

**Read the Review of  
Branagh's film version of  
Hamlet from Harper's Bazaar  
and Salon**

## SAMPLE CCR

### TASK:

Read the reviews of Branagh's film version of *Hamlet* from Harper's Bazaar and Salon.

Write a letter to the editor in response to one of them.

In the letter you should:

- emulate the style of the publication
- engage with some of the critical issues / contexts
- give your own views of Branagh's adaptation
- root your comments in the text of the play itself

## CANDIDATE RESPONSE

Letter response to Richard Rayner's review in *Harper's Bazaar*

Dear Sir,

Rayner describes Branagh's *Hamlet* as being 'ballsy and brilliant'. Fat chance! When I read the review I had to add my voice to the debate. Rayner says how the verse from Branagh's mouth 'springs spontaneously'. He is utterly mistaken. Branagh's soul may be tormented, but his delivery, although technically brilliant, lacks raw emotion. He reels off the first soliloquy, a solitary figure in a grand great hall. He is not alone; he is putting on a show at the theatre for an audience he imagines is watching him. Except that we are watching him on a screen and his movements are extravagant and unnecessary. He is about to release his suppressed anguish, the speed of his voice quickens and without warning he shouts 'and yet within a month' to his absent audience, whilst simultaneously changing direction and raising his hand up to the sky. Then Branagh squeals hysterically – 'A little month' – and so the perfectly planned tirade continues. I remain cold and unmoved.

Surprising as it may seem, I do agree with Rayner when he says that Branagh 'gives a chilling picture of power in decay.' In fact the characters in this adaptation do reflect the anxieties of the 90s – a voyeuristic Britain, where Big Brother is preparing to rear his sick head. But Rayner then rants on about Branagh's 'sly dig at the house of Windsor.' I would argue, however, that he is not criticising the royals; rather he is attacking the paparazzi, by paralleling the treatment in the play of 'fair Ophelia' with the hounding of Princess Diana. The film was released a year after Diana's death – proof of life foreshadowing art. Kate Winslet's presentation of Ophelia is groundbreaking, poignant and perceptive. Of course all Rayner can muster when it comes to Winslet's performance is that she looked fit and that he was 'well up' for seeing her 'without any clothes on.' What a shame that he misses her acting. Soldiers charge into her bedroom hunting for Hamlet after his killing of Polonius – an unforgivable invasion of her privacy. She jerks awake, wide-eyed – a rabbit caught in the headlights. Ophelia is used by her father as a sexual tool to spy

on Hamlet, while Hamlet plays equally thoughtlessly with her emotions. She is used until there is no more to use in her, until she is mentally scarred. Discovering that her father has been killed by her lover, she howls – piercing our conscience (though clearly not Rayner's!) She is no longer tameable, clawing the gates of her locked chamber. She gives up life, stranded in the centre of that grand great hall, resorting to the voice and mannerisms of a child. Speaking in riddles she wears a white straitjacket – a physical symbol of her oppressed mind.

Though Rayner criminally neglects Winslet's acting, he may have a point about her good looks. However, to my mind, Branagh just doesn't make the grade and he's not worth trekking down to the Odeon for, even if Rayner thinks he should be 'rewarded with gold statuettes.'

## Ballsy and Brilliant

By Richard Rayner

Published in January 1997 in Harper's Bazaar

Shakespeare did something sophisticated and modern with the old tale of a Danish prince who feigned madness while contemplating vengeance for the murder of his father, and *Hamlet* was the result, a piece written to order that nonetheless has many of the qualities of a self-portrait. Now Kenneth Branagh has done something sophisticated and modern with what Shakespeare created, and you get the feeling that he's also putting a lot on the line. Shot in 70 millimeter and running more than four hours, this *Hamlet*, unabridged but updated to the 19th century, announces itself with a robust grandeur unheard of in any other film version. Branagh adapts for the screen, directs, and needless to say, stars. The word mania comes to mind. Maybe he didn't get enough attention from Mum as a child, but then so say the Freudians--that was Hamlet's problem all along.

*Hamlet* uncut is too long, because a monolithic text was assembled after Shakespeare's death by editors intent on preserving his every line, and because everyone in the play, with the exception of the women, talks too much. Hamlet himself witters on incessantly, though beautifully. For my money, Branagh does the verse much better than even Laurence Olivier, which is to say that from Branagh's mouth it springs spontaneously, with natural energy and life. Any problem a modern audience might have with the metaphor-charged Elizabethan lingo disappears the moment he comes onscreen. His Hamlet has bleached hair and a little Vandyk. He's sensual and scornful, playful and depressed, a brilliant mind trying to understand how to be a human being; as soon as he figures it out, he realizes he will die.

One of the film's coups is to take itself into the character's consciousness, presenting offstage events and even fantasies. There are flashes of the beginning of the affair between Claudius and Gertrude; the murder of the old king is remembered; and there's a shock when it seems that Hamlet really has killed his enemy. Branagh has also decided that Hamlet is sleeping with Ophelia before the action starts, which gives us a dramatic frisson by heightening every moment that occurs between them, and the purely prurient one of seeing Kate Winslet without any clothes on. I was all for it. The overall effect is to open out the play, investing it with terrific speed and a sense of visual space.

At the same time, Branagh loses none of Elsinore's incestuous intimacy: Every sheet is steaming inside this wintry palace of huge marbled halls, roaring fires, and the type of nubbly period furniture designed for optimum show and minimum comfort. Branagh gives a chilling picture of power in decay, of a royal family fiddling, feuding, and at last eating its own entrails while doom marches to its doorstep, in the shape of Fortinbras (Rufus Sewell, with those oddly wayward eyes--Marty Feldman born again as a sinister hunk). There's a sly dig at the house of Windsor, lest we forget that Shakespeare is our contemporary.

The performances are mixed. Derek Jacobi is the biggest plus, a steely and yet very human Claudius. Polonius is made less the fusspot and more a capable and conniving

old shit by Richard Briers, and when Ophelia goes bonkers, Winslet does her stuff heartrendingly. Julie Christie seems self-conscious at first as Gertrude but eventually relaxes.

Unfortunately, Branagh grabs too many stars for the smaller parts, as if he is afraid to let up on the pizzazz for even a second. After two hours, I found myself wondering, Who isn't going to be in this? By then we'd already seen Jack Lemmon, Gerard Depardieu, Sir John Gielgud, and Charlton Heston. Still to come: Billy Crystal, in a low-key turn as the gravedigger, followed by Robin Williams' whiskered and clownish Osric. Williams is fun, of course, but a distraction at the moment when the action is speeding to a climax.

Cinema has been kind to the Bard lately. Baz Luhrmann directed a terrific *Romeo and Juliet*--with rap, platform shoes, and Leonardo DiCaprio in a silly suit of armor--understanding that each generation needs a reinvented Romeo, simply because there aren't many stories that work so well. Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* is a wry, self-deprecating investigation of why Shakespeare still compels. And now here's Branagh with an epic *Hamlet* that is engrossing and alive, an act of hubris that could blow up in his face. Four hours! (A two-and-a-half-hour version in 35-millimeter will be released after the original.) If *Hamlet* should prove a commercial folly, then at least it's a grand one. Hats should be doffed, and Branagh duly rewarded with gold statuettes.

