Did Kenneth Branagh fail in filming Hamlet?

1. Some general remarks

Without question, Hamlet is the most famous play ever written. "To be or not to be" and a lot of other quotations are familiar to nearly everyone in western culture. But many people have never seen a stage performance of it. Several movies were made to eliminate that lack (or to present a film director's personal version of the play) and to be available to much more people than a stage performance. Kenneth Branagh was the last one who tried it, he was the first one who tried it with the full length version of the text (following the Oxford edition), produced in 1996[1].

But was it a success? Certainly not in commercial matters. Is it a good film? Is it a good version of Hamlet? These and some further question will be answered on the following pages.

1.1.   Shakespeare´s Hamlet

When we nowadays speak about Shakespeare, we are certainly aware that a William Shakespeare was not the writer of all the plays and sonnets[2]. But when we say "Shakespeare", we mean the author of Hamlet, whoever he might have been. The tragedy of the hesitant Prince of Denmark (a play "The Revenge of Hamlet Prince [of] Denmark" is dated at 1602) wherein nearly every principal character is murdered needs no further introduction here, I suppose.

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[1] The other Hamlet-movies (like Laurence Olivier´s [1948] or Franco Zefirelli´s [1990] one) are not taken into consideration in this essay. But other Shakespeare film version are. That is just a precaution not to start simply comparing films. Hamlet without quotation marks means the film or play as well as the character, dependent on context.
[2] There are a lot of texts and essays about that issue, a documentary film ("Die Shakespeare Verschwörung", GB 1999, broadcasted in Germany on 3sat in 2000) presents a lot of proofs and indicies that the person of William Shakespeare is different to the person of the author who is probably the Earl of Oxford who used the pen name Shake-speare.

There are many different ways of interpreting and staging the play as we learn from stage history. The man with the tricot or in a rocker´s dress or even naked has influenced generations of theatre players, writers[3], directors. It was the leading role nearly every popular actor wanted and wants to play, and actresses too, as we see on older and newer photographs of actresses in the well known "Hamlet suit": tights and tricot.

1.2. Branagh´s Hamlet

Kenneth Branagh says that he saw Hamlet on stage for the first time when he was 15 and that it has changed his life. He became a very young member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, soon directed several stage plays and directed his first movie in 1989 at the age of 29, "Henry V". He proved to be a man who can transform Shakespeare into great performances on screen. "Henry V" was a very up-to-date film in very old settings and demonstrated Branagh´s abilities in presenting "old stuff" to a broad modern audience. Although setting and costumes recalled an age more than four hundred years ago, the style of the film was modern, the editing, the tempo of the film, the way of presenting the action, shortening the text. It looked quite like MTV and not like an old play. In "Much ado about nothing", Branagh again succeeded in modernising the play by leaving the stage or stage like setting and it was a success in commercial and artistic value systems. The next Shakespeare film of his should be Hamlet.

In 1996, he got the chance to let his dream come true. He was allowed to spend 18 Million US$, less than he had for his last big budget film "Mary Shelley´s Frankenstein", on his Hamlet version. Before his opus magnus, he presented his "preparation" to us: "In the bleak midwinter", a low bud-

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[3] like Tom Stoppard who realised a film version of his stage play "Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are dead" (1967) in 1992.

get film in black and white about a disappointed actor who wants to stage Hamlet in an old church. Then, finally, Branagh had his hour, better his four hours, that is the time he needs for all the lines.

Branagh wanted the most and tried the best – that is what I assume and what seems to be really the fact. So did he achieve the high standard he aimed at or did he fail on a high level? To come to the point, I put it that way: He made a great performance on a widened stage and filmed that. The advantage of doing so is that we have a play easily available for everyone. The disadvantage is that we have no Film[4]. But these statements have to be proved and made plausible. So I will come back to these points later.

To evaluate the result of Branagh´s efforts, we look at the film from two angles. On the one hand we have a film. While using that perspective, let us forget that it is based on a stageplay. On the other hand, we have the stageplay in a new version.

1.3.   Theatre vs. Film

What makes theatre differ from film? There are several aspects. At first you have a stage. It is defined by unchangable size during a play. Then you have persons on that stage. These persons act within a setting, whatever this may look like or be. The persons (actors or actresses) use gestures and other devices for their performance. And then there is the sound, you have voices, music, sound effects and so on.

Of course the screen the film is projected on is similar to a stage. But the view is not defined. It can be a small or wide excerpt of reality (in any form), the camera defines the scene: as wide as a stage, wider or smaller; anyway altering. A film consists of pictures which can be put together in a

very free way. It is possible to show a walk of twenty metres in three se-conds on screen while the person really needed ten seconds for that di-stance. In theatre, it had to be ten seconds, in film not necessarily. The chance to do that is the editing. The editing and the camera replace the audience´s looking.

In theatre, the viewer has to decide himself where to look, how to limit the range of view (what happens quite automatically by concentrating on one object). Furthermore, the time of experience and the time of reality can differ a lot. E.g. a soliloquy of thirty seconds is so emotional that the listener and viewer has the impression that it lasted for several minutes. On the contrary, two parallel scenes can take two minutes and it will ap-pear to be just one minute. In film, the camera replaces the eye of the viewer, it has to decide what the viewer would have concentrated on or what the viewer should see. The editing tries to emulate and support the experience time. By marvellous cutting (what means the same as editing) the experienced and real time have a clift, either in one direction or the other. So the soliloquy may really last some minutes. But parallel scenes can seldom be shown simultanously, they are mostly presented altering, what makes the scene much longer, but the audience does not notice it. We are used to the idea that altering scenes mean simultanity. Neverthe-less, real and experienced time differ from each other, there are several different devices in theatre and film to reach the best effect.

Theatre must try to fill the seconds a person needs to cross the stage. Film can cut unnecessary timespace out, and the audience will not miss one single thing. Generally speaking, the camera tries to offer the best (what ever that may be) view or look on the object and the editing tries to offer the best experience of the actions or happenings.

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[4] Film means here the same as Literature in contrast to literature, a film with the status of art, a piece of the film art.

But the most important factor of both media is the audience. Due to the fact that theatre and film try to give the audience something, they have to be aware and conscious of their possibilities of doing it. In theatre, a lot of things have to be established by words or by "overacted" gestures, to make sure that every one will get it. If a figure swears an oath with crossed fingers you have to show the crossed fingers in an unrealistic ("realistic" means close to everyday life) way or use words on that fact because a lot of people will not see the small detail of the crossed fingers on the huge stage. In film, you can just intercut a short image of the crossed fingers and every one gets the idea, no one missed it, because it was the only thing people could see this moment while in theatre, they had to decide where to look.

Film has the chance to stage (dead or silent) objects and to interpret words by combining them with contradicting images; often it gets a lot of its emotional power out of these devices. Explanations of these possibilities would easiliy fill several pages, here just that remark that may be helpful when watching the film again.

Maybe the principal difference is that on a stage you get a performance combined with words, setting and sound and have to decide on your own what to concentrate on while in film the director makes that decision for you.

2. Hamlet as a film

"Words become images – that is what makes movies great", a critic says[5]. And here we have the greatest problem of Hamlet. The play is a very long one, so the idea is realistic that some scenes were performed at the same

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[5] It was another film basing on a book (Starship Troopers, 1997) Uwe Raum-Deinzer (Moviestar 1/99) spoke about, but it is a good statement I think.

time on stage, concentration of the audience always altering[6] or that the play was shortened for staging (possibly depending on the reactions of the audience). But in film the scenes have to be shown one after the other (other ways are possible but seldom used) and so the movie gets longer and longer. By doing so, each word – even if not important – gets its own space to fill, each word gets its own importance, whether it is worth it or not. And all words (necessary for a theatre audience to get everything) were used in the film. E.g. the question "to be or not to be" could be replaced by a close up of Hamlet holding a gun towards his head and then letting sink it, we could read his thoughts in his face (that way of replacing the Shakespearean lines by these images would be possible although "blasphemic"; just for demonstration reasons). A lot of words could have easily been changed into images without losing anything, but Branagh kept all words in the film. The question is not whether the film could have been made a better way. The question is where are the weak points and why am I right in thinking that Branagh failed to make a <u>film</u> version of Hamlet.

There are lots of words and lots of images, but images do only underline words. They support the meaning of the text, but do not form a meaning for themselves (exceptions included). We have a lot of reported speech, accompanied by little flashback scenes. So the content is doubled: the word on the sound track and the images in the pictures. The only reports without flashback are in Act 2.1[7] when Ophelia tells her father Polonius about Hamlet´s strange behaviour and demonstrates it, and in 4.7 when Gertrude speaks about Ophelia´s death. Of all reported speeches so far, they are the very best, in the sense of having emotional and direct effect.

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[6] A play in Shakespearean time normally lasts about two hours. How else could the text – even if shortened – be presented?

[7] I will stick to the devision of "The Oxford Shakespeare" into Acts and Scenes of the play to make it easier finding the scene I mean. A scene of the play is always given as "Act X.Y".

You are informed about an action that happened and you see the reaction of the messenger and the persons informed at the same time.

In the flashback supported reports, we have the doubled content (eye and ear get principally the same information), what makes us feel as if we were unable to understand just the text or just the pictures. The sound track would have made a great radio play and the images (if some words for orientation were left in) a great illustration of Hamlet, but together they are too much – that was my experience while watching the film.

The point is furthermore that Branagh wants to be quite modern and uses fast cutting and other editing devices like fading. So we have the visual style of a modern music video and an accustic style (of words) of centuries ago. That does not fit[8], especially in the beginning – where are a lot of reported speeches or little remarks that cause a flashback – when the cutting changes quickly between close ups, totals and flashback images.

In contrast, there are several plane sequences, camera motion replaces the image changings of the editing. And while the fast cutting prefers extreme close ups and wide ranges or figures in motion the camera motion mostly offers halfsize frames. Like the view of the audience, the camera follows the figures from far away to very close and concentrates on them. The editing does the same, replacing the audience´s eyes: changing between overview and detail or between details (which are here mostly the heads of speakers or listeners, the later ones much shorter). But film has opportunities to present ideas without imitating the view of the audience.

There is one moment where the flashback adds some new information to the text we hear. In Act 1.3 Ophelia speaks with her father and we have five little scenes cut inbetween where she and Hamlet make love (↗Appendix, picture C). So is it the truth, as all the other flashbacks are, or is

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[8] There is a film where it fits: "William Shakespeares´s Romeo and Juliet" (Baz Luhrman, 1996). This film is consequent in transporting the old content into a new style, but back to Hamlet.

it just the imagination of Ophelia? I would say it is true, but I could not hinder anyone to believe it is imagination although we have no direct hint to that. Nevertheless, here we have the first impressions of Ophelias insanity because her thoughts (real or imagined) contradict her words. And here we have images that have a meaning for themselves for the very first time.

Except the editing, what else makes us speak about Hamlet as a film? It is shot on 70 mm film. That proves on one hand that Branagh wanted the best quality available for his film. On the other hand, it underlines Branagh´s wish of reproducing a stage play on film closer to reality than the normally used 35 mm material would have done. He invited a lot of stars for cameos (very small parts, names are seldom mentioned in the titles). By doing so he tried to motivate more people to watch the film; in a simple stage play, it would have been impossible to get all these stars together. But I will come to the cast later, here just that remark.

And of course, we have something a theatre is unable to provide: close ups and panorama shots. Branagh and his director of photography Alex Thomson find interesting and surprising perspectives the camera can watch from. The editing made the pictures fit together, but I will explain why I think that a good camera work is not enough for a good film later.

The point is: what makes film an independent art form? It expresses something in a way no other art can do. To give an impression, what that means I look at the famous match cut in "2001 – a space odyssey". The manape Moonwatcher throws a bone with which he has killed another manape into the air. Cut. Four million years later. A bone like looking starship is on her way through space around the earth while Strauss´ "The blue Danube" is heard. It is impossible to evoke all thoughts and impressions of that film moment in another art form. The uniqueness of an art form lies in such use of special devices, there are a lot of such which already have

no name. The use of such devices is the first step of a film to become a Film.

Simply speaking, the question whether it is a good film or not can be understood as: Does Branagh´s Hamlet have anything any other media like theatre, radio play, written play cannot deliever? And furthermore, do we have to know anything about Shakespeare´s Hamlet to evaluate and appreciate the film?

The first question can quickly be answered: The close ups of the actors and actresses (unique in film, photography) present the feelings of the characters, but these are quite extensive presented in words. So the additional emotions become just pseudo-additional, they do just support and underline the meaning of the spoken words, too.

2.1.   The formal side of the film

As mentioned, there are a lot of close ups, especially in the beginning of the film. In contrast to the static close up, there are a lot of moving shots, too. The rareness of moving on an ordinary stage (as mentioned, because the time of being in motion has to be filled somehow), Branagh avoids by having the figures moving a lot, what keeps the images changing and thereby interesting to watch (standing figures speaking are not very interesting to watch for long time on screen). So the beginning of the film is principally made of close ups and bits where the characters move, although often without a causable reason. So all the moving comes up to be just not theatre. It seems quite often unmotivated, only to be not standing.

The shots are cut together in quite a fast way. In contrast to that, we have in act 2.2 (what can be either seen as part of the exposition or of the rise of a drama, anyway close to the beginning) a very long camera

drive through the castle or palace of nearly four minutes (↗Appendix, picture A, where that long drive is presented in 14 screenshots)[9]. And there are two other quite long shots in that act. So the atmosphere of theatre is established by avoiding it. We see a long shot uninterrupted, no cuts guide the attention of the audience (for example from a total to a detail) we just follow the camera, which goes the way our eyes would have gone in theatre. Of course, we are guided by the frame the camera offers, but that way of presenting one scene in one single shot is closer to theatre than to film. Although the camera circles around and makes some complicated movements, the atmosphere of theatre is not destroyed. There are huge rooms with a lot of space like the big hall, but the uninterrupted shot demonstrates and establishes the limitations of the room, like the side walls of the theatre. The film consists – as already mentioned – principally of two ways of shooting: fast editing of close ups and panorama shots as well as camera movements. Furthermore, the close ups and panorama shots are more and more replaced by halfsize shots, so the extreme difference is lifted during the film.

That does not mean that the camera is not used in a good way in that film. It means that the way of the setting, the speech, the editing and the images do not fit together. The great "to be or not to be" soliloquy is done in one shot, shortly intercut by an image of Polonius and Claudius observing, (↗Appendix, picture B and D, left column). We can concentrate on the words we hear, but we are used to visual plays and so we wait for something to happen. The "boring" standing longshot is not established so far. There has always something been moving, and when nothing moves action is made through editing. So you are not prepared for just listening. You are prepared for fast changes in the picture which you miss

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[9] Already in Act 1.2 Hamlet´s soliloquy is done in one shot which lasts on when Horatio and the watchmen enter.

here. Thereby although greatly performed[10] that soliloquy is boring and we wait for something that will not come. Of course, in contrast to theatre, we can watch each fibre of Hamlet´s face while speaking, which is a thing that only film can do to that extent. But is the use of film devices enough to be a Film?[11]

The whole film tries to be moving, but mostly remains statal. In the play-in-the-play scene you can see quite well how the static atmosphere is tried to be moving (in both meanings) by editing. The only person really moving is Hamlet, but we can see all his running, jumping, not-sitting as visualisation of his mood. The inner life of Hamlet comes out and is performed, but that is not a film device it also works on theatre where it is necessary to translate the inner feelings into outer performances (in word or action). I will not continue to say about each scene why it is closer to theatre than to film (except that the look is guided by the camera frame), but we can constitute that Branagh´s efforts in expanding the visual values of the play in a way theatre can not do, because the space is limited (and which stage play has a budget of several million dollars?) but would be used if possible[12], are enormous. It is like the arrival of Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern to Hamlet, when they enter the "stage" on a train (↗Appendix, picture D). It has no meaning and does not offer any further thought to the play, it is just an image for itself.

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[10] That shall be the only commentary on acting, because I think there is no bad or good acting. Good acting just means in my point of view that the character is plausible in my way of seeing him/her, and here the connection to the often interpreted and staged text is in that way of seeing it too big. Let me state here that no actor did a bad work in my eyes.

[11] To find out whether a text is not only literature but Literature we look at the Canon. Film as an art form is quite young and so there is no Canon established as in Literature; there exist just a few films that are accepted as Film like "Citizen Kane", "2001 – a space odyssee" or "Psycho"; there are a lot of films that are estimated as "important", but only a few are really canonised. To see whether Branagh´s Hamlet is Film we still have to wait a while, because we know from Literature that it takes at least one generation (25 years) to establish an author or the work of an author. We can just try to find out whether Branagh´s Hamlet is a candidate for the Canon here.

[12] When you see an one-room-real-time-play on screen (which is theatre) and a look out of the window offers a great view over a city (visual value) that has no relation to the play, it does not come to you that it is no theatre, it is just a theatre play with a special image, a widened "stage" that has no relation to the play.

I do not want to continue to list any furthe runfilm qualities. I suppose I managed to present the general idea, that although on screen, we see only a stage or efforts in avoiding a stage and thereby establishing the idea of it.

2.2.   Theatre on screen? Or reality?

Siegfried Kracauer, a popular film theoretic, says that no theatre is allowed on screen. Film is in his and in a lot of other film theoretics´ opinion based on capturing the reality. Theatre can never be reality starting with the language used. Branagh makes no effort to adapt the play to our reality[13], he keeps every single word, which is a nice experiment but hinders the film in becoming an image of reality. Furthermore, the editing is mainly used to put the pieces of film together, not to produce additional meaning. Nothing gets clearer by the next piece of film sticked on. The only exception is that we know quite early that Hamlet and Ophelia have a relationship with a sexual attitude, may it be imagined by Ophelia or real.

Especially in dialogues or e.g. in the play-in-the-play scene there are a lot of images only to show the reactions of other (in that moment not acting, speaking) persons. That (selection of images) is just a film directors decision. In theatre, we would look at them to see their reaction ourselves, although not that often and of course not that detailed, because there is no close up possible in theatre and our concentration is mostly guided by words or gestures. One task of a film director is to present things to us in a way we would not be able to see them that way in this situation on our own.

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[13] As far as I know, there is a new film version in progress, if not already finished. It is a modernised (that means close to nowadays everyday life) American version starring Ethan Hawke as Hamlet.

But neither the look of a person in close up nor the constellation of the persons or a film piece followed by another (montage) tell us something that we would not know from the lines we hear. Film is not used with its own vocabulary as a "language", it is just a media to capture another media (theatre) while using the expanded possibilities. For example that not all scenes had to be shot continiously or that you can show the stage from different angles and use a stage that is wider than in a normal theatre and so on.

And another point is: a film uses bits of reality which are put together to convey us something. Theatre uses words combined with performance to tell us something. Of course the bits of reality have words too, but the film comes to life when the pieces are well-arranged. We see films more with the emotional and sensual eyes and film works on that level; theatre plays need some intellect to "retranslate" the words and "unreal" performances (they have to be clear not real) into the idea behind them and do seldom adress the emotional side directly[14].

In theatre, we see just a rebuilded reality, but it is never rebuilt completely, only some aspects of it, enough that we can recall it as bits of reality; but we can not see what is not on the stage. In film we see the reality, of course arranged too, but it has not the problem of translating so many things into words. The reality can be taken as it is.

I have the impression that there is no real concept behind the film except filming Hamlet in quite a good way. It was impossible to detect a visual style that runs through the whole film. The beginning is quickly cut and mostly consists of close ups and motion. Then there are several long shots (plane sequences) and then halfsize frames intercut by close ups and so on. I could not find out one visual device (film is here firstly a vi-

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[14] For example if a character doubts something we see it by an unobtrusively intercut image of the face, in theatre the character has to say that he/she doubts it, to make sure that the whole audience will get it.

sual media, because Branagh had no influence on the sound track – the words – from the moment on he decided to use the whole text) which had a meaning for its own because of it being used only in moments of the same nature. So the visual style of the film appears to be random, just to be the best for the shot, independently from the rest of the film. And any piece of art should have (or has) isotopy, some stylistic "red line".[15]

"Like the Morse alphabet is no independent language, but an encoded version of word-language, so a message fixed on celluloid with words or gestures is still word- or gesture- but no film-language." (Jan Marie Peters) To put it short: Branagh does not "translate" the words into film-language, he illustrates the words.

3. Hamlet as a Shakespeare play

Now that we have provisionally finished to look on Hamlet as a film, we come to Hamlet as a play. What makes us think it is a play? The complete text is used (what, however, in stage performances is seldom done). The question is whether it makes the play work better; as I tried to indicate, film has other oportunities to transport meaning, it does not necessarily depend on words (there are just about 40 minutes of speaking in the more than two hours long "Space Odyssey", but does it lack content?). Theatre also depends on the setting or its absence. Branagh used more than one million dollars only for the main setting, that means for a huge stage. Everything is artificial, even the snow in the Fortinbras-Soliloquy (↗Appendix, picture B, right column), as normally in theatre. Furthermore, most principal characters are performed by respected theatre actors and actresses who are mostly unknown to the broad (cinema) audience, what

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[15] One may see the straight camera drive towards a face or straight away from a face or action as "visual red line", but they are used randomly and not depending on special content or motifs, they

is usual in theatre (that a cinema[16] audience does not know most theatre players). And – last but not least – after the first act the scenery/setting and the characters are very often shown in a halfsize frame (you see head and body but mostly no feet; the figure fills nearly the complete height of the frame), what is equivalent to the view the audience of a theatre play has[17]. And at last the whole film is accompanied by just a small amount of music, which is quite normal in theatre plays.

There were a lot of ways staging Hamlet: "classic", "modern" or anything. Branagh decided to use the scenery of the 19th century for his version to shorten the distance to the original time of the play and to keep a distance; the old fashioned text style would not have fitted into a completely modern style in his opinion. So he walked on the thin line between classic and modern interpretation. The 19th century setting offering more luxury and giving chances to have a lot of visual power is another important reason.

3.1.   Value System and images

How close did Branagh stay to life (with all its values, ideals, etc.) presented in the play? Just as close as the text defines it clearly. The first time Hamlet speaks with Getrude and Claudius they kneel in front of him. The Queen and the King kneel in front of the Prince during a state occasion! (↗Appendix, picture D) For all I know it is impossible in these times, also if it is meant symbolically. And the same prince has the behaviour of an ordinary man, so it is quite questionable that he is treated with respect by

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do not represent an idea by themselves, just present different actions in a similar way.

[16] Cinema is the place of being entertained by films, theatre is the place of being entertained by plays. That does not mean, that neither in cinema nor in theatre is space for art. No doubt, most people would agree that generally theatre has more art-value than cinema. Cinema is a mass media, theatre is (because of the ticket prices, too) a media for the educated and intellectuals, generally seen.

everybody all the time, no one even questions his authority, although he often makes a fool of himself.

In Act 1.3, as we learn from short intercuts, a sexual relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is established. On the one hand it contradicts the virtue of virginity, which was an important value in original Hamlet days. On the other hand, it supports the fact, that men of power, and Hamlet is one of them as the Prince of Denmark, can do anything they want. But that brings us to another problem: Hamlet himself has disregarded the value system (if we take these intercuts not as Ophelias imagination). So has he the "breaker of the law" the right to fight for revenge? But Hamlet as a man of power has the chance to live his own value system. So we not only get a hint at Ophelia´s insanity (if these sexual scenes are imagined), but at Hamlet´s conflicting personality (if these scenes are true).

A further question is why Polonius asks Claudius in Act 3.1 not to send Hamlet to England before Hamlet had a conversation with his mother, which Polonius would spy. What motivates Polonius to side with Hamlet? Polonius was so far presented only as a man who has in no way a positive relationship to Hamlet.

I do not mean that these and other things are not given in the text, but Branagh brings out all the slight indifferences of the text and so they are not covered but made clear. On the other hand, he did a lot of "good interpretation", but to list that would bring us too far and my intention is to show why he failed.

3.2.   Text-treatment and -problems

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[17] A self conscious look on yourself watching a stage performance will show that you limit the frame by yourself automatically. And that is what a film does. And that is what this film does to a great extent: to emulate the view of the audience.

Although adapted for screen several times[18], Branagh´s version is the first film-Hamlet with full length text. But that does not mean that he leaves it unchanged.

A short list of some changes: Hamlet´s speech in Act 1.4 lines 20-38 is transeferred to the beginning of Act 1.5. In act 4.5 dialogue parts of Hamlet and Claudius are pulled out as voice over to introduce a scene. They are a kind of conclusion and represent the action so far. In Act 2.2 line 110 Ophelia – and not Polonius – read the letter, then Hamlet reads it in a flashback scene. There are changes in Acts 3.4 and 4.1. In Act 4.2 Ophelia calls for Hamlet and he rushes out. In 4.5 Horatio´s short speech is partly given by a maidservant.

So the attitude of Branagh consequently sticking to Shakespeare´s text is disproved. This can be interpreted either as Branagh´s inability of thinking of a better way to keep the lines in the film without boring the people or as his will to be a good story teller. May it as it be, the text was changed, that is a fact.

In his previous Shakespeare adaptations ("Henry V" and "Much ado about nothing"), he proved to be a man who can handle the text and shorten it the right scale to the well-being of these films. But when he sticks to the complete text, he has to be aware that it has been written for theatre performances not for film. So he has no other chance than to make theatre on screen, although this media has restrictions in presenting, for example, parallel actions, as mentioned before.

The problems of the text (like Polonius' conversation with Reynaldo) remain unsolved. Branagh tried to make the best out of it, but he was not able to demonstrate the necessarity of such scenes. Especially the talk of

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[18] The "Chronik des Films" names four films (selection following the importance for film history): 1920 (Deutsches Reich, Sven Gade), 1948 (GB, Laurence Olivier), 1964 (Soviet union, Grigorij Kosinzew), 1990 (USA, Franco Zefirelli). You can also count in 1992 "Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are dead" (GB, Tom Stoppard) inspired by Hamlet.

Polonius with Reynaldo does not make the character of Polonius clearer, so it just slows the film/play. Instead of cancelling scenes "no one really needs" Branagh added further scenes which are given as additional passages in "The Oxford Shakespeare". A less strict handling of the text would have worked out well, in my opinion.

Furthermore, sentences like "O, I am slain" (Act 3.4 line 24) or "…I am poisoned" (Act 5.2 line 263) which in theatre should make clear that the figure is dead are not necessary in films, where you see quite clear that a person is dead, are quite ridiculus, because the content is again doubled in a very unrealistic way (Who says "I am slain" when all people around him/her see he/she has been slain?). My conviction is that these lines in the play are just for the reader or to be used if in a performance the audience did not get the death. Nevertheless, such lines could have be easily deleted in the film without hardly anyone realising it.

4. Hamlet as a populistic piece

Making everyone happy is Branagh´s main interest. He is a populist, as Russell Jackson[19] puts it. He wants to satisfy the intellectual and the entertainment searching audience. This attempt is noticable in all his films. But here – as already in "Frankenstein" – he failed in trying to attract a "stuff of the intellectuals" to a broad audience. But how?

Simply speaking, Branagh made a lot of concessions to satisfy the broad audience. He is not consequent in realising his very own version where everything would be just to serve the story in any way. It is a question of heart, either you do something because of your inner life (heart) or because of exterior things (to be loved by other people, to prove something etc.) That is the principal difference between art and commerce, in a ro-

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[19] Russell Jackson is the Text consultant for Hamlet and "Henry V", who gave a special lecture on June 21st 2000 at Humboldt University in Berlin.

mantic view. In the beginning of his career (as we learn from his early films), Branagh made films because of <u>his heart</u>. And now he wants to <u>show us</u> a good film. Both approaches can bring out great films, but the first type ("made of heart blood" as I call it) hits us deeper; no one has found out how we divide one from the other, but we do, unconsciously.

And with Hamlet, I have the impression that he wants to prove that he is a good actor and director, I can nearly feel the pressure he suffered from. The film is not light and easy like his "Much ado about nothing" and has not the gravity and seriousness of "Henry V". It is somewhere inbetween being neither light when Hamlet jokes nor heavy when he is serious. So it just bores with its importance.

Of course there are some scenes to attract the broad audience, like the great fencing duel[20] between Hamlet and Laertes or the death of Claudius who is not simply killed by Hamlet who only hurts (Act 5.2 line 274) him, but by the sword Hamlet throws at him, that spears him and afterwards by the cut off chandelier that smashes him. But these "action scenes" can not compensate for nearly four hours of old-style talk.

If you know how great the play is, you can enjoy the film, because you will get the whole text you appreciate accompanied with great pictures. Some interesting ideas were presented: that Hamlet is aware that Claudius and Polonius are spying his talk with Ophelia (Act 3.1, ↗Appendix, picture D) or that Polonius himself is a "friend of life" (Act 2.1 beginning, when a prostitute comes in) etc. But if you just know "there is a famous thing called Hamlet" you will certainly get bored by the film, which does not mean that other Hamlet films were better or that this one is a bad one.

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[20] There are already several fencing scenes in the background in Act 2.1 and 2.2 for example. The presence of swords is established quite early, no one will question the idea of Hamlet and Laertes fighting at the end, violence and thereby the violent end is elegantly presented as sport quite early, although just in the background and unreflected by the "main performances".

Nevertheless, you have to be aware of the approach Branagh chose: to make a version of the full text without denying its origins at theatre.

4.1.   Setting

The pictures are full of pomp and luxury. But pomp and luxury have no meaning, they add no idea to the story, they only exist for themselves or the image of themselves with no reflection in the content. So, the visual background is another concession to the broad audience who wants to see great images, it is just for visual power. The interiors are richly decorated and pompously designed, in every frame, you get the idea of richness, not of style or it is so stylish that it appears to be just pompous. As splendid a big room with mirrors might look it does not give the film anything it would need.[21]

As in "Twelfth Night" which Branagh directed in the mid 1980ies, the play is situated in winter. Wide white landscapes have somewhat of an elegant atmosphere and underline the efforts of the production designer Tim Harvey in creating a rich but stylish setting. Still, it is very unusual to rest in the quite cold snow covered garden. Hamlet´s father does so when he gets murdered by his brother. Probably that flashback scene was not imagined although it just represents the memory of the ghost. I could not think of a solution of that contradiction of "sleeping in mine orchard" (Act 1.5, line 35) in a wintry garden without winter clothing.

4.2.   Cast

Except himself as Hamlet (what has sometimes been interpreted as arrogance, but I will not comment it), Branagh casted actors and actresses

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[21] The spying Claudius and Polonius (Act 3.1) can be easily involved by using the mirror cabinet, but a single mirror or other settings could have done the same job.

for the principal roles who are quite unknown to a broad audience. Only the supporting roles are acted by well known "stars". A special gag is the watchman who is relieved in the beginning and a black actor. In "Much ado about nothing" he did the same and Denzel Washington got an important role. But the black watchman is not the only coloured man. Valtemand and Fortinbras´ general are coloured actors, too. Branagh is famous for his extraordinary casting; "sometimes it works, sometimes it does not" (R. Jackson), what can be either be seen as fun of risk or his arrogance of a marvellous artist to succeed in doing something no one else would have done[22]. The old Jack Lemmon, another watchman, surprises the audience as well as Gerard Depardieu as Reynaldo. Here is an interesting idea presented by a prostitute[23] coming in while Reynaldo has the talk with Polonius. The question why this scene is in the play and what it means is still discussed by Shakespeareans all over the world – with no final result.

Billy Crystal and Robin Williams as gravedigger and Osric are further examples for well-known stars in small parts. But these castings do nothing else than to make the film attractive for more people. They do not give the figures any more suggestiveness than any other actor/actress would have done. But they give us – as the audience – the chance to see well-known faces in extraordinary roles, and the actors/actresses the chance to present their will or ability of doing some art, namely Shakespeare. This thought makes me think of a previous remark about doing something for yourself or others (the difference between art and commerce).

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[22] With this remark (and some before) I hope I could establish the ambiguity of seeing the film and his maker what states him quite close to Hamlet and helps to understand why he felt that he had to make this film as he said.
[23] That idea came to Branagh when he was not sure what to do with the scene (having no direct or recognisable relation to the rest of the text), as he told in an interview. But it could be presented on a stage, too. So it is not the idea of the film maker Branagh but of the director Branagh.

<u>5. Conclusion</u>

"When people really want to watch a stage play they go to the theatre, not to the cinema. What do they do then in the cinema?" (Kurt Pinthus) That is the question I ask, too. The advantage of cinema is the higher budget and other possibilities that give the "ordinary" stage play more "power". And that is what Branagh did with Hamlet. I think it is no exaggeration to say that he did not make a Film but a great stage play using some possibilities of film. So it is just a stage play with a widened stage. No question, it is an attractive version, very useful if you do not want to read the text. So many scholars will thank Branagh for freeing them from the imprisonment in letters. But film classes will not have to take notion of that film, because it has nothing that could make it a Film.

Or to put it that way: It is a very comfortable and well executed chance to see the most famous play in a good (stage) version whenever you want or need.

And to leave a good impression of the film: "The principal concern of art is *to be* aesthetic." (Kristin Thompson) And you can say whatever you want, but it is an aesthetic experience.

Maybe being aesthetic is enough to have the chance of becoming noticed as art, although I do not think so. But if, I have wasted a lot of time and energy. Maybe Branagh´s version will be canonised one day as the greatest Hamlet adaptation ever. Maybe one day they stop defining film so narrow and e.g. "Independence Day" (Roland Emmerich 1996) is noticed as art (most commercial piece of the last years I know). Maybe…

May it be as it will be. I do not think that Hamlet is a good film but a very good version of Hamlet if you think in scales of the stage.

The rest ist silence.

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