
The films get better as they go along: *The Shrew* is a disgrace; *Romeo* is a curate’s egg, good in parts; and *Hamlet* is the best film of the play that there is.

*The Taming of the Shrew*

To understand what Kate’s problem is, you have to get Bianca right: Bianca is a spoiled daddy’s girl, whose two-faced, manipulative way with her father makes Kate sick, and forces her to the opposite extreme. For Kate, watching Bianca, all good manners are hypocrisy, so she does nothing but talk plain, and offends everybody. She’s desperate for a man, but alienates all potential men by her refusal to play society’s game. The men on offer are boring anyway, so when Petruchio comes along, who’s as big a foe of hypocrisy as she is, and kind of crazy to boot, she’s intrigued, and fancies him at sight, but is now stuck in the rut she’s created for herself. His job, which he carries out with ingenuity, is to reconstruct her attitude to play-acting (that is, to “good manners”), and teach her that it can be enjoyable as well as degrading. He succeeds (the scene where he insists that the sun is the moon proves that she’s got the point); she loves him, and her famous last speech, seemingly male chauvinist, is in reality an act which she puts on to please him, and to show the other women present what a wonderful husband she’s got, in contrast to theirs.

Neither Zeffirelli nor Taylor nor Burton appear to understand any of this, and Bianca is played as a straight ingenue, with the result that Taylor’s Kate is an unmotivated variant on the Shrew of cliché, little better than the face-pulling Mary Pickford in the old and execrable Douglas Fairbanks version.

But that’s not all: seeming afraid of all those weird, boring old words Shakespeare uses, they cut seventy-five percent of the script, and substitute witless knockabout, so that most of the character-comedy in the original isn’t there at all. Acting is in broad strokes.

The aim is to reassure the audience that their heads won’t be hurt. In case you tax their brains verbally, you distract them visually. Thus as Lucentio and Tranio (Michael York and Alfred Lynch) ride into Padua in the opening sequence, the very small amount of expository text left to them is offset by shots of a drunkard dangling in a gibbet, and of a big-busted prostitute displaying herself at an upstairs window. Thus a solemn piece of church music is interrupted by a cannon-shot, and the service erupts into mask and riot just when we thought it was getting dull, with a kind of Carnival Fool being carried around the street in a nightgown, and tossed up and down on his stretcher. None of this relates to the plot, but is there to get us jolly in a way that they calculate fuddy-duddy old Shakespeare won’t.

The scene in which Kate ties up Bianca and torments her, is reduced to a shadow of itself, a beating-up from which all we can derive is that Kate is a destructive bitch who enjoys wrecking rooms. Indeed, Bianca (Natasha Pyne) has most of her lines cut, and expresses herself largely in giggles (see below, *Romeo* section: when in doubt about his actresses, it looks as if Zeffirelli thought that giggling would redeem them).

Richard Burton’s Petruchio seems from his first entrance to be a charmless, drunken boor. His relationship with Grumio (Cyril Cusack) appears not to be one between mutually-supporting comedians as the text suggests, but between the bully and the bullied. We can’t see why Grumio enjoys his company so much. Grumio and Hortensio (Victor Spinetti) put him to bed to *When that I was a little tiny boy*, from *Twelfth Night*. When he wakes up, we witness another way the film has of reassuring its audience – have the characters laugh a lot. Burton wakes up – a minute or so is wasted by a pair of comic servants pouring his morning washbowl – then Hortensio and Grumio enter, disguised as musicians. They reveal themselves (all this without dialogue), everyone laughs – Burton disagreeably – and Hortensio outlines as briefly as possible his plan to woo Bianca as music-teacher. Burton puts a pair of idiot specs on Grumio, and all three chums laugh. Fade.
Now for a comedian to show that he finds his own gags amusing is both unprofessional and unfunny. Comedy lies in ridiculous people taking themselves seriously, not in ridiculous people finding themselves ridiculous. The misapprehension is to be seen at work throughout the low comedy scenes in that abomination, the Max Reinhardt Midsummer Night’s Dream, with Mickey Rooney as Puck. It fails there, and it fails here as well.

The big wooing scene is vital, for it shows Kate and Petruchio alone for about ten minutes, testing one another out. The film has faith neither in it nor in us, for it cuts it into six or so bits, adding snatches from the wooing of Bianca by Lucentio and Hortensio, and the bargaining before Baptista between Tranio and Gremio (Alan Webb). Both of these scenes are shredded. In the meantime Burton chases Taylor through a barn, across a rooftop, and down through a ceiling. All the time she’s running from him; the only impact he’s making on her is negative. When did you study all this goodly speech? is snarled up at him as he pins her down on a heap of wool. Neither they nor we can see what’s going on in the text, which is that, whatever happens, each character from now on knows that they have to marry the other.

The film’s real problem also becomes clear here: we don’t like the two leading actors. Burton is as horrible as he appeared at first. He sports a good beard; but has a nasal and disagreeable baritone voice without power to charm. He’s Coriolanus, landed in the wrong play. His laughter is evil. Taylor wears lots of eye-shadow and blusher, and has only one tone of voice – shrill.

Baptista is Michael Hordern, doing one of his “I’m not coping and can’t quite remember what’s going on anyway” turns. After Burton’s marched out, and assured him that all will be well, Taylor has a few moments alone, where she appears to melt, and look forward to whatever’s coming. But the moment’s prepared for by nothing that we’ve seen.

Shakespeare has the wedding reported: you can’t have a wedding in the middle of a comedy, and how, in any case, could they get Kate to say “I will”? Zeffirelli feels this is a cop-out, and so Taylor is about to say “I will NOT!” when Burton (who seems drunk again) grabs her and kisses her before she can say the last word. When, after Petruchio has abducted her from her own wedding feast, he wanders off with Grumio and leaves her alone at the city boundary, she makes up her mind to follow him: but we can’t see why. She’s shown no interest in him of any kind.

(This still is the wrong way round).
Still less interest does she show in him on the bridal night (another event which can’t occur properly in the middle of a Shakespearean comedy). She arrives in the pouring rain with eye-shadow and mascara only slightly runny, they fail to eat dinner, and in the bedroom she crowns him with the warming pan as he’s about to make a lecherous advance. The script says he makes a sermon of continency to her, as part of his taming programme; but they couldn’t face that, so Burton, perhaps concussed by the blow, leaves the bedroom, says to the servants the inauthentic line “I spit on you that you should treat her thus” – and does so.

The humanity and wit in Shakespeare’s play has been ignored. Much coarseness has been substituted, and the whole thing’s been rewritten as a contest of wills between two disagreeable people. It’s not funny because we don’t care what happens.

Petruchio wakes to find his bride has charmed the servants, and is cleaning and redecorating the house – the reverse of what she used to do at her father’s. An accommodation of some kind is reached before they set out for Padua again; but not such a solid one as will enable this Petruchio to enter into the final wager about wifely obedience without a bit of a qualm – a qualm which we can see is shared by Grumio. When Taylor drags Bianca and the Widow into the room, Burton looks mightily relieved, and stares at her as she gives her long speech with increasing amazement. It’s an amazement which we share – for we don’t know why she’s suddenly being so compliant.

Shakespeare gives the long speech a detailed build-up and a massive inner logic. For Burton, Taylor and Zeffirelli, there’s no logic, so much of the play has been cut, and so much of what’s left has been ruined.

**Romeo and Juliet**

This is an exciting film. The costumes are gorgeous, the locations are used with skill, William Hobbs’s fights are some of the most dramatic and well-imaged in movies, and there are no unpleasant stars on ego-trips present to spoil it all. Leonard Whiting as Romeo will do more than adequately until Leonardo di Caprio comes along; and John McEnery and Michael York excel as Mercutio and Tybalt.

The dust is the principal memory you have of Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The heat, and the dust which is kicked up as its consequence. No-one can move without raising a cloud of it. Verona is as a result ten times more convincing than smug Padua is in *The Shrew*. You believe in the dusty market-place, in the blood flowing from people’s heads in the opening brawl, and the dust raised by the hooves of the Prince’s horses as they gallop into the square to separate the Montagues from the Capulets. Already you forget your annoyance at Olivier not voicing-over the last six lines of the prologue, and the compromise whereby Sampson has to spit at Abraham’s feet as well as bite his thumb at him, lest the audience aren’t able to read thumb-biting as an insult. Sometimes there’s a zip-pan, as if the cameraman only caught a piece of action by chance. It all assists in making us believe, and takes our minds off the fact that the post-synching doesn’t always match the visual perspectives. They have a lot of lines, too – gone is the fear that Shakespeare’s language is incomprehensible. The Nurse (Pat
Heywood – too many teeth) has most of her long, total-recall speech about Juliet falling over; and John McEnery has the Queen Mab speech entire.

In aftertimes, I think, Baz Luhrmann watched this Mercutio. His drag-queen version of the character is implicit here. After having been entertained by Queen Mab at first, the Montagues go quiet, as it becomes clear that Mercutio has Something Wrong With Him. He rushes ahead into a deserted square and shouts the last third of the speech to no-one, until Romeo approaches with concern and tells him, twice, “Thou talk’st of nothing”. They then press foreheads together. Now, as any fan of Withnail and I will tell you, the problem of a gay man in love with a hetero was something Zeffirelli knew all about; and Mercutio’s passion for Romeo – explicit in the Luhrmann version – is not far beneath the surface here. What Luhrmann is able to exploit, which Zeffirelli isn’t, is the consequent guilt Romeo feels when Mercutio dies as a result of his misplaced action.

Rosaline seems to have been a victim of the cutting room. No reference is left to her in the early scenes, and although a blonde girl flits in and out of shot at the ball, we aren’t certain what Romeo feels about her; and when Friar Laurence mentions her in his first scene, we aren’t clear who he’s talking about. All the male leads are beautiful. Bruce (Withnail) Robinson is especially soulful; so is Paris; and the person singing the song as Romeo and Juliet first kiss is, as they say, camp as a row of tents. Bisexuality is palpable in the casting, if not in the interpretation.

If I profane … is very well directed and acted. The angle and the lighting for the shot in which She Sees His Face For The First Time is perfect. Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer were never as convincing.

Mercutio doesn’t get to say his poperin-pear line, and so part of his motivation – jealousy at Romeo’s having run off – is lost. Later, however, he gooses Benvolio on the line I was come to the whole depth of my tale, so, if we’re attending, we get the point.

A big problem is that Olivia Hussey, the Juliet, though beautiful, has a limited emotional range: a problem which Zeffirelli solves by cutting all her really hard speeches, like Gallop apace, and the Potion speech, and, whenever she needs to act sexual desire, having her giggle instead. She giggles every time she and Romeo kiss during the Balcony Scene. Many a time have I shown the film to classes of adolescent girls – who expect, during the Balcony Scene, to be empathising with her – but instead they find her annoying. If you’re thirteen and female, love is no giggling matter.

Partly because of her callowness, the suspicion you feel when watching Claire Danes and di Caprio – that Romeo and Juliet are two beautiful, over-sexed, death-fixated adrenalin junkies – is also missing. When Danes says … Nor any other part belonging to a man, her grin shows you that she knows what part the line refers to. Hussey says the line in medium shot, and it goes for nothing.

The centrepiece of the movie is its fight scene, in which Tybalt first kills Mercutio and then is killed by Romeo. William Hobbs is also responsible for the fights in Ridley Scott’s The Duellists, and the nasty ones at the end of the Polanski Macbeth (as well as Zeffirelli’s Hamlet). He tackles the two seemingly impossible fights in the Gerard Depardieu Cyrano de
Bergerac. In *Romeo*, his art is shown at its finest. The two duels are excellent not just as displays of swordsmanship, but of character development and drama via action. Whether by accident or not, they also exploit the ubiquitous imagery of dust to which I referred at first.

Mercutio’s fight with Tybalt is a game. Neither man means it seriously. At one point they joins forces to shoo away Romeo – who can’t see that it’s a joke – shake hands – and continue. Mercutio begins the fight sitting up to his neck in a water-trough, to escape the heat and dust. Tybalt appears to win – we have a shot right down his sword, to Mercutio’s throat. But Mercutio, after some nervousness, decides it’s still a game, and, with the sword still at his Adam’s apple, crosses his legs and whistles without concern. Everybody, including Tybalt, laugh. Romeo’s intercession, which leads to the fatal stab, is hardly noticeable. We don’t realise what’s happened until a close-up of Michael York shows that the game has gone terribly wrong, and a pan to the tip of his sword shows blood on it. Not for some minutes – not until he’d dead, in fact – do Mercutio’s friends realise that he hasn’t been joking, and that there’s a hole in his chest which has bled internally. Before that, on the line *I thought all for the best*, he and Romeo press foreheads together, in an echo of their earlier gesture.

Romeo’s fight with Tybalt stirs up much more dust. He first daubs Tybalt’s face with the handkerchief stained with what little blood Mercutio has shed. This preliminary action takes place in a narrow, sloping side-street, down which he falls, chased by Tybalt – for in his fury he’s forgotten to carry weapons, and his friends have to lend him theirs. The fight is long, and by the end both men have ripped shirts, blood on them, and are covered in dust. They punch one another on the neck and in the stomach. The gentlemanly manners which characterised the first fight are gone. No holds are barred.

The end is perhaps a cliché – or has it become one since? You think Tybalt’s won – he chases Romeo, who lies on the ground crawling towards his lost sword – Tybalt raises his weapons to strike – and Romeo with lightning speed gets hold of his sword, turns over, and Tybalt’s momentum carries him on to its tip, which penetrates right to his heart. The lifeless stare in Michael York’s eyes as, only seconds later, he crashes down on top of Leonard Whiting and falls sideways, is horrible.

There’s much more passion in the way the film depicts these destructive, homosocial confrontations than there is in the scenes between the lovers. In case we’re in any doubt, the farewell scene – the reverse Balcony scene – played largely naked by the newly-married couple – features four times as many shots of Romeo’s buttocks as it does of Juliet’s bosoms.

As Juliet becomes more isolated, Olivia Hussey gets less and less convincing; she is so bad at crying that we’re not able to distinguish her real tears for Romeo from her fake tears for Tybalt. However, Leonard Whiting’s tears at her tomb are no more convincing. There is no Apothecary; Paris doesn’t turn up at the tomb to be killed; and, instead of the pestilence and quarantine delaying Friar Laurence’s right message, Friar John takes it by mule while Balthasar takes the wrong message by horse.
Zeffirelli, unlike Luhrmann, has his Friar Laurence well in focus. There’s no doubt here that the reason Juliet kills herself is because the Friar’s deserted her just when she needs him most – Luhrmann won’t have that, and leaves the Friar out of the scene altogether. Zeffirelli takes his line “I can no longer stay!” and has his Friar (Milo O’Shea) back in a panic out of the tomb, and say it four times, with increasing desperation. It’s much more dramatic and complex, as well as more anti-clerical, and gives Juliet the best reason for taking The First Adult Decision Of Her Life.

The final scene is played in the cold, with everyone muffled up. The winds howl softly, ruffling the veils of the mourning women and the shrouds on the dead bodies. The heat, dust and blood are memories.

**Hamlet**

Not many people understand Hamlet, preferring an innocent, romantic version. Hamlet is a charismatic serial-killer, who camouflages his rampage by always killing people indirectly, through the post (as with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) or through the curtain (as with Polonius). His uncle the King is Mr Normal. He’s only killed one person, his brother, and there’s a respectable Biblical precedent for that. In any case, his brother, Hamlet’s dad, was a poor king, always going to war, and the King’s motive was the reciprocated love he felt for his brother’s wife. Hamlet is as incapable of love as he is of direct murder. He can neither fuck people nor kill them to their faces, but verbalises at them and at us, going round and round the issue in fascinating ways, which, he feels, absolve him from the responsibility of doing anything. Not only is he “more an instrument than an agent”, as Dr Johnson said, but he’s more of an actor than a real person. He’d be happiest as Artistic Director of the Danish National Theatre. He’s certainly happier dying than he is living – and it’s only when he’s dying himself that he can kill a person in a straightforward way.

I don’t know whether Zeffirelli shares this interpretation, or whether, if he does, he made any of it clear to Mel Gibson in the rehearsals for the movie; but Gibson (fresh from *Lethal Weapon*) was ready for the task. He’s charismatic, as we all know, a bit of a buffoon in some ways, and finds gloom and hysteria easy to play. He also finds Shakespeare easy to speak, as do the rest of the cast, and so we don’t have the insulting implication, as in *The Shrew*, that we need distracting via the visuals or we’ll lose interest.

Unlike Olivier, who surrounds himself with indifferent artists the better to show off his own talent, Zeffirelli casts all the lead parts from the top drawer. Alan Bates is the King, Glenn Close is Gertrude, Helena Bonham Carter is Ophelia, Nathaniel Parker is Laertes – plus you have Paul Scofield (no mean Hamlet himself in ancient times) as the Ghost, and Ian
Holm as Polonius! The Horatio, Stephen Dillane, is superb, and went on to play Hamlet for Peter Hall (not very well, but at least he played the role). This strength enables us to see another aspect of the tragedy: that by the end, an interesting and potentially admirable bunch of people are all dead. Few versions, either on stage or screen, ever give you that feeling.

We see Hamlet, in the opening scene, as a fist; not about to clunk someone, but poised over his father’s coffin to scatter earth over the body (Scofield plays dead as to the manner born). As he does so, the King tells him to think of him as of a father. Zeffirelli, in other words, has cut the first scene on the battlements and plunged us straight into a version of the second scene in the court. This he proceeds to cut into pieces again, giving us the Wedding in one location, the King and Gertrude trying to argue Hamlet out of his unmanly grief in another location, Laertes getting permission to go to Paris in another, and Horatio bringing the news that he’s seen a ghost in yet another. In the midst of all these fragments we have Polonius’s Neither a borrower nor a lender be, dragged in from the next scene. This is spied on by Hamlet from a high battlement – for no obvious reason: we’re not able to gauge what his attitude to Ophelia is. He’s just given us most of Oh that this too too solid flesh from another high vantage point, looking down on his mother and step-dad as they go off on a merry ride, while the court applauds. Always Hamlet is looking down on people. He’s not a participant, but always (so far, at least) an observer.

Hamlet is the most robust, cuttable and rearrangeable text ever, so none of this jig-sawing matters if what you have left you do well. This film does it well.

The production design is late medieval – Hamlet is a Renaissance man well before the Renaissance – and the setting is a castle with immaculately scrubbed flagstones.

As Hamlet goes with the soldiers to the battlement, he’s able once again to look down on the King and court, revelling.

The Ghost is not a seven-foot slow-motion monster, as in the Russian Hamlet; nor is he a faceless zombie with Hamlet’s own voice in an echo-chamber, as in Olivier’s version. He isn’t in armour, either. He’s a physical presence like another person, except that he can disappear whenever it becomes necessary. The first shot of him, looming over the camera, is nevertheless frightening. Scofield plays him with an air of tragic resignation, never ranting or even raising his voice; many of his ranting lines are cut. This spook just has one needful piece of information to impart, and then he’ll go. As he says Adieu, adieu, adieu, a single tear runs down his cheek.

Hamlet worries us, on Meet it is I set it down, and on Oh Villain, villain, smiling damned villain, by trying to carve the ghost’s message on to the top of a wall with his sword, and then stabbing the wall with it. Though seeming robust and masculine, he may not be a man of action, and may be a bit unbalanced, too.
Further worries are next aroused. Hamlet arouses them deliberately, in my opinion – he behaves oddly to draw his uncle’s attention to him, so that his uncle will take an initiative, for he can’t take initiatives himself. Mel Gibson appears before Ophelia, not with his knees knocking, still less with his stockings fouled, ungartered and down-gyved to his ankle, but certainly pale and sighing, and barefoot. He doesn’t back out of the room as Olivier does, either (the sequence is done in real time, not in misty-framed flashback); but he does signal that he may have gone crazy. By way of economy, Polonius is spying on him from above this time, so Ophelia has no need to report his self-exposure.

Polonius continues spying on him from above – along with the King – in the Nunnery scene; except that this time Hamlet may know they’re there. There’s a shadow on the wall. He looks in its direction, and perhaps sees it – it’s ambiguous. Olivier’s Hamlet hears them planning the Nunnery scene. Zeffirelli leaves us in doubt, so that we aren’t certain what motivates Hamlet’s abusive rant. He shouts Those that are married already – all but one – shall live! at the whole hall, so on balance it’s safe to assume he knows he’s being overheard, if not by whom. It’s further odd behaviour, to force the King into making the first move.

Ophelia is deprived of Oh, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown.

Unlike Olivier, who says To be or not to be at the top of a tower up which he’s run, leaving an hysterical Ophelia at the bottom, Zeffirelli sets the soliloquy apart from the rest of the action, with Hamlet standing over his father’s tomb. Also unlike Olivier, who cuts it, this Hamlet is given What a piece of work is a man, which is said at an improvised barbecue, with Horatio listening, as well as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet’s just forced them to admit that they were sent for, by kicking a stool out from underneath one of them. He can get violent, we see, if he wants. Later he pinions Rosencrantz to the wall with the player’s pipe.
Now there is an important omission. You feel sorry for Pete Postlethwaite (later to be Baz Luhrmann’s uncompromised Friar Laurence), who comes up the hill towards Hamlet as the First Player on his cart – is greeted by Hamlet with a hearty laugh – and then has his entire part edited out. There’s no rugged Pyrrhus speech at all. All Hamlet says is You are welcome to Elsinore, and they cut to the players entering the castle. For this reason, when Hamlet starts Oh what a rogue, all references to the First Player, as the man to whose convincing emoting Hamlet is comparing his own feeble emoting, have to be cut, for the First Player hasn’t emoted. Hamlet’s given most of Oh what a rogue – his longest speech – but in this context he’s judging himself as a man of action. The strange parallel he makes in the original, whereby it’s not as a feeble revenger that he despises himself, but as a feeble actor, isn’t there.

It makes him more normal. We can see that he likes actors; but doesn’t think of himself as being at one with them. He wears a colourful cloak and a feathered hat when in their company, but only as a sociable gesture. The Advice to the Players is cut, too.

Part of the Nunnery scene is transposed to the dialogue with Ophelia before the play starts, and another part is added after it’s ended. As the court rushes out, Hamlet says Go thy ways to a nunnery, kisses Ophelia passionately, adds a glib Farewell! as if to say “Just kidding”, and leaves her staring and slightly unhinged, even before he kills her father.

The Play scene is an anti-climax; what should be one of the play’s centrepieces is rushed. Perhaps, after soft-pedalling Hamlet’s fixation with acting, Zeffirelli wanted to understate it – or perhaps he was asleep that day. The King is far too moved at what seems a tatty piece of amateur dramatics (some lines are re-written to make The Mousetrap appear even more trivial than it is), and he reacts too quickly. Even though he is a bit drunk, a politician such as he would have shown, we protest, greater self-control. The Olivier version, which takes the same line as Zeffirelli, gives the King’s exit a much longer and tenser build-up.

The King has very few of his lines left in Oh my offence is rank. He’s allowed some agonised grunts and moans by way of compensation for the editing. This, plus the abbreviated Play scene, reduce his stature as an antagonist to his nephew. Alan Bates could in any case be a bit more masculine and assertive in the role. Dare I say it? – Oliver Reed would have been stronger casting; though Robert Shaw would have been ideal. However, I find to my amazement that in 1990 he’d been dead twelve years.

The Closet scene is much longer, and is directed as if Zeffirelli had strong ideas about it. The Ghost’s entrance looks as if it’s just in time to stop mother and son from committing
incest. Hamlet makes use of the rhythm of *Nay, but to live in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed* to mime a sexual assault, and Gertrude reciprocates on *A king of shreds and patches*, by kissing him, partly to shut him up, partly because she appears to want him.

Glenn Close is the same generation as Mel Gibson, but her pallor and grey hair make us forget the fact. (Incidentally, in the first scene – the funeral – she has a foolish braided Viking wig, which is never seen again.) The bad taste in Olivier’s casting of Eileen Herlie – an actress nine years younger than him – has no parallel here. As Hamlet leaves for England, mother and son kiss as if they were lovers.

Hamlet puts on Polonius’s cap when he says that Polonius is *at supper*, and in the entire confrontation with the King in this scene Mel Gibson appears at his most unbalanced. Our sense that he is, willy-nilly, spreading misery all about, is later emphasised by the reactions to Ophelia’s mad scene, where the entire court is affected. Helena Bonham Carter always looks a bit crazy anyway, and she counterbalances it by playing most of her lines in the mad scenes in a factual tone of voice. The music moves us as, in long shot, Horatio picks her up and carries her with some court ladies to a secure place. This is the strength of Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet*. Far more than in any other version – partly because the castle where the exterior shots are done looks so lived-in, partly because of the unobtrusive excellence of the acting – we’re aware of Elsinore as a place where things might have gone a lot better. The exterior shots of Olivier’s Elsinore are all faked in a studio, and he has no interest in the community.

The climax of the piece comes at a point where I’ve not seen it come in any other production – at the death of Gertrude. She drinks the poisoned cup unwittingly (Eileen Herlie appears to commit suicide), then, as her head starts buzzing and her stomach to heave (all victims of the poison display identical symptoms) there’s a shot of the cup from her viewpoint, and a cut to her as she realises what she’s just done. The expression of horror on Glenn Close’s face is extraordinary; and we know that from this moment on they’re all doomed.

There’s no Fortinbras. For Fortinbras, you have to go to the Russian *Hamlet*.

Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* is so much better than his *Taming of the Shrew* that it might be by a different director. Because of the greater consistency of the acting, it’s also more satisfying than his *Romeo*, splendid as that is in many ways. I’d not be without the Olivier version, with its atmospheric sets and photography, and its naïve Oedipal angle; likewise the Russian *Hamlet* by Grigori Kosintsev, with Innokenti Smoktunovsky, is a powerful interpretation. But Franco Zeffirelli, despite his cutting, has done the play in three dimensions as no-one else has.