



LAURENCE OLIVIER'S HAMLET is a belated Second Quarter 2018 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's evaluation of that dvd film.

19 of a possible 20 points

******* of a possible *******

**Great Britain 1948 black-and-white 153 minutes live action feature tragedy
Two Cities Film Ltd. Producers: Reginald Beck and Laurence Olivier**

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 2 Direction: Laurence Olivier* and Anthony Bushell***
- 2 Editing: Helga Cranston* Text Editing: Alan Dent***
- 2 Cinematography: Desmond Dickinson***
Camera Operator: Ray Sturgess*
Stills: Wilfrid Newton*

- 2 **Lighting: James Hamilton*, Maurice Gillett***
Special Visual Effects: George Blackwell, Frances Carver, Syd Howell,
James Snow, Bill Warrington
- 2 **Screenplay: Laurence Olivier from the play by William Shakespeare***
Continuity: Elizabeth Everson
Music Recording: E. A. Drake
- 2 **Music: William Walton***
- 2 **Production Design: Roger Furse* Art Direction: Carmen Dillon***
Scenic Artist: E. Lindegaard
Costume Design: Elizabeth Hennings*
Makeup Supervision: Geoffrey Rodway*
Makeup: Tony Sforzini*, Michael Morris*, Norbert Myles*, Basil Newall*,
Ernest Westo*
- 1 **Sound Supervision: Charles Cyril Stevens**
Sound Editing: Harry Miller
Sound Recording: John Mitchell, E. E. Overton,
Desmond Dew, and Ken Rawkins
Casting: Maude Spector*
- 2 **Acting**
- 2 **Creativity**
- 19 total points**

Cast: Laurence Olivier* (Hamlet and Voice of Ghost of Hamlet's Father),
Norman Wooland (Horatio, Hamlet's confidant), Jean Simmons*
(Ophelia, daughter of Polonius and sister to Laertes), Felix Aylmer*
(Polonius, Lord Chamberlain), Basil Sydney* (Claudius, the King),
Stanley Holloway* (Gravedigger), John Laurie (Francisco), Edmond Knight
(Barnardo), Anthony Quayle* (Marcellus), Niall MacGinnis (Sea Captain),
Eileen Herlie (Gertrude, the Queen and Hamlet's mother), Terence Morgan
(Laertes, son of Polonius and brother to Ophelia), Peter Cushing (Osric),
Harcourt Williams (First Player), Patrick Troughton (Player King), Tony Tarver
(Player Queen), Russell Thorndike (Priest), Patricia Davidson (Lady of the Court),
Christopher Lee (Spear Carrier), Patrick Macnee (extra player), others

Perhaps the most successful of Laurence Olivier's Shakespearean film adaptations, *HAMLET*, from 1948, remains a fascinating study in the art of bringing intensely concentrated poetic prose to audiovisual kinetic splendor. Using an approach privileging minutely measured dolly and tracking shots with prodigal abandon, Olivier permits viewers to wend their way in serpentine fashion through a bleak, sparsely furnished Elsinore Castle, accentuating the limited interior design options of northern medieval Europe. Choosing black-and-white photography to communicate the phantasmagorical gloominess pervading this tragedy's setting, the director firmly establishes gradations of gray as predominant in grim, stone-enclosed physical partitions of Elsinore's imposing battlements as well as inside the turbulent, feverish brain of Hamlet himself.

Something is unsettled and decadently so in the sovereignty of Denmark. A prince unjustly denied elevation to kingship by overreaching, ambitious uncle, studious Hamlet clings to lamentation amid exultant festivity celebrating a royal marriage. Only two months have lapsed since a mysterious and unanticipated death of the youth's father, surely a span not adequate to constitute any proper courtship period. Yet already Uncle Claudius weds his mother, usurping both throne and queen brazenly. Is Gertrude truly in love with this uncouth roisterer, who spends his days wining and dining with little attentiveness to matters of state?

Complications arise when a persistent ghost makes his identity known to the grieving youth who should have succeeded him, commanding vengeance for premeditated poisoning. To accomplish such a task, Hamlet must set himself against his own mother, in addition to undermining a smug tyrant and his eavesdropping chief counselor, Polonius.

Can he do that and still remain legal? How will his rash actions affect faithful sweetheart Ophelia? Regardless, he must cast off all ties to future happiness and devote himself entirely to plotting a monarch's downfall. If, in so doing, he terrorizes a doting parent and sends a maiden into amazed confusion, followed by despair and suicidal insanity, that is lamentable, but can't be avoided.

As the drama unfolds it discloses the true moral character of each principal player. Laertes, Ophelia's brother, blindly pursues vengeance at any cost for a father's death. It matters not to him what means are employed for executing that, ethical or not. That leads to personal disaster. Polonius fatally attempts

one too many politically motivated snoopings, failing miserably to observe his own pithy maxims of diplomatic behavior. Ophelia, loving indiscreetly someone bent on dissociation, meets an unhallowed, shameful end, Elsinore's priest refusing to sanction formal funeral rites for her. A mother dies after imbibing a toxic drink prepared by treacherous spouse for her beloved, suspicious, unpredictable son. Hamlet reaps what he sows at the hands of a hateful Laertes, too securely trusting in practice at the expense of prudence. Over all of them Destiny rules, Shakespeare seems to be saying. Humans are mere pawns, whose stratagems are foiled or advanced by a power far greater.

Olivier's highly abridged version of this complicated web of plottings crafted by England's foremost wordsmith preserves the pith of Shakespeare's play without attenuating it to a duration inducing drowsiness. His chief obstacle is the impossibility of doing equal justice to verbal acrobatics and observable behaviors. Using film enables greater foregrounding of small, vital props, such as goblets, foils, rings, crowns, and Yorick's skull. Tiny changes in expressions of actors are plainly revealed, much more so than could be perceived by spectators assigned rear rows in traditional theater settings. However, overlapping dialogue, a staple of opera, and rushed torrents of poetic effusiveness, are ultimately garbled and undecipherable. Only in readings, slowly analyzing one speech at a time, can the full majesty and profound inferences of the original author be fully digested. This solitary exploration, though, reveals nothing of the activity occurring onstage simultaneously, denying pleasant revelations of live performances.

There is no completely satisfying way to unify these two disparate elements of stagecraft. Olivier's bold attempt here comes as close to achieving communication of the spirit desired by Shakespeare as any other, mainly through judiciously chosen close-ups, sinuous camera glides, low-key treatment of encounters between insubstantial, vaporous ghost and corporeal auditors, and effective exterior footage of stormy ocean waters sandwiched between monologues and conversations.

William Walton's score, at times wildly blaring, matches well unfettered boisterousness of Claudius when necessary. At other moments it corresponds to melodic meditative passages for Ophelia's gentle lyricism and offers brief discordant harmonies to match Hamlet's dismal philosophizing. This contrast between overbearing bombast and sweet melody parallels the play's oscillation

between comical and tragic elements. When regal formality is required, the score readily accommodates that, too.

Equally well-adapted are production designs created by Roger Furse. Lavish costumes swish along through otherwise threadbare sets, reflecting wordlessly the chasm between reality and desires. External colorlessness and simplicity set at naught intricate schemes hatched by dissatisfied individuals trapped frustratingly by situations and surroundings they cannot control. Islands collide trying to make of themselves continents, leaders contending at cross-purposes for divergent goals. These are a predictable preface to fatal calamity. Stressing Nordic blondness for more innocent cast members, like Ophelia and Hamlet, and darker costuming for villains such as Claudius and misguided Laertes, décor silently mirrors interior characters.

Lighting superbly illuminates action, mimicking stage convention for solo speeches while getting reinforcements from deep focus photography for scenes indicative of divisiveness. A most notable example is the passage which concludes with Claudius and Gertrude exiting from the same chamber at different speeds of ascent using stairways angling apart from initial juxtaposition.

Of course, screenwriting is of superb quality, verbal cadences alternating with protracted silences achieving optimal dramatic effectiveness. Indeed, frequent intentional lapses into utter soundlessness permit audiences gratifying rest periods between tempestuous outpourings of emotion.

Some criticism has been directed at Olivier for chopping away blocks of text, though nothing vital was deleted. This seems absurd. How unlikely any Elizabethan playwright would purposely force audiences to attend and keep focused on a drama running three or four hours. No flood of inspired oratory or stunning scenic effects could be reasonably expected to transfix theatergoers for such a length of time. Olivier, a veteran of the stage, had no wish to stir restlessness among ticketholders by relentlessly unrolling what might be skillfully presented in a considerably shorter form. His decision was eminently practical. It surely would have met with the Bard of Avon's personal approval. The play's the thing, not the script.

Among cast performances, most memorable are eighteen-year-old Jean Simmons as a castoff beloved of the inconstant Prince's, Felix Aylmer's compromised busybody Polonius, Stanley Holloway in quicksilver punning mode

as an ironically-inclined gravedigger, and Laurence Olivier himself depicting an introspectively brooding Dane torn between attachment to a life just reaching mature blossoming and necessity for violent, potentially self-dooming action.

Released on dvd in 2006 as part of the Criterion Collection, the dvd under discussion includes only one bonus feature, an even-handed essay on the film by critic Terrence Rafferty.

HAMLET won four Academy Awards™ including Best Picture, Best Actor in a Leading Role (Olivier), Best Art Direction – Set Decoration for Roger Furse and Carmen Dillon, and Best Supporting Actress for Jean Simmons. All these were richly merited.

Due to its graphically violent plot involving murder and suicide of human beings, this film is suitable only for mature teens and adults. Younger screen enthusiasts can explore its themes and action instead by watching and listening to Disney's estimable THE LION KING.

Any viewer wishing satisfaction from a single film version of HAMLET should strongly consider picking out this one. It does an especially remarkable job of clarifying actions accompanying Shakespeare's far-from-transparent text, with highly recommended visualizations and performances. Criterion accompanies the film with helpful subtitles that disentangle numerous verbal intricacies. Feel free to utilize them abundantly.

Olivier's HAMLET has held up well over successive decades, a tribute to its lack of faddishness and profound respect for original text. Check it out and see for yourself why it remains an aesthetic triumph.