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BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

The Anatomy of Burton's Melancholy

RICHARD BURTON was a long way from mastering *Hamlet* when he played it at the 1953 Edinburgh Festival, and the errors of his pursuit were readily apparent (SR, Sept. 13, 1963). Eleven years later, Burton would seem still some distance from *Hamlet*, but now his errors are less obvious.

Perhaps this is because Sir John Gielgud has conceived and directed this new production as a rehearsal of *Hamlet*. Thus, he has changed the actors' contract. No longer is it the usual one of creating the illusion that the events of the play are really happening, or making us feel that understanding them is of much importance. Instead, the actors are doing what actors actually do at a rehearsal, which is to practice their acting techniques.

Since Sir John is superb at finding a technically effective shape for any stage performance, he has been able to orchestrate these rehearsal crescendos and diminuendos into an evening that moves along at a sprightly pace as if it knew exactly where it was going. However, one feels a lack of commitment by anyone to bringing the play alive. The actors come and go, each contributing his or her well-disciplined solo and departing, presumably for coffee and a sandwich at the Gaiety Delicatessen across the street.

All of this encourages Burton simply to act his role speech by speech. Secure in the knowledge that the greatest *Hamlet* of modern times is conducting, he seems to feel completely free to explore his instrument. Since it is a magnificent instrument, a sensualist can enjoy the rich open diapason, the sustained blasts of power, and the sudden sharp staccato—for their own sake. Yet, it is hard to find any deliberate significance in them.

The most memorable moments in Burton's performance are unrelated. Furthermore, they seem to come from concern for the relationship between the actor's own experience and what *Hamlet* finds himself saying or doing. Burton's silence after a beautifully phrased speech in which he has explained that external passion "can not denote *me* truly" is darkly deep. The beginning of "To be or not to be" stunningly strikes the core of his subconscious, before "perchance to dream" jolts him back to the surface. His rapid, unostentatious delivery of the speech to the players, at the beginning of the second act, creates a nice sense of before-the-play urgency. And most moving

of all is his brief avowal of cameraderie with Horatio, as if he had found all his passionate relationships with family and women less true than the shared understanding that can exist between two undemanding friends.

Sir John has also staged the final scene imaginatively. After Laertes foully pinks *Hamlet* from behind with his poison-tipped sword, the Prince simply walks over to the guilty duelist and takes the weapon from his unresisting hand. And Burton's brutish gesture to the King's corpse and his foolish little laugh in the same direction just before he says, "The rest is silence," suggesting that *Hamlet* may be rather pleased with how things have turned out, seem at least original.

There are a few more surprises in this production. One is the ghost's appearance by means of a giant motion picture silhouette of its head against the back wall, while Sir John's rich voice bubbles out of loudspeakers. Another is Alfred Drake's subsidence into a compelling genuineness in the prayer scene. There, he abandons his disappointing, cheerily shallow Claudius and attempts to display remorse, only to find it all too false. At this point, we sense a true emotion, the lament of a man trapped in his own superficial, public personality.

Eileen Herlie as Gertrude, Hume Cronyn as Polonius (with a cane), George Voskovec as the Player King, and George Rose as the Gravedigger all leave us with a sense of having seen a characterization, but one feels that even they miss the assistance of character-defining costumes, mood-supplying settings, and unarrested accumulation of dramatic intensity that comes when role reacts with role instead of actor with actor.

This is not to disparage the Gielgud notion of doing a Shakespearean play as rehearsal. But if one attempts this, might it not be better to make it a deliberate streamlining and elimination of all the distractions that might otherwise take some of our attention away from the play's subtle substance? If so, Ben Edwards's impressive, poetic recreation of the whitewashed rear wall of a theater would have been replaced with black drapes, and the variously styled and colored modern jackets and sweaters worn by the cast would have been simplified and abstracted. Of course, there is another intriguing possibility. That would be for some modern Pirandello to use the contrast between

(Continued on page 50)



Mood Ebony

TWO new films dealing with racial matters provide highly thought-provoking if not entirely pleasant experiences. They are *The Cool World*, directed by Shirley Clarke, a young woman whose talent is combined with an uncompromising sense of reality, and *Black Like Me*, the first directorial effort of Carl Lerner, perhaps the most noted film editor in the East. Miss Clarke's film is the better of the two. She has gone directly to an area of New York's Harlem to tell the story of a fifteen-year-old Negro boy whose primary aim in life is to own a gun and take over the leadership of his teen-age gang. The entire cast of youngsters in the movie was chosen from students of Harlem junior high schools. All of them, including Hampton Clanton, who plays Duke, the gang leader, perform with astonishing ability and do much to provide the chilling quality of reality the movie possesses.

Miss Clarke has already made one controversial feature, *The Connection*, which became embroiled in censorship because of the use of a word or two not commonly heard on sound tracks. She has not learned her lesson, because the same word is heard occasionally in *The Cool World*. But it is hardly the use of any particular word that shocks here; it is rather her use of the camera to portray Negro desperation and violence, a sense of overwhelming futility among members of a segment of our society, and a mood of literally black despair that causes shock in the viewer, no matter what his skin coloration.

The story has been taken from Warren Miller's novel, which was also turned into a not particularly good play. Miss Clarke wrote her own screenplay with Carl Lee, who is brilliant in one of the adult roles (a Negro gangster), and both allowed for some improvisational scenes by the young people. The movie is, as a result, best in its documentary aspects, and occasionally weak in its drama, which is perhaps as it should be. What is shown is a group of emotionally deprived young people reacting instinctively to a bleak environment, all but immune to the public education they are given, and either doping themselves or stimulating themselves through violence, sex, cheap wine, and crime. The world they are supposed to grow into is basically "white" in its outlines, and it is as though they just don't see it. Their faces turn literally blank when they are taken on a school bus for a visit to

the stock exchange and are told that someday they can "own a share of America." Duke and a friend, in fact, ignore the teacher (who is white) and talk about the difference between a Colt and a Luger.

The movie ends with a fight between two rival Negro gangs, in which Duke is grabbed and taken away roughly by the police; if you wish, you can view him as one more boy gone and put out of harm's way for awhile. He is a killer, after all, and society is owed its protection from him. But what made the killer? Miss Clarke plays her camera over the wide-eyed, innocent faces of small Negro children on the street and makes you wonder if they, too, are going to join the environmental outlaws some day. She shows a Black Muslim exhorting a Negro crowd and proclaiming "the decline of the whites." And meanwhile, what is all too evident is that "cultural lag" we sometimes hear about, and *de facto* segregation, and something that could perhaps be termed a "black psychosis," which is to say an image of oneself that is dominated by the color of one's skin. Quite obviously there is a "white psychosis," too.

While after truth with her camera, and catching a good deal of it, too, Miss Clarke has nevertheless emphasized matters to bring out tones of violence and has only hinted at other forces in the Negro communities. One young Negro, well dressed, thoughtful, intelligent, a Freedom Rider, and brother of a heroin addict, can't symbolize vast groups of Negroes who are asserting the facts of their citizenship. And the evident sympathy she feels for Duke doesn't always get transmitted to the audience, for the boy's hostility is reasonless on a conscious level, and his total social amorality, beginning with a handbag theft and ending with a knifing, doesn't make him much of a hero except to minds as distorted as his own. The tragedy lies in what he might have been; but Miss Clarke's camera has no way of providing the answers.

Black Like Me was an award-winning newspaper series and book, but the screenplay written from it by Carl and Gerda Lerner is unrelieved by any subtlety and all too often turns into caricature what might have been vastly compelling. The film presents, in a style that is sometimes documentary, sometimes patently staged, the adventures of the pseudonymous John Finlay Horton, a Southern white newspaper-

man who darkened his skin and traveled throughout the South as a Negro. The transformation, as undergone by James Whitmore, seems hardly convincing, for Mr. Whitmore takes on the rugged look of a Maine potato farmer who has wintered too long at Miami Beach, and his acting has a heavy anguish that hardly needs such histrionic stressing, considering what he undergoes.

While hitchhiking his way, he is picked up by several kindly chaps who soon evince an excessive interest in his sexual habits. A bus driver refuses to let him visit a rest room at one of the stops. He is terrorized by white boys in cars looking for trouble and is followed by two sadistic white youths on a



street. But the worst experience he undergoes is that of "feeling like a Negro," as though his skin color has begun to permeate his spirit. Mr. Lerner, in exploring what is encountered by a quasi-Negro, has told us what we are already well aware of, and this is the principal fault of his movie. He has stuck to the surface facts of prejudice, the shameful meannesses brought about by encrusted habit, ignorance, and fear, but he does not convey that basic injury to the psyche that comes from (as one character puts it) being "black in a white man's country." Just as he seems about to probe this matter, he shies away from its complexities, and although Mr. Whitmore makes every attempt to get his feelings across to us they don't impinge with salutary force.

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