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Review: The Russian Hamlet

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Motswasele has ended her teaching career, comes to know them, and Isaac finds comfort with her after nightmares.

The death of the chief, and the resulting regency of Motswasele, changes the even tenor of events, and Isaac has to leave for the relative security of a nearby township. A customary marriage is accepted; a job found, a small home built. He renews his political connexions and nearly brings disaster by an untested trusting of a police-spy. In the meantime the chief's daughter, Seneo, returns from her nursing in London, avoids Motswasele's attentions by mourning, but recognizes her danger. Her brother, Letlotse, the heir to the chieftainship, has been delayed while visiting Russia with his fellow students and arrives later, unsettled in his mind about the very institution of chieftainship, let alone his ability to assume it. The Regent overplays his hand and Letlotse decides to raise his regiment—initiation group—which he must do before he can be installed. He calls Isaac to join him, and there is a tensely described treacherous interlude that brings them both close to death, and very close to each other because of it. Motswasele is killed, the Installation proceeds, and after its completion, Isaac moves from his new found stability to continue his harrowing of the oppressive regime of the Republic.

Such is the story, the manner of its telling is in the third person with Isaac as the protagonist, and here there arises a nagging awkwardness for the reader. When his thoughts are described and often in his speech as well, Isaac uses standard English, but sometimes lapses, for no obvious reason, into a town-boy pidgen, quite out of keeping. It is almost as if he was first conceived by the writer as such a speaker, then educationally upgraded, but not everywhere re-written. Apart from this dichotomy, there are also lapses from both manners of speech. The word *get* for a bastard is Scots dialect; *thinkings* is close to baby-talk; "charming neat behinds", breasts that feel good "like plunging one's fingers into corn" these are utterly alien within the context. But these are slight lapses, the book reads easily, smoothly, with flashes of awareness of the countryside that tell of a close observation and appreciation of the author's surroundings. There is one particularly delightful remark that must be quoted:

"All the same" said Josh, "if you do get a white friend why, well, why it's like having a pet giraffe. You're proud, man, you're proud, though it can be difficult taking a giraffe about with you. It knocks its head, see, and people look.' "

The only really serious loose end in the book is the unexplained importance of Amos, the third member of the destruction team, concerning whom Isaac is so emotionally involved, that he loses all control, all sense of proportion at the very name. Why this should be is not even hinted at, the name alone is all we ever hear of this man.

This is the tale and its telling. Does Miss Mitchison succeed in convincing us that the tribal society has within it the seeds of the just society? The idea is mainly set before us in the thoughts of Isaac as his participation in tribal life erodes the glib concepts he had formed as an antidote to the falseness of Apartheid's golden-age Bantustans. His ideal is still a free, a just, Africa, but he comes to recognise the value of a well-functioning part

of the whole. His relationship with the young chief, intensified by their common suffering, is at first swampy, but loosens to a mutual recognition of roles and aims.

Letlotse's own reorientation is more acute. The wider horizons of his European travels, his advanced education, have spread into the traditional sphere that his father had mapped out for him, he has to reconcile the boundaries. But the chief is not the tribe, though he is essential to it. The difficult word in the phrase we are discussing is "just". Towards the end of the book, big countries are condemned because they only really unite for war. Are the regiments, the groups of the initiated held together by anything deeper than the same solidarity in adversity that, for a couple of years at least, all but wiped out class distinctions in wartime Britain? Though we are shown a present day regiment making erosion protections for the good of the tribe, they were in the past fighting groups. Can the cohesion be kept for the duller works of peace? One wishes that it were so, one must hope that it will be so, but reality shows how often such enthusiasms are flashes in the pan, their sophisticated equivalents the regimental dinners, the class-reunions,—banal, ineffective.

For Bechuanaland a major bond between the chief and people has been the former's concern with rain production. This apart, it is the kinship structure that acts as the reinforcing bars holding people together. The great are only great while they give, they are often excused much if they continue lavishness. In the comments on the harshness of Motswasele, one is taken near to the same mystique that is evoked by novelists writing about 'unworthy priests'. These and kindred ideas are looked at without severe interruption of the narrative and add considerably to it. But in the final analysis we are faced with the anomaly touched on at the beginning of this review. How valid are these statements? Granted we have an interesting, well-written novel, but can Naomi Mitchison, owner of Galloway herds in lush grasslands, terror (one hopes) of the Colonial Office, really be a Mokgatla, with all the strengths and weaknesses of such a position? Are not the Jesuit's first seven years missing? Isn't milk from drought-ridden cows the lacking vital fluid? If not a giraffe in Josh's phrase, is she not, are not all we who try to assimilate, to seek the richness of Africa, some other, slightly less quixotic animal—a beaver perhaps—and so excluded? This isn't a matter of skin colour, not Nature, but nurture. So it would seem in this materialistic, mid-century world, such unity is more probable in the ugliness of cities, our coming to manhood will be achieved in the struggle to prevent the made from overtaking the maker. Return to the created there will have to be, but like Isaac "just to drink at old wells." Our wells are not ours to choose, this our parents have done already, it is to Miss Mitchison's credit that she helps us to realise that the wells reach to the same source, "the common purpose which is in the heart. which is happiness."

FILM

THE RUSSIAN HAMLET

Gerald Moore

DRAMA IS ESSENTIALLY an arrangement of spoken words in a particular pattern and sequence. For this basic

language, the screen substitutes a language of images in movement. The achievements of the silent screen are sufficient to remind us of this primacy of the image in cinema. The task of the director who sets out to create a film around an idea first realized for the stage is to find ways of replacing the dominance of words by the dominance of images, without lessening the coherence of the original idea. His problem is worsened when the play in question is one of classic status, whose major speeches are already familiar, at least vaguely, to most of his audience. They will be waiting for tags and will feel cheated if they don't get them. But the director must never be terrorized into becoming an adapter. He must penetrate the impulse that underlies the realized play, and not content himself with tinkering about with its manifestation in detail as a work of dramatic art. In other words, reverence for the text is not important for the film-maker; reverence for the meaning and scope of his subject is. And he must be ruthless in replacing a sequence of words, however sanctified, with a sequence of images whenever the proper rhythm and shaping of his film demand it. In the words of Pasternak's own poem "Hamlet":

*I consent to play my part,
But now a different drama is being acted;
For this once let me be.*

It is here precisely that Kozintsev, director of the Russian *Hamlet*, recently exhibited in East Africa, has carried the art of filming Shakespeare to a new height of excellence. Perhaps he was helped by the use of Pasternak's words, inevitably less hallowed than Shakespeare's own. But he was helped still more by the Russian tradition of exploring the new language of the film with boldness and freedom. He opens with a horseman hurrying through a wide bleak landscape. The horseman thunders into a castle and instantly the drawbridge, photographed from road-level, begins rising terribly against the eye of the spectator. As it rises higher, a portcullis appears at the top of the screen and begins to descend in front of it. After this sequence we scarcely need the words, 'Denmark's a prison'. Over and over again the detail of this film's direction reveals the same clarity and strength.

Kozintsev, more than any previous film-maker of Shakespeare, has recognized another aspect of his task. Although the image can do some of the word's work, it moves more slowly than the word, and more tyrannically. When Hamlet says:

*'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye . . .
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within, which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.*

he creates a whole landscape of grief, then flashes a theatre before us, dismisses both, and leads us into the very heart of sorrow. It is this kind of inspired conjuring trick that the cinema cannot perform, or not in the few seconds that it takes an actor on the stage to speak these lines and give the audience their 'form and pressure'. And *Hamlet* is a very long play, a text with which even stage directors usually take considerable liberties in the interests of getting their audience home by midnight.

Given the slower movement of the film image, and the reduced speed and accuracy of the audience's ear in the cinema as compared with theatre and radio, the film director will be in danger of losing his way entirely unless he is prepared to take the different kind of short cut which the screen uniquely offers him.

To take another example from Kozintsev, he has made considerable cuts in Ophelia's mad scene and has broken it up between several different locales, thereby increasing its impact, for the scene as it stands is simply too long for the screen. We are prepared for it by one terrifying shot of Ophelia, after Hamlet's exile to England, being clamped into a sort of iron chastity-belt and smothered in black lace. As her puppetlike exquisite beauty disappears beneath the lace, we know that she must break. Detail speaks again when she gathers dry sticks from the fireplace, instead of real or imaginary flowers, to distribute among the watchers. And when it comes to Gertrude's "Messenger's Speech" announcing and describing her death, Kozintsev rightly omits it altogether. Instead we get a tracking shot of the lovely tapestried bedroom where she was once happy, while the violin plays the melody of 'Walsingham'; then the camera pans over the river and hovers for a moment only upon the image of her death, rather than the death itself: the figure of a young girl lying straight and still at the bottom of the clear stream.

For the Court intrigue the director has gone all out for a solid Renaissance setting. This palace, unlike so many draughty Elsinores, is comfortable and convincing, the tangible reward of power. All the more effective, then, the bleak landscape that surrounds it; the muddy foreshore on which Fortinbras's army fumes and curses over its heavy siege-engines; the barren field where Ophelia is laid to rest.

Finally, Kozintsev has done a lot of his work simply by the selection of faces. Innokenty Smoktunovsky sends flickers of grief over a visage that seems to be cast upon stone. He is Hamlet almost before he speaks. Instead of the usual dog-like Horatio, we have a curving nose and strong brow that evoke a Holbein canvas, a formidable older Horatio who fills the slow-paced role as a youth cannot do without loss of force. Gertrude radiates love for her son; a woman who must always be under the domination of some man, once King Hamlet, now Claudius; but weak and self-indulgent rather than vicious. Certainly no match for this Claudius who, by a brilliant stroke of direction, retains his foxy smile even while she drinks the poisoned cup. The choice of Anastasia Vertinskaya as Ophelia is perhaps the most effective of all. Her frail, delicate, profoundly Renaissance beauty burns in the mind, while her first appearance, dancing doll-like while an old, black-shrouded crone capers before her plucking the lute, tells us all the director wants to tell us about the education of young ladies in that particular society, rendering unnecessary the garrulity of Polonius and his advice to virgins.

After Hamlet's death—rather too elegantly draped against the rocks—the superb coda of Shostakovich's score points his progress, on a bier composed of sword and lances: away from the martial vigour of the clangings steep, over the drawbridge where the long shadows of his bearers precede him, to the little knot of peasants who wait beyond to see their Prince borne away from them.

think about the Negroes in America and about the image of integration as a state in which the Negroes would take their rightful place as another of the protected minorities in a plurastastic society, I wonder whether they really believe in their hearts that such a state can actually be attained, and if so *why* they should wish to survive as a distinct group. I think why the Jews once wished to survive (though I am less certain as to why we still do): they not only believed that God had given them no choice, but they were tied to a memory of the past glory and a dream of imminent redemption. What does the American Negro have that might correspond to this? His past is a stigma, his colour is a stigma, and his vision of the future is the hope of erasing the stigma by making colour irrelevant, by making it disappear as a fact of consciousness.

I share this hope, but I cannot see how it will ever be realized unless colour does *in fact* disappear: and that means not integration, it means assimilation, it means—let the brutal word come out—miscegenation. The Black Muslims, like their racist counterparts in the white world, accuse the “so-called Negro leaders” of secretly pursuing miscegenation as a goal. The racists are wrong, but I wish they were right, for I believe that the wholesale merging of the two races is the most desirable alternative for everyone concerned. I am not claiming that this alternative can be pursued programmatically or that it is immediately feasible as a solution; obviously there are even greater barriers to its

achievement than to the achievement of integration. What I am saying, however, is that in my opinion the Negro problem can be solved in this country in no other way.

I have told the story of my own twisted feelings about Negroes here, and of how they conflict with the moral convictions I have since developed, in order to assert that such feelings must be acknowledged as honestly as possible so that they can be controlled and ultimately disregarded in favour of the convictions. It is *wrong* for a man to suffer because of the colour of his skin. Beside that cliched proposition of liberal thought, what argument can stand and be respected? If the arguments are the arguments of feeling, they must be made to yield; and one's own soul is not the worst place to begin working a huge social transformation. Not so long ago, it used to be asked of white liberals, “Would you like your sister to marry one?” When I was a boy and my sister was still unmarried, I would certainly have said no to that question. But now I am a man, my sister is already married, and I have daughters. If I were to be asked today whether I would like a daughter of mine “to marry one,” I would have to answer: “No, I wouldn't *like* it at all. I would rail and rave and rant and tear my hair. And then I hope I would have the courage to curse myself for raving and ranting, and to give her my blessing. How dare I withhold it at the behest of the child I once was and against the man I now have a duty to be?” □

THE DEATH OF OPHELIA FROM THE RUSSIAN HAMLET (SEE PAGE 55)





SCENES FROM HAMLET

