

Romeo and Juliet—Hagbard and Signe

Dennis Raymond

1968

The biggest mistake in bringing Shakespeare to the screen is to construct some sort of stone effigy to him. But France Zeffirelli's film production of "Romeo & Juliet," at the Studio 8, pulsates with a life all its own.

In translating a stage drama to a visual medium, much of the dialogue has been cut in favor of the action. Surprisingly, this works beautifully. "Romeo & Juliet" is a remarkably visual movie that could stand on its own for the imagery alone. The result is a thoroughly "cinematic" film adaptation.

Zeffirelli's visual sense is irreproachable. Virtually every frame is exquisite. The rich use of color, the careful balance between darks and lights, the intricate compositions are all patterned after Italian Renaissance paintings.

Color becomes an integral part of the drama as it expresses the actions and feelings of the characters: in the midst of Capulet's Grand Ball, the camera singles out Juliet in a vibrant red dress; the lovers' bedroom scene is photographed in simple blacks and whites; Juliet's deathbed scene is dominated by a dirty pink; a brooding blue embellishes the screen as Romeo blindly rides through the night to discover his love sealed in a tomb.

Zeffirelli took a big chance by casting two youngsters in the title roles: 15-year-old Olivia Hussey and 17-year-old Leonard Whiting. He took his chance and he won.

Suddenly, we see Shakespeare's doomed lovers as we have never seen them before. They are children, young, awkward, and impetuous. Romeo is a beautiful schoolboy in love, and Juliet is a charming child, the stronger-willed of the two. Their meetings are passionate, clumsy, and naive, as one would expect from young lovers.

Of course, Shakespeare's poetry suffers a bit in the reading, but the young players are so appealing in themselves, who could complain?

There is a homosexual air around the whole film that is difficult to pinpoint but definitely present. There is the slightest suggestion of homosexuality in the scenes between Mercutio and Romeo. This feeling is further defined by the kind of Greek attention lavished on the nude Romeo during the bedroom scene.

The remainder of the cast is uniformly perfect. John McEnery's ravaged Mercutio, Milo O'Shea's Friar Lawrence, and especially, Pat Heywood as Juliet's buxom nursemaid are among the prime pleasures of this film.

The only glaring defect is the editing, which is sometimes very awkward. But Zeffirelli's faults would make the reputations of a dozen lesser directors.

Also recounting the immortal tale of Romeo and Juliet, with variations "Hagbard & Signe, at the Studio One, unfolds with such simple elegance and grace, that one is immediately swept up under its spell.

Set in medieval Iceland during the twelfth century, "Hagbard & Signe" achieves a timelessness that instantly puts it in the classic category: it is that rare motion picture that will continually turn up at the film festivals and revivals, informing future generations of our current sensibilities.

The most impressive aspect of this by no means modest production is the utter economy and simplicity with which the story is told. The pace is leisurely, the narrative is simple and unaffected. Dialogue is kept to the absolute minimum, relying totally on the visual images, the sounds and silences, to tell the tale. "Hagbard & Signe" reminds us, as few films do, that film is basically communication through pictures.

The director, Gabriel Axel, has achieved many great sequences. The battle scenes, choreographed like some mad ballet, are among the best ever captured on film since "Alexander Nevsky." When heads roll during a beachside siege, it's difficult to convince yourself that the gore is not real.

So much of "Hagbard & Signe" is familiar to us as well as foreign, and like any classic, it leaves us with the impression of having been ours forever.

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Fifth Estate #68, December 12-25, 1968

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