**Branagh, Shakespeare, and the Movies: The View from Abroad**

As the once upstart Irish prodigy Kenneth Branagh approaches sixty, he finds himself honored and courted by the English theatrical world as the restored heir to its distinguished tradition of the actor-manager. He has been knighted, made the president of RADA, given a Special Olivier Award, become the director of several Hollywood blockbusters and the most prolific maker of Shakespeare films in the long history of the genre. But it was not ever thus. Though he has been recognized for distinguished achievement by BAFTA, his films have not been highly regarded the English critics, and his private life, particularly during the years of his marriage to Emma Thompson, was catnip to the British press.

Distance often provides perspective. Outsiders often see more interestingly into another culture than its natives. The French are particularly good at seeing from afar. After all, it was the French, in Le Jazz Hot back in 1932, who first championed American Jazz. They did it again, in Cahiers du Cinema, with American movies turning John Ford and Howard Hawkes and Jerry Lewis into film auteurs and championing John Wayne and Clint Eastwood as iconic film personas. Now, in our own moment, they have done it again, with a little help from some American friends, with Kenneth Branagh. Pierre Berthomieu wrote the first book-length critical analysis of Branagh’s films back in 1998 and two years later Sarah Hatchuel published her indispensable A Companion to the Shakespearean Films of Kenneth Branagh. Several years later, I followed in their wake with The Films of Kenneth Branagh. Remarkably, these remain the only academic monographs devoted to his work on film.

Branagh’s career explores his liminal position between the two traditions his work reconciles: Shakespeare and film, Stratford and Hollywood. The signature images for this exploration are two stunning shots from his first and last Shakespeare films: the startling back-lit entrance of Henry V looming in the great council chamber doorway in 1989 and its equally arresting twin capturing Shakespeare in silhouette frozen in the doorway at New Place in All is True thirty years later. Only Branagh, I will argue, has the visual imagination, courage, and perhaps folly to link Henry V and Shakespeare with Darth Vader and John Wayne, George Lucas and John Ford.

In the thirty-five years since he performed Henry V, Laertes, and the King of France in his only season at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Branagh has created a theater and film legacy unlike that of any of his predecessors or contemporaries. He is an actor-manager-film director who builds on the legacy he inherits from Olivier, Welles, and Zeffirelli even as he revises and transforms it. Branagh’s career as a major Shakespearean actor began in 1984; he created his own Renaissance Theatre Company in 1988; he directed his first Shakespeare film in 1989, thus establishing his triple threat talents as an actor, a manager, and a filmmaker. We now have 35 years of work to assess. I appreciate this opportunity to revisit Branagh’s early achievement as a filmmaker and to place it in the context of the accomplishments of his predecessors, the work of his contemporaries, and the films he has directed in the past two decades.

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