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Author(s)	Peter Cowie
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HAMLET

Peter Cowie sees Kozintsev add powerful imagery to Shakespeare . . .

Directed by Grigori Kozintsev. Screenplay by Grigori Kozintsev from the play by William Shakespeare. Director of photography, I. Gritsyus. Editor, E. Makhan'kova. Music, Dimitri Shostakovich. Art directors, E. Ene and G. Kropachev. A Lenfilm production, distributed by British Lion. Russian. English subtitles. Wide screen. Cert U. 149 mins.

Hamlet, INNOKENTII SMOKTUNOVSKI; *Claudius*, MICHAL NAZWANOV; *Gertrude, (the Queen)*, ELIXA RADZIN-SZOLKONIS; *Polonius*, Y. TOLUBEEV; *Ophelia*, ANASTASIA VERTINSKA; *Horatio*, V. ERENBERG; *Laertes*, C. OLEKSENKO; *Guiltenstern*, V. MEDVEDEV; *Rosencrantz*, I. DIMITRIEV; *Fortinbras*, A. KREVAL'D; *Grave-Digger*, V. KOLPAKOR.

When I first saw this magnificent film last year, it was foolishly shown in the original Russian (translation by Boris Pasternak) without subtitles. Now a second viewing, this time with an almost entirely faithful set of subtitles, convinces me that it is the finest film version of *Hamlet* ever made. By comparison Olivier's is theatrical and unadventurous. Kozintsev has brought to this most disturbing of plays a gift for powerful imagery and an interpretation of key scenes that chimes precisely with my own view of the drama (and everyone owns his private vision of Hamlet). He has grasped one of Shakespeare's fundamental intentions—to show the puny stature of human beings when compared with the mighty rocks and the timeless sea.

The opening is masterly. Shots of a restless, frothing sea are succeeded by the sight of one black flag after another being thrust from the castle windows to mark the King's death: and off-screen the doleful knelling of a funeral bell. The major sequences of the film are all handled in this way, with the accent on physical action, landscape and decor. Again and again in the early stages Hamlet's subdued wrath is suggested by the image of blazing logs in a great hearth. The rumble of the sea is never far away, and the massive portcullis stresses the Prince's parallel between Elsinore and a prison—Denmark, 'the foulest dungeon of all'. Kozintsev's camera movements, far from being esoteric or eclectic, are extremely purposeful and arouse all kinds of connotations in the mind—for example, the recurring crane shots that sweep upwards and away from the characters, giving the sense of a power more mighty than man. Kozintsev may be hinting that Hamlet's predicament is brought about by the inhuman conditions in which he lives, but such a suggestion never becomes didactic in the film.

Here too is a Ghost one can accept. Kozintsev introduces him as a vast knight

in seven-league boots, his cloak billowing like a trail of thought behind him as he stalks the battlements and reduces Hamlet to a gibbering rage. Yet the Prince, the Queen, Claudius, Laertes and Polonius are all as human as Shakespeare drew them; only Ophelia, with her hieratic gestures and marbled features, seems to have strayed from an anaemic stage. Innokentii Smoktunovski's Hamlet may be a little too melancholy and squat for some tastes, but his mercurial changes from man of wit to soldier of fortune scrambling ashore in sackcloth on the Danish coast convince me. Far and away the most arresting characterisation, however, is Michal Nazwanov's Claudius. From the start his eyes gleam with lust and guile, and gradually his suave, cal-

culating and malevolent manner stains the drama. Kozintsev's idea of making him applaud the wandering players before suddenly rushing headlong through the castle like a wounded bull becomes a *tour de force*. Claudius emerges more vividly than ever before on the screen as a man proud of his virility and fearful of his own reflection. The characters are in fact all as the text would suggest; the only changes made by Kozintsev are topographical, and certain important speeches are narrated off-screen.

The entire production is dominated by Shostakovich's arrogant score (note the subtle use of the harpsichord in Ophelia's scenes) and by the absolute rightness of the setting. Kozintsev has created not merely a supremely faithful rendering of *Hamlet*, but also a historical spectacle that is authentic down to the minutest detail. His own words (in a *films and filming* article in 1962) sum up his attitude and his achievement: 'The word "contemporary" to me means no tricks of style. I myself do not like the production of Shakespeare in modern dress. I think it is absolutely possible, and desirable, to show Shakespeare productions in Elizabethan costumes; but the general sense of history, the spirit of the poetry, the sense of humanity, should be modern and absolutely lifelike for audiences today'.

Films + Filming