted, he'd had the audacity to recite one of the Prince's soliloquies to Hugh Crutwell, the principal of RADA. Mr. Crutwell - a severe critic, and one who has served as an advisor for all of Branagh's Shakespearean films - was "very uninterested in my seventeen-year-old Hamlet."

Crediting Branagh for the current revival of Shakespeare on film, Stamberg asked how he explained the playwright's continuing appeal. Branagh spoke of the dramatist's "wonderful insights into the human condition." He expressed the view that "we all need a bit of poetry" and that there's "magic in the web" of Shakespeare's words. He said he was intrigued by the complexity and ambiguity of Shakespeare's characters. "Hamlet," for example, "is wonderfully imperfect," a man of conflicting drives and motives, and the drama in which he appears is "a miracle of construction, a complete piece." In the final reckoning, Branagh said, "Shakespeare belongs to everyone."

When he was given an opportunity to discuss some of the other plays he would like to do, Branagh alluded to a film musical of *Love's Labor's Lost* ("that'll delight the purists") and mentioned that he was also giving some thought to "The Scottish

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Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*

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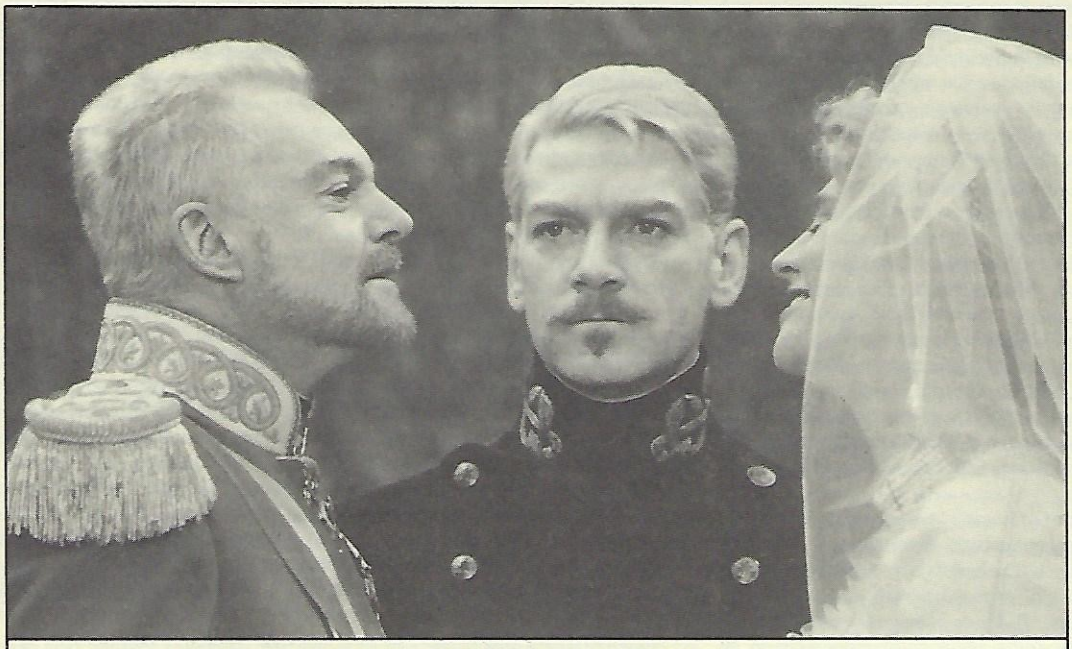
Play." He said he had enjoyed playing Iago and might want to return to *Othello*. He did not yet feel ready, however, to tackle the protagonist of *King Lear*.

Toward the end of the afternoon a member of the audience asked why Branagh had included Dame Judi Dench (Hecuba) and Sir John Gielgud (Priam) in the flashback that accompanies the First Player's speech about the sacking of Troy. Branagh replied that these mute cameos were his way of paying homage to two of the stars he most admired, and to a tradition he saw them as having transmitted to his own generation. He went on to say that he was invoking Heaven's blessing on a project whose success he had regarded as anything but certain. Surely it would not hurt to include in the background of his portrait of the Prince a tribute to "the greatest Hamlet of the twentieth century."



Derek Jacobi (Claudius), Branagh (Hamlet), Julie Christie (Gertrude)
Photo Credit: Rolf Konow © 1996 Castle Rock Entertainment

Editor's View

[Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* must be judged a flawed masterpiece, but it is possible that subsequent experiences of the film will remove the qualifying "flawed" from my judgment. I saw the film at the Paris Theatre in Manhattan on a January afternoon, and I was grateful for the tip from a SHAKSPER correspondent to head for the mezzanine after the wait outside in the cold; the mezzanine offered plenty of room and, it turned out, entertaining commentary from some young people in the row behind, one of whom had seen the film already and was alerting his mates to what to expect. Moviegoers should be warned that, in this uncut presentation of the text, the Intermission came after two hours and thirty-five minutes, at the end of Hamlet's last soliloquy, that is, after 4.4. After an intermission, the film runs for another hour and twenty-five minutes. The logic behind this division is clear enough, allowing us to witness the entire action up to the hero's departure from Denmark, but more than two-and-a-half hours at one sitting is very long. I was grateful that I had an aisle seat and could easily cross my legs.

I judge the film a flawed masterpiece because Branagh does so many things right but a few things very wrong. The decision to film the entire text, the "traditional" conflation of F/Q2, inspired by Adrian Noble's 1993 RSC production of the play, which starred Branagh, is absolutely right. The complete text provides wonderful opportunities to appreciate characters and circumstances in depth, so that, for example, we see Polonius conspiring with Reynaldo to spy on Laertes and we enjoy the complete conversations between Hamlet and Rosencrantz/Guildenstern. Watching all seven of Hamlet's soliloquies offers more insight into his character, and we get a greater sense of the concerns of ordinary Danes in the full exchange between the two gravediggers. I think that, for the most part, the flashbacks work, although Branagh's decision to make Hamlet and Ophelia lovers (according to the screenplay, they first sleep together after the elder Hamlet's death, although this timing is not clear on screen) is obviously controversial. As John Andrews comments, the decision to depict Claudius's murder of King Hamlet as the Ghost tells his story removes any audience doubt about the veracity of the Ghost, but Hamlet himself remains understandably uncertain.

Blenheim Palace provides a splendid setting, and the interiors, particularly the "State Hall," are superb. Most of the principals seem to live behind the mirrored doors on either side of this grand hall; predictably, Hamlet is on one side, Claudius and Gertrude the other. Hamlet's book-lined study reflects a scholarly, inquisitive character, a man of many parts, who can appreciate a book about demons as well as a miniature theatre for conceptualizing dramatic action.

The magnificent setting is matched by wonderful performances. The "stars" in cameo roles do quite well, except perhaps for Jack Lemmon as Marcellus, who really is not comfortable with Shakespearean conversation and, frankly, looks rather old to be a Danish guard. Outstanding among the cameo performers is Charlton Heston as an imposing Player King. The principal roles all work very well, including that of Gertrude, played by Julie Christie in her debut as a Shakespearean performer. Kenneth Branagh makes an impressive Prince, surely what Marvin Rosenberg in *The Masks of Hamlet* would call a "power" as opposed to a "sweet" Hamlet; when he calls himself "Hamlet the Dane" at Ophelia's grave, we accept his boast.

A Flawed Masterpiece

What, then, is flawed? John Andrews uses the term "in your face" to describe Branagh's cinematic technique, and I would add that there is a certain "over the top" quality to the entire production. Everything must be done with maximum noise and exaggerated behavior. Branagh would probably argue, with reason, that a four-hour film, intended for general distribution, must provide some pleasure for the groundlings, as it were, and perhaps Hamlet's advice to the players simply cannot apply to film. But some of Branagh's "over the top" procedures are truly questionable. For example, in the very opening moments, Barnardo says, offstage, "Who's there?" and then, without waiting for a reply, crashes into view, hurling Francisco to the ground, where they grapple, blades drawn, until Francisco gets the upperhand and demands, "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself." Shakespeare seems to seek an atmosphere of foreboding and confusion, which Branagh conveys in the lead-in to the first lines, but the violence that Branagh then introduces distracts from this mood. Branagh himself is not immune from such broad gestures, most notably, perhaps, in his ranting approach to the final soliloquy, delivered on a snowy plain as the camera pulls back to introduce the intermission.

But there should be much discussion about the presentation of Fortinbras; Shakespeare himself seems to change his mind about the Norwegian prince, portraying him as a ruffian in early references but then, in 4.4, referring to him, in Hamlet's words, as "a delicate and tender prince" to whom the dying Hamlet later gives his "dying voice" as his successor on Denmark's throne. Branagh depicts Fortinbras as a thug from first to last who stages a *coup d état* at the close, with maximum use of killing and destruction. This Fortinbras has no need of Hamlet's approval; he simply marches in an takes control of the castle, and he does so without knowing about the cinematic duel that simultaneously leads to the utter destruction of the Danish royal house. It does seem to me that this kind of overkill damages a remarkably fine film, as do those instances where the text says one thing and the characters do another. When Hamlet greets the players, for example, he addresses one of them as "my young lady"; that he is speaking to a boy is evident in his lines hoping that the boy's "voice . . . be not cracked." Ever faithful to the text, Branagh delivers these words as he scoops a girl up from among the players.

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SEMINAR ABSTRACTS

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Political Geography in a Distracted Globe: Ian McKellen's *Richard III* and Stephen Raynes' *Macbeth*

This paper will explore two important recent productions of Shakespeare in which events that Shakespeare placed in Britain are resituated. Richard Eyre's 1992 production of *Richard III* (now made into a film), starring Ian McKellen in the title role, complexly combined allusions to England in the 1930's and settings in Nazi Germany. The Committed Artist of Great Britain/Haworth Shakespeare Festival's production of *Macbeth*, directed by Stephen Raynes, similarly changed the geographical and temporal setting of the play to present the events in a more-or-less modern day Africa. With a largely black cast, Raynes and the company of Committed Artists rewrote the politics of *Macbeth* along with its geography. I will explore the political and aesthetic effects of such geographical and political transformation, in part to try to understand why directors choose to stage the present as past (why present the Nazi story through the lens of *Richard III*? Why explore tyranny and oppression in modern day Africa through *Macbeth*?). I will compare the ways in which Shakespeare endows geography with varying symbolic meanings and the ways these modern directors use setting to re-frame the plays. The paper will conclude with some brief speculation about the role of political allegory in theater and about the relation between visual and verbal meaning.

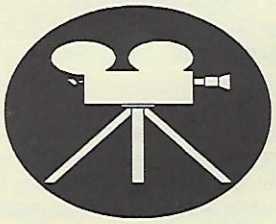
Susanne Wofford (U of Wisconsin - Madison)

Bulletins

- SHAKESPEARE is a new magazine for Shakespeare enthusiasts, scholars, and teachers. The premiere issue, recently published, includes an interview with Donald Foster about the Funeral Elegy and several articles on *Hamlet*, including an interview with Kenneth Branagh about the new film, four veteran teachers' approaches to teaching the play, and *Hamlet* on the Internet. In addition, a kindergarten teacher describes how she uses *The Tempest*, *Pericles*, and *The Winter's Tale* to assist in the cognitive and moral growth of her students.

The magazine's publishers are Michael Collins, Professor of English at Georgetown, Peggy O'Brien of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and Keith Rose, an editor at Cambridge UP. For subscriptions ($12 for one year, three issues), write to: SHAKESPEARE, Georgetown University, P.O. Box 571006, Washington, DC 20057-10006. Inquiries about submissions can be sent via e-mail to Editors@shakespearemag.com.

- The 1997 Ohio Shakespeare Conference focuses on "Textual Practice and Theatrical Labor: Shakespeare and His Contemporaries" from 16 to 18 May at Ohio State U. Contact Luke Wilson or Chris Highley at the English Department, 164 W. 17th Ave., Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210. Telephone (614) 292-6065. Fax (614) 292-7816.



Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*

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Cinematic Dividends

There are dividends in Branagh's cinematic technique: the ceremonial moments of 1.2 work well indeed, including the shower of confetti bestowed on the royal newly-weds as they leave the State Hall. Polonius questions Ophelia about her relationship with Hamlet in a chapel dominated by a confessional, and Claudius uses the same box in his attempted prayer later in the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern first appear to Hamlet's eyes in a most enjoyable fashion. And other inspired moments could be cited.

In his Introduction to the screenplay, Kenneth Branagh writes: "I've brought as much intelligence as I can to its [the film's] execution but in the end mine is not an intellectual approach, but an intuitive one." In following his intuitions, Branagh has created a compelling film of Shakespeare's play. Its strengths and weaknesses will inspire much stimulating and profitable discussion for years to come. We must be grateful for this daring interpretation of the complete text of an enduring masterpiece. [J.W.M.]