

Hamlet

US, 2000 – 111 mins

Michael Almereyda

After *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) established a precedent for original-text Shakespeare in contemporary America, Michael Almereyda moved *Hamlet* to present-day Manhattan, the setting for his low-budget features *Another Girl*, *Another Planet* (1992) and *Nadja* (1994).

Denmark becomes the Denmark Corporation, a vaguely defined multinational, headquartered in the high-rise Elsinore Hotel, Times Square, and as Kyle MacLachlan's power-suited Claudius succeeds his



'To be, or not to be . . .' – Ethan Hawke's Blockbuster Video soliloquy in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*

murdered older brother as CEO and uses public relations to conceal corruption, ruthless commercial values sustain Almercyda's United States of Denmark. 'Global corporate power,' wrote Almercyda in his Preface to the published screenplay, 'is as smoothly treacherous and absolute as anything going on in a well-oiled feudal kingdom.'

His setting was inspired by *The Bad Sleep Well* (p. 27) and *Hamlet Goes Business* (p. 38) and Hamlet's meeting in a bar with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the shooting of Polonius are closely modelled on the equivalent scenes in the latter. Where Aki Kaurismäki mocked the play with banal dialogue and drab *mise en scène*, Almercyda retains Shakespeare's verse (heavily and skilfully edited), and finds visual poetry in chrome and glass skyscrapers, or the sleek interiors of Gideon Ponte's production design, dominated by shades of blue, red and green.

With Carter Burwell supplying moody electronic and orchestral themes, Almercyda roams effectively around the city, using a supermarket, a laundromat, JFK Airport and the coiled walkways of the Guggenheim Museum. He sacrifices the sense of imprisonment created in other screen *Hamlets* (notably Olivier's and Kozintsev's), demonstrating instead how an individual, regardless of class and wealth, might feel as trapped by a metropolis as by castle walls. Such loneliness and alienation were stock-in-trade qualities for Ethan Hawke, whose self-pitying 'slacker' in *Reality Bites* (1994) and introspective student in *Before Sunrise* (1995) both share some of Hamlet's traits.

Aged twenty-nine, and convinced, he wrote, that 'Hamlet was always much more Kurt Cobain than Sir Laurence Olivier', Hawke is the 'grunge' prince: a poor little rich kid wearing a goatee and a wool hat, using his trust fund to make experimental digital films (including the 'Mousetrap' as a hilarious short privately screened for Claudius and Gertrude). He is slightly obnoxious, fatally missing the character's great wit and mumbling infuriatingly, even during 'To be, or not to be', ironically delivered in the 'Action' aisle of a Blockbuster Video store.

As well as introducing so many film-making references that some academics have interpreted this adaptation in part as autobiographical metaphor (Hamlet/Almercyda the indie film-maker bravely takes on the all-powerful Denmark/Hollywood system), Almercyda uses *Hamlet's* eavesdropping and covert missives to comment on twenty-first-century media saturation, placing gadgetry in virtually every scene: fax machines, phones, answerphones, TV screens. Hamlet delivers one speech via his laptop; CCTV provides our first glimpse of the Ghost (a stern Sam Shepard as a tactile spirit in the mould of 1990's *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1990) mould); Ophelia wears a wire-tap for the 'Get thee to a nunnery' scene and the film ends, like *Romeo + Juliet*, on a TV newscaster, who introduces Fortinbras as Denmark Corp.'s new boss.

All these transpositions are effective, and around Hawke's dull centre revolve strong performances from Diane Venora, evoking her Lady Capulet in *Romeo + Juliet* as a sensual, disarmingly contented Gertrude (as in Olivier, she knowingly drinks the poison), Liev Schreiber, a commanding Laertes, and Bill Murray, whose middle-aged Polonius is part buffoon, part concerned father. Completing her Shakespearean hat-trick, as Ophelia Julia Stiles is more mannered than in *10 Things I Hate about You* (p. 241) or *O* (p. 180).

Yet all too often one is distracted by glaring incongruity in the language or action. 'Watching the movie requires a certain suspension of disbelief,' the director acknowledged, hoping we would 'forgive words that don't seem right', yet that is impossible when, for example, Hamlet's pals Marcella and Bernardo address him as 'My Lord', not in ironic frat-boy endearment, but in earnest. When we are asked to accept that Hamlet and Laertes are both accomplished fencers for the climactic rooftop confrontation, much of the story's hard-won credibility evaporates.

Almercyda recalled how language problems contributed to his film earning the second-worst test preview scores in Miramax history (it eventually limped to a US gross of \$1.5m, and took \$130,000 in Britain) and concludes his Preface by calling this 'a collage, a patchwork of intuitions, images and ideas'. Judged against his own metaphor, some

components blend to give the impression of a coherent whole, others come disastrously unstuck.

Dir/Scr: Michael Almereyda; **Prods:** Andrew Fierberg, Amy Hobby; **DOP:** John De Borman; **Editor:** Kristina Boden; **Score:** Carter Burwell; **Main Cast:** Ethan Hawke (Hamlet), Diane Venora (Gertrude), Kyle MacLachlan (Claudius), Julia Stiles (Ophelia), Bill Murray (Polonius), Liev Schreiber (Laertes), Karl Geary (Horatio).