A Touch of Vaudeville

Steve Vineberg

Present Laughter
by Noel Coward,
directed by Scott Elliott,
Walter Kerr Theatre, New York,
1997.

Hamlet
by William Shakespeare,
directed by Kenneth Branagh,
1996.

WHEN Brian Bedford makes his first appearance as the dandy Sir Harcourt Courtly in the invigorating production of Dion Boucicault's *London Assurance* at New York's Roundabout Theatre, what we're seeing, in a delectably prolonged moment, is the whole history of theatrical entrances. He glides onto the stage with preening fatuousness like a peacock on a conveyor belt, flashing a dimpled smile and gently shaking his bewigged head as if to catch the light from several angles at once. Bedford is acknowledging the audience the way a star in this role would have around the time Boucicault wrote the play (1841). What modernizes his theatricality is that this first image of him is actually consistent with the rest of his performance: he plays Sir Harcourt as a man so enamored of the figure he imagines he cuts in the social world that every time he enters a room, he is—in his own mind, at least—a beloved personality sailing onto a stage. And what makes Bedford's performance feel not just modern but contemporary is the edge of irony in his entrance, glittering like tinsel. "See? This is how it was done," the actor is telling us. "Isn't this style silly?" Then he seems to add, with a barely perceptible wink, "And don't you just love it?"

Joe Dowling's revival of *London Assurance* is a tribute to Boucicault, for whom playwriting was so finely honed a craft that he could turn out literally hundreds of plays (some in England, some in America), and who presented himself, unapologetically, as a commercial entertainer. The delight my Saturday matinée audience at the Roundabout took in both Bedford's performance and the play, with its comedy-of-manners sheen and its miraculously engineered—and ridiculous—farce machinations, was similar to the kind of response theatergoers are having to the Kander-Ebb musical *Chicago*, which Walter Bobbie and Ann Reinking have remounted in a loving tribute to Bob Fosse, the director-choreographer of the original mid-Seventies production. Fosse was an entertainer, too, but unlike Boucicault he was haunted by what he saw as the hollowness of his own talents. The contradiction between the amazing sleight of hand he could pull off and his cynicism about it defined his style; it made him a distinctly Vietnam-era version of a stage magician. The new *Chicago* wrings almost all the self-loathing out of the material—it never really belonged there in the first place—and polishes it up to a very high shine. I have fond memories of the 1975 production, despite its slightly sour aftertaste, but this one is pure pleasure. At *Chicago* you don't feel you're being made to pay for your fun, the way you do at a George C. Wolfe show like *Jelly's Last Jam* or *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*, which lures you in with dazzling musical numbers and then turns around and preaches that any black performer who entertains a bourgeois white audience is a pandering race traitor.

What Wolfe can't see is what the great black musicians and dancers he burlesques in *Bring in 'da Noise*—like Billie Holiday and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson—knew in their bones: that the theatrical impulse, the impulse to entertain, is a noble one. Kenneth Branagh's four-hour film of *Hamlet* and Scott Elliott's New York revival of an infrequently produced Noel Coward comedy, *Present Laughter*, may not have much in common, but they're unified by the same impulse and the same conviction.

THE DISCREPANCY between the reviews for *Present Laughter* and the happy crowds it drew during its run at the Walter Kerr Theatre confirm that sometimes audiences can be a hell of a lot smarter than critics. The press carped that Elliott turned Coward's play into a three-ring circus and that, by interpolating a moment of full frontal male nudity into the third act—which makes the pursuit of the play's protagonist, a narcissistic actor named Garry Essendine (Frank Langella), by a rather pathological would-be playwright named Roland Maule (Tim Hopper) overtly homosexual—he was wounding the dignity of this Forties comedy and outing the playwright at the same time. Did the New York reviewers read the play? It's not exactly *Private Lives* or *Design for Living* (Coward's masterpieces). *Present Laughter* is masterfully assembled and often hilarious, but it's a shameless whirligig of a play, as commercial as that other richly enjoyable gossip jag about theatrical life, the Kaufman-Ferber comedy about the Barrymores, *The Royal Family*. No, Coward didn't have Roland Maule flash Garry Essendine; he never would have gotten away with it in 1946. He also didn't come up with the supreme show-biz touch of having the socialite Lady Saltburn (Judith Roberts) enter with a dachshund in the middle of Act Two so that it can end up nestled in Frank Langella's arms, licking his face, as the curtain falls. He didn't think of it.

The play, premised on Coward's jokey self-portrait, is an increasingly preposterous series of scenarios, piled one on top of another until the whole structure tumbles. And the moment when the plot comes crashing down is meant to be immensely satisfying, like the floods and flash fires and other grand stage effects were in the spectacle-melodramas of the last century (and in D. W. Griffith's movies, which translated them, with a you-can't-beat-this flourish, to the big screen). Coward doesn't even try to tie the dangling strands of the plot together at the end; he simply leaves Roland Maule locked offstage in the spare room and one of Garry's mistresses locked off the other side in the library and has Garry retreat to the shelter of his ex-wife's apartment, imploring her to put him up for the night—and, by implication, to take him back because she's the only one who can keep him out of trouble. Their hushed exit together echoes the moment at the end of *Private Lives* when Amanda and Elyot sneak off on tiptoe while their new spouses are screeching at each other. It also echoes the finale of *Design for Living*, when the two men release the woman they both love from her inadequate marriage to a well-meaning prig and go off, bound together forever in a bond of entirely anti-social love and devotion. The difference is that the end of *Present Laughter* lacks the emotional weight of the earlier two. Coward was doing this one just for fun.

Present Laughter is set in Essendine's London flat over the period of the week or so before he traipses off on tour to Africa with a new property. (Elliott pulls the time period back to the spring of 1939, before the Blitz and the rationing took the flash out of English fashion—a little gift to his set and costume designers, Derek McLane and Ann Roth, who come through magnificently for him.) In this brief interlude between shows, Garry manages to have a one-night stand with a credulous young thing named Daphne Stillington (the talented Kellie Overbey, a memorable Shelly in Gary Sinise's production of *Buried Child* last year), whom he puts off in the morning with an antiquated speech about how his dedication to the theater dooms him to solitude. She's more resilient than he counted on, however; she gains a second entrée to his suite a few days later when he indulges Lady Saltburn with a few minutes' audience for her aspiring actress niece, not realizing it's Daphne who will be reciting for him. Garry's ex-wife Liz (Allison Janney) drops by to inform him that his producer, Morris (David Cale), is probably sleeping with Joanna (Orlagh Cassidy), the wife of his backer, Henry (Jeff Weiss), imperiling their whole collaborative enterprise. She leaves it to Garry to weed the truth from Morris, but he screws up the assignment: he falls for Morris's protestations of innocence, and then manages to get seduced by Joanna himself. And then there's the persistent Roland Maule, whose unbearable play Garry has read and detested; when he tries to pass on a few relatively gentle words of advice, Maule's air of moral and intellectual superiority—he disdains the shallow, inconsequential plays Essendine chooses to appear in—stings him into a tirade about the theater so passionate that the young man becomes immediately smitten. The Maule plot is the circus's third ring.

Though it's graced with Coward's unerring instinct for comedy of manners and his genius for language, the play is vaudeville. The additions Elliott and the star, Frank Langella, make to it are perfectly in keeping with its cornucopic style, even when—as with the cabaret-style musical numbers that preface the acts (performed by Steve Ross, who also plays the butler, Fred)—they don't work. As it happens, almost all of them do. This is theater as banquet: the more courses the better, providing the seasoning's good and they're executed with panache. Derek McLane has built a towering staircase cascading down from stage left and landing center stage, mostly so Langella can appear, thundering, at the top in Act One (when he's awakened, irritated, from a late and deep sleep) and make a long and glorious entrance down it. Langella may not be the sublime onstage technician Brian Bedford is, but he's only one rung below Bedford, and that's high praise. When his Garry Essendine fancies he's been affronted (which happens, on the average, every five minutes), he peels his eyes like a cobra about to strike and his quips come out nasal and elongated, half withering wit and half self-pitying pout. Langella plays this man as a little-boy narcissist, turned on by the glory of his own charisma. Of course he keeps falling into bed with whatever girl (or boy, possibly—he isn't immune to Roland's come-on) dreams up some threadbare excuse for drifting back to his flat. In Langella's portrait, it's clear that all this strutting around and making melodramatic scenes and dropping wisecracks gives Essendine a perpetual hard-on. As anyone knows who saw Langella play Dracula on stage in the Seventies (or even in the disappointing movie version), he's a devastatingly sexy performer: I don't think it's a stretch to say that Langella equates the kind of enjoyment an audience can get from an entertainer with sexual pleasure. His performance in *Present Laughter* is premised on that link (which is also the mechanism that makes sex farce work).

The standouts in the supporting cast include Kellie Overbey, Tim Hopper, and Margaret Sophie Stein (she played the Polish peasant Ron Silver's married to in *Enemies, A Love Story*) as an absurd Swedish housekeeper who's always smoking a cigarette in a holder. And there are some wonderful physical bits in Lisa Emery's reading of the role of Garry's secretary, Monica Reed; Emery is so tall and thin and tooth-

some that she made me think of some exotic jungle beast. But the only actor on the stage who's really a match for Frank Langella is Allison Janney. Janney is probably best known to audiences as Tony Shalhoub's girlfriend in *The Big Night*, but she's had better parts. She was heartbreaking, for example, in the lynchpin role in "Old Friends," the final episode of the TV show *Law and Order* to feature Michael Moriarty as Assistant DA Ben Stone. She played a trapped innocent, an enterpreneur whose testimony against her mobster partner Stone forces, getting her killed in the process; then he resigns in despair over what he's done. If you saw her on the stand in that episode, telling a truth she knows will sign her death warrant, and then saw her shimmering high-comic veneer in *Present Laughter*, you might have to pause for a moment, as I did, before realizing it's the same actress.

If Scott Elliott's production is self-indulgent, then so is Coward's play. After all, it's Coward, not Elliott, who tossed in Essendine's lecture to Roland Maule:

> To begin with, your play is not a play at all. It's a meaningless jumble of adolescent, pseudo-intellectual poppycock. It bears no relation to the theater or to life or to anything...I would like to tell you this. If you wish to be a playwright you just leave the theater of tomorrow to take care of itself. Go and get yourself a job as a butler in a repertory company if they'll have you. Learn from the ground up how plays are constructed and what is actable and what isn't. Then sit down and write at least twenty plays one after the other, and if you can manage to get the twenty-first produced for a Sunday night performance you'll be God-damned lucky!

Coward couldn't resist; he felt that he knew better than anyone how plays are constructed and what is actable and what isn't. Watching this *Present Laughter*, you're not inclined to argue. The title of the play borrows from *Twelfth Night*: "What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;/Present youth hath present laughter;/What's to come is still unsure." Coward read in these lines a defense for mirth, for fleeting joys, since life is ephemeral. He believed that being a provider of mirth was a worthwhile way to spend your life.

IS IT self-indulgence to make a four-hour movie of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? In his 1948 version Laurence Olivier excised Fortinbras, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the "How all occasions do inform against me" soliloquy, and (even if you're not sold on Ernest Jones's Freudian interpretation of the play, which inspired Olivier's) it was a smashing picture at just over half the length of Kenneth Branagh's. Branagh has a reputation for ego that's roughly the equal of Garry Essendine's, and his decision to move from a stage career to a film career with a remake of *Henry V* with himself in the title role made it clear that he was out to challenge Olivier, whose 1944 version of Shakespeare's great war play is, justly, one of the most celebrated of all directorial debuts. Branagh followed *Henry* with a jarring change of pace: the witty, ostentatiously high-style thriller *Dead Again*, in which he seemed to be modeling himself on Orson Welles in his *Lady from Shanghai* period. Now here he is playing Olivier again; he even emulates Olivier's Scandinavian blond hair (though the aerial shot of Hamlet's bier being borne away at the end is a nod to Welles's *Othello*).

Branagh's desire to see himself in the company of the two most beloved—and, it must be admitted, the two most egocentric—actor-directors after Chaplin is only troublesome, of course, if you don't like his movies. I'm crazy about them, for the most part, though I could have lived without *Peter's Friends* and *A Midwinter's Tale*, both of which erred on the side of smugness. (His short film *Swan Song*, adapted from Chekhov, wasn't much, but it framed a touching performance by John Gielgud—its raison d'être.) Though in the final analysis Olivier's *Henry V* may have won the competition, Branagh's demonstrated extraordinary skill and confidence, it included some bravura sequences, and it showcased the actors—not just Branagh himself—beautifully. And it had a consistent vision, a far more modernist one than the earlier, wartime, government-commissioned version. Though it would be too simple to call Branagh's *Henry* anti-war, certainly the war section was touched with the grand-scale realist approach Welles had taken to the Battle of Shrewsbury scene in his Falstaff picture, *Chimes at Midnight*; it contained moments that shell-shocked the audience. Moreover, his 1993 adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, featuring Branagh as Benedick and the incomparable Emma Thompson (also his co-star in *Dead Again*) as Beatrice, may be the most successful transcription any movie director has made of a Shakespeare comedy. (Its only rival, perhaps, is the *Midsummer Night's Dream* mounted in Hollywood in 1935 by the great stage impresario Max Reinhardt, with Jimmy Cagney as Bottom.) In the joyous opening sequence of *Much Ado*, both the soldiers marching home triumphant from war and the women awaiting their return go through communal rituals of stripping down, washing, and donning their finery to meet the eagerly awaited opposite sex. The elaborateness of the preparations is a wonderful joke that acts as a dumbshow for the entire structure of romantic comedy (for which *Much Ado* is the classic model), where all the dressing up, like the obstacle course that separates the hero and the heroine, is a prelude, prolonged with delicious agony, to the undressing that comes, inevitably, in the finale.

That Branagh had the temerity to take on the uncut *Hamlet* turned out to be the best news of the 1996 movie year. His version, made with the superb collaboration of cinematographer Alex Thomson, production designer Neil Farrell, costumer Alex Byrne, and editor Tim Harvey, is a majestic spectacle, projected (for those lucky moviegoers living in cities with theaters equipped for it) in seventy millimeter. Branagh has given it a high-romantic nineteenth-century look, with a fairy-tale castle, misted gothic woods, snowy nocturnal landscapes across which the Norwegian prince Fortinbras (Rufus Sewell) leads his army, and a magnificently appointed—and thickly populated—court. He's even included a swashbuckling climax, where Branagh's Danish prince plays Errol Flynn to defeat Laertes (Michael Maloney) in a duel and win his revenge on the treacherous king (Derek Jacobi) who has murdered his father and finally, unwittingly, his mother (Julie Christie). And within this storybook setting, probably the most engaging play ever written unfolds with the kind of excitement you normally experience with *Hamlet*—ironically—only when you read it. Olivier aside, directors tend to muck it up with overintellectualized concepts; I can't think of a play that's suffered as much from bad grad-student thinking. Branagh releases *Hamlet* from the burden of scholarship; he approaches it dramatically, not as a text for debate. There was a lot of unearthing to be done. Perhaps because no play is greater than *Hamlet*, none has been more victimized by the admiration of its critics; scholarship has borne down on it so crushingly that generations of students can recite the myth, created by critics, of the wimpy, delaying prince. In the most revealing analysis of the play I've ever encountered, *Hamlet and Revenge*, Eleanor Prosser argues that

> the Hamlet that we see is busily, even energetically, active: greeting friends, taunting fools, struggling with moral issues, denouncing corruption, outwitting spies, planning a play, considering murder, lashing out at his mother, killing an eavesdropper—mourning, joking, shouting, singing, racing through the castle with every sense alert. With so much exciting activity going on, how could the audience cluck their tongues over this pallid melancholic who is paralyzed into inaction? If anything, the appearance of the Ghost has shocked Hamlet out of his lethargy, rather than into it.

Prosser is describing Branagh's Hamlet. His energy, both as director and (especially) as star, galvanizes the movie.

He makes a number of mistakes. The movie begins badly, with Jack Lemmon as Marcellus and a parade of effects for the entrance of the Ghost (Brian Blessed) that belong more properly to one of the *Exorcist* pictures. The silent flashbacks that augment the narrative speeches feel like the Classics Illustrated edition; they're distracting, like Patrick Doyle's bombastic score. Branagh presents so many contradictory perspectives on Polonius (Richard Briers) that you get the sense he's searching in vain for one that will work. It's smart to ground the madness of Ophelia (Kate Winslet) by showing her inconsolable grief when she learns that her lover, Hamlet, has killed her father, but making her, in her final appearance, a lunatic of such violence that she has to be straitjacketed runs counter to the way Shakespeare wrote her mad scene. Alan Levitan, the marvelous professor who solidified my love of Shakespeare when I was a Brandeis undergrad, used to claim that Olivier would have to spend some time in purgatory for the willowy, frail Ophelia he set loose in the world, but I've never agreed: he didn't invent her, Shakespeare did. (Look at the famous Steichen photo of Lillian Gish as Ophelia in the Gielgud *Hamlet* of the Thirties.) Branagh's not the first director to want to build up her strength: it didn't work when another gifted Shakespeare interpreter, Robin Phillips, tried it in Stratford, Ontario in the Seventies, either.

Branagh includes too many shots of Rufus Sewell's Heathcliff eyes. In fact, there's too much of Fortinbras altogether; the overlay of his march through Scandinavia, which culminates in his arrival at the end to take over the throne of Denmark, is the one time in the film when Branagh imposes a concept foreign to the play. Since Hamlet's death from the poisoned rapier—more of Claudius's treachery—leaves the kingdom without a direct heir anyway, the notion that Fortinbras has been plotting to take it by force seems extraneous. The way Shakespeare constructs the play, we don't care much who becomes king once Hamlet has expired—and in fact Fortinbras's willingness to sacrifice his soldiers over a minute parcel of land doesn't speak very well of him, so Branagh's attempt to make him heroic falls through. That Hamlet praises his actions in the "How all occasions do inform against me" soliloquy is problematic, but then the speech itself, where he damns himself for his comparative inactivity, is a problem; even if you buy the delaying-prince theory, it's hard to share Hamlet's point of view when, having just slaughtered Polonius in the mistaken belief that he was thrusting his sword into the king, he's now being taken under heavy guard to a ship that will bear him to England. Surely his inability to kill Claudius under these conditions—if we really think revenge is such a hot idea in the first place—can't be held against him. Prosser argues that the placement of the speech may have been an editor's error, since it doesn't appear in either the First Folio or the First Quarto editions, and speculates that Shakespeare may have cut it before the first production went up. Considering that it's both a redundancy and (coming at this point in the play) a contradiction, her guess is persuasive. Branagh's stuck with it, since he wants to produce *Hamlet* uncut, so he goes ahead and makes it his centerpiece, just before intermission, pulling the image of the contemplative, self-berating Hamlet into close-up in a dramatic reverse zoom. (A student of mine called it Branagh's "As God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again" moment.)

There are some casting mistakes, too, but they're part of an overall scheme—a Branagh trademark—that I admire. The guest-star rosters that fill his Shakespeare films function as both a tribute to old Hollywood and a contemporary approach to casting Shakespeare that does away with the distinctions between classically trained actors and American actors with other kinds of theatrical education. Branagh

isn't so much of an egotist that he can't appreciate other performers; in all of his movies except *Peter's Friends*, he's unfailingly generous to his fellow actors (and his lack of generosity in *Peter's Friends* may have been partly the consequence of disastrously misconceived material). In *Much Ado,* he used Denzel Washington as the Prince, Michael Keaton as Dogberry, and the young Robert Sean Leonard as Claudio; *Hamlet* features—in addition to Jack Lemmon as Marcellus—Billy Crystal as the Gravedigger, Robin Williams as the court fop Osric, Gerard Depardieu as Reynaldo, and, cast opposite the elegant Rosemary Harris, Charlton Heston as the Player King. (The rest of the cast is English and includes John Gielgud, Judi Dench, John Mills, and Richard Attenborough in walk-ons.) The only bright spot in the casting of Lemmon and Depardieu is that their roles are so tiny, and Williams, who contributed a memorable few comic scenes as a guest star in *Dead Again*, does nothing here you haven't seen him do before. But only a purist could object to Crystal's Catskills kibbitzing in the graveyard scene, and even a purist might perceive that this scene is about legacy: Branagh's making the observation that Shakespeare's clowns were the stand-up comedians of their day. And his direction of Heston humanizes this actor in a way no previous screen role has; he and Harris are—who would have guessed it?—a terrific match.

Except for Michael Maloney's overly exuberant Laertes and the confusions in Richard Briers's Polonius, the principal actors gathered around Branagh's riveting star performance are rock solid. Kate Winslet is a moving Ophelia, especially in the nunnery scene (which I've never seen better played or better directed, even by Olivier and Jean Simmons). Nicholas Farrell taps deep reserves of feeling in his portrayal of Horatio. Timothy Spall and Reece Dinsdale make a fine Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though I couldn't help thinking that, *pace* Tom Stoppard, a little of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern goes a long way. Julie Christie is a luminous Gertrude, gliding through the Danish court in exquisite gowns that suggest that designer Alex Byrne must, quite sensibly, have fallen in love with her. Christie's one of the great modern movie actresses; the revelation here is that she can command Shakespeare's verse, too. Perhaps her rendition of the queen as both sensual and sensible, doting yet capable of understanding, will kill off those fatuous, empty-headed Gertrudes we've all seen. The most innovative idea in Branagh's and Christie's treatment of this character is that, once Claudius has stowed Hamlet away to England, she becomes disillusioned with her husband; she sees him treat Laertes' rebellious return to England as a political problem rather than a human one, and his instinct toward self-preservation rather than compassion distances her from him. She realizes, with a jolt, that she's married a stranger.

Derek Jacobi's Claudius is the ultimate political animal, so skillful at presenting an image of himself as a wise and caring monarch that, for his first few scenes, we're taken in too. (Jacobi is brilliant.) Or we would be, if Hamlet's inky cloak and his refusal to hide his mourning mood weren't presented in cruel contrast to Claudius's smiling countenance as he plays to the crowd. Claudius escorts Gertrude, still wearing her wedding clothes, into court and makes a public exhibition of their happiness; Hamlet sits down in the middle of the celebration and keeps his words to both his uncle and his mother quiet, understated, as if insisting on the privacy—and the appropriate decorum for the months following a funeral—that Claudius is violating. Later, in the mousetrap scene, Hamlet pulls a cunning reversal: he leaps down to the stage in the middle of the traveling players' show and annotates it publicly, directing his comments to the king and queen, so that the entire focus of the court audience shifts away from the play and up to the royal couple seated on the highest tier of the theater. He beats Claudius at his own game—and that's when Claudius becomes truly dangerous.

Shakespeare wrote this man as a politician, of course; Branagh isn't making anything up. But no production I've seen of *Hamlet* has exposed the layers of political corruption in the Danish court as convincingly as Branagh's. He plays the "To be or not to be" soliloquy not as a reverie on suicide but as a moral debate on ways of being in the world, in an immense room circled with mirrored doors. Behind one of them—a two-way mirror—Claudius hides, spying on his nephew. When Ophelia enters, Hamlet is passionate with her; but she's so nervous with him that eventually he cottons onto the fact that they're playing a public scene, not a private one. That's when he locates Claudius. He talks right to the two-way mirror, so his line about how all married couples but one should live is a direct threat. And you can see in Jacobi's face that Claudius gets it.

Branagh's ideas are all there in his adaptation, which is a superlative example of the role of a screenwriter in bringing drama to the screen. (His nomination for the Adapted Screenplay Oscar generated the usual jokes about stealing credit for transcribing Shakespeare, but the writers among the Academy voters knew exactly what they were doing; the booby-trapped art of adaptation isn't necessarily a matter of adding dialogue.) The reason the movie is such a knockout is that Branagh thinks both theatrically and cinematically—the way Olivier and Orson Welles, both men of the theater, thought. He's able to drive through his *Hamlet,* in a four-hour stretch so speedy it feels almost reckless, by acknowledging that the play is even more a feat of showmanship than it is a literary masterwork. The coups Branagh pulls off, like the mirrored soliloquy and the anatomy of the Claudius-Gertrude marriage, are dependent on an understanding that the power of theater and film to move us and deepen our awareness of human interaction is inseparable from their power to entertain us. Branagh's Errol Flynn moves are part of the *Hamlet* package; so is Billy Crystal's vigorously funny shtick. Branagh's being a vaudevillian in his soul makes him even more of a Shakespearean.□

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