



A Prince

by Charles Weinstein. Written on 2012-02-22. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the film: *Hamlet at Elsinore* (1964; DVD release 2011).

CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER'S HAMLET IS SO FINE THAT IT REDEEMS A BAD FILM AND GOES A LONG way towards redeeming Plummer's career. Here is a man whose gifts might have placed him among the great classical actors, but it was not to be. The fault, dear Brutus, lay in his wayward commitment, a matinee-idol fecklessness that all-too-often opted for the easy or thoughtless way out. His Iago (1982) was a palimpsest of clashing interpretations; his ashen Macbeth (1988) died before the play began; and his Lear's (2004) admonition that nothing can come from nothing was self-referential. But his Cyrano (1973) was marvelous: Romantic and Modern, eloquent and neurotic, febrile and edgy yet flamboyant, it synthesized centuries of acting styles in a manner reminiscent of Olivier. I am happy to add Hamlet to the list of his achievements.

Plummer gives us the complete Prince where others have given us parcels. He has looks, presence, breeding, charm, athleticism, wit and consummate grace. He also has a touch of the feminine (which works well for Hamlet), yet is incontestably virile. This is important: one mustn't feel that Hamlet's fitful misogyny springs from congenital attraction to his own sex. There is no doubt that Plummer could have happily married Ophelia in a better world than Denmark. Nor is there any doubt of his capacity for martial exploits if his mind could deem them authentic. "Hamlet does not think too much but too well," and Plummer has the capacity (lacking in Gibson, Branagh and Hawke) to convey a subtle and probing mind. Michael Pennington (1980) was more intellectual, Derek Jacobi quirkier in his line-readings, but neither combined thought and surprise with sexual incandescence as Plummer does. He is a bright particular Star who has been wounded into inwardness, which is merely to say that he is Hamlet.

The movie serves as foil to Plummer: its badness makes his talent stick fiery off indeed. Filmed at Kronberg Castle in Elsinore, it struggles to work new interiors and grounds into every frame. At times, this pays dividends: the Players' first scene takes place in an open-air courtyard, conveying an exhilarating sense of freedom. However, most of the locations are hackneyed, nugatory or distracting. Repeated shots of waves crashing upon rocks look backwards to

Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948) and sideways at Kozintsev's (1964). One stony corridor is much like another. The Nunnery Scene is filmed in the castle's chapel (acceptable) with Hamlet standing above and beyond Ophelia for a time in the pulpit (not). A minister exhorting a sinful parishioner may seem like an apt metaphor, but the actors do not play the scene that way, and the distance between them prevents dramatic synapses from connecting. It's an ominous portent of postmodern decadence.

There are unkind cuts, bizarre compositions and moments of painful misdirection—one can count the infelicities like sheep vaulting a stile. The Mousetrap is reduced to its Dumb Show, making nonsense of Gertrude's "The lady doth protest too much." Ophelia loses her second Mad Scene and all her unsettling flowers. Polonius, Gertrude and Claudius speak in a single-file diagonal bisecting the screen, which is perfect for a conga-line but awkward for a conversation. Plummer is so tender, quiet and lucid with Ophelia that her "O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" seems crazier than anything Hamlet has said.

The tally increases with a crupperful of bad performances. Alec Clunes' Polonius is so fulsome and cute that one can hardly wait for Hamlet to kill him. Jo Muller plays Ophelia as though she were 13, while Laertes (Dyson Lovell) is a cipher to a great account. Subtextual Gertrude must be brought to the surface; June Tobin leaves her placidly submerged ("drown'd, drown'd"). As Fortinbras, Donald Sutherland looks and sounds like an extraterrestrial. The young Michael Caine is a beautiful creature, but beauty is wasted on Horatio, and Caine is so busy avoiding cockney vowels that he neglects to create a character. The biggest disappointment is Robert Shaw, whose distracted, head-rubbing Claudius seems to be suffering from recurrent migraines. Philip Locke, of blessed memory, brings more camp viciousness to Osric than I have ever seen, but it's too little, too late.

Plummer must salvage the proceedings, and so he does, seizing his plum role and plumbing it to its depths. With him in the lead, at least one thing is healthy in the state of Denmark. Sometimes there is no reason at all to see a Shakespeare production; sometimes there is only one. *Hamlet at Elsinore* is out of joint, but Christopher Plummer was born to set it right.