

HAMLET

“Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.”

Claudius (Anthony Hopkins)

Tony Richardson’s 1969 film of Hamlet was radical and ground-breaking on several fronts, but widely-published claims that it was the first colour version of Shakespeare’s most famed play are wide of the mark. One year before, a “spaghetti western” update of the Danish tragedy appeared in Italy under the title *Quella sporca storia nel West* (“That Dirty Story in the West”), directed by Enzo Castellari—later responsible for the original *Inglorious Bastards* (1978)—and written by Sergio Corbucci, of *Django* (1966) fame. It’s safe to assume that the picture released internationally as *Johnny Hamlet* and *The Wild and the Dirty* is well known to Quentin Tarantino, but otherwise it is at best a footnote in the extremely long list of big-screen Shakespeare adaptations.

The Richardson picture, a claustrophobically intimate affair framed mainly in close-ups, has fared only a little better, overshadowed in the popular memory by more extravagant renditions such as Laurence Olivier’s from 1948 and Kenneth Branagh’s from 1996—both of which were adapted and directed by their stars. Like 1968’s *Inadmissible Evidence*, Richardson’s *Hamlet* seems to have been created primarily for the purpose of capturing a seminal, award-winning Nicol Williamson stage-performance for posterity.

The Williamson *Hamlet*, directed by Richardson at the Roundhouse—a former trainshed dating back to 1847—in north London, was a sensation in its day: the British prime minister at the time, Harold Wilson, proclaimed it “the best of his generation, perhaps even of the century” (Wilson’s enthusiasm eventually led to Williamson giving his *Hamlet* at Richard Nixon’s White House). And while the movie itself is more of a curio than a masterpiece (Richardson noted that “it’s not perhaps a film really, but something a visual LP”) the performances, from the searingly mercurial Williamson all the way down to the smallest roles, belong in the pantheon of big-screen Shakespearean thespianism.

Anthony Hopkins makes for a very young, very lusty, ear-ring-sporting Claudius; Judy Parfitt is a brittle but magnetically ethereal Gertrude; pop star and paparazzi-magnet Marianne Faithfull exceeds all expectations and delivers an Ophelia for the ages. And then, stealing scenes left and right in what would be his final feature-film appearance, Roger Livesey—unforgettable as Billy Rice in Richardson’s *The Entertainer* some nine years before—doing sterling double-duty as the First Player and the Gravedigger.

The circumstances of *Hamlet*’s creation are remarkable. It was actually shot during the theatrical run, in ten exhausting days at the Roundhouse (with the cellars standing in for the battlements of Elsinore Castle), starting at 8am and finishing at 5pm, allowing the cast two and a half hours before the evening public performance. As such, it transcends the deadened feel of “filmed productions” and instead exists as a unique cinematic-theatrical hybrid.

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Aptly enough, the very first shot is an extended, bracingly blunt close-up of an old brick wall: this is Shakespearean tragedy as huis clos nightmare, the characters (aristocrats and underlings alike) trapped by their social circumstances and by the inevitability of their imminent demise. Richardson, unafraid to play fast and loose with the text, which he trims from four hours down to less than two, gets rid of Fortinbras's triumphant entrance at the end.

And he gets away with it too, closing instead on the exact moment of the death of Hamlet (King of Denmark at last, if only for a few minutes.) After *Inadmissible Evidence* and *Laughter in the Dark*, the curtain also rings down on what now stands as a semi-accidental "Williamson Trilogy": he would never act for the company again, but in these three films the magnificently commanding, superbly eclectic enfant terrible did more than enough to warrant his own special chapter in its annals.