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Shakespeare the Savior or Phantom Menace?: Kenneth Branagh’s A Midwinter’s Tale and the Critique of Cynical Reason

By COURTNEY LEHMANN

At last I can see that a balance between professional and personal life can be achieved, and I hope that I can continue to keep it in view. (Branagh, Beginning 244)

And he did, but only for a short time, though it was a blessed time. This was during the making of Much Ado About Nothing, the fourth film in which he acted with and directed Emma Thompson and the point at which it all seemed to come together: the private life and the public one, the balance between fear and aspiration, work and love, striving and contentment. And there was the lush Tuscan landscape [and] the healing sun, a story that had, as he says, “much sunshine in it” and the sense of well-being that would, in retrospect, convince him that he had never been as happy as he was then. (Kaye 76)

As the sequel to the gritty filmmaking battle Branagh wages in his production of Henry V (1989), Much Ado About Nothing (1993) resonates as a much-needed retreat into a “make-believe” world where the sun never sets on Branagh’s personal and professional empire. Through Much Ado, Branagh catches a glimpse of the balanced life that has eluded him ever since adolescence, when he was forced to become “English at school and remain Irish at home” (Beginning 23), and acting became an escape from playground bullies seeking an Irish scapegoat for their English rage. But Much Ado’s embracing sunshine burned itself out with unanticipated haste: Branagh’s next film, a monster-sized Hollywood version of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, was a $43 million flop, and his better half, Emma Thompson, left him to face the press with remarks like “Ken’s so tired ... his sperm are on crutches” (qtd. in Kaye 76). Though Branagh claims that his modus operandi in life as well as art stems from a strict Protestant work ethic and, therefore, the impulse to “make-behave” rather than “make-believe” (76), after this string of personal and professional disasters, he found himself in need of “the fairytale ending, which we beggarly actors so long for, and rarely find” (Branagh, Midwinter vii). His next set of Shakespearean adaptations begins, appropriately, with an unlikely fairytale that points the way toward this promised end: A Midwinter’s Tale (1995). Released in Europe under the title In the Bleak Midwinter, this deliberately minor film was not only created as an intimate, low-budget, profit-sharing venture shot entirely in three weeks, but is also about the three-week collaboration of a small

1. I wish to thank Laurie Osborne for her extraordinarily helpful suggestions for revision. I am also grateful to Kathy Howlett and Linda Charnes for their extensive comments on earlier versions of this essay.

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group of profit-sharing actors rehearsing for a Christmas performance of *Hamlet* in a provincial English town called Hope. *A Midwinter's Tale* thus stages a return to the world of the “make-believe” by way of the “make-believe”—not the “make-believe” that is the stuff of fairytales like *Much Ado About Nothing*, but more simply, the imperative to manufacture belief itself in a postmodern culture which valorizes the cynical over the hopeful, the corporate sellout over personal integrity. By returning to the primal, small-scale, and often thankless scene of regional theater, *A Midwinter's Tale* positions itself in the breach where “affect” seems to have lost its connection to “art” and seeks to restore belief in the cultural value of Shakespeare. In so doing, this “little Hamlet film,” as Branagh describes it (Arnold, “To Film” 41), exonerates his guilty conscience for having wandered so far afield from his theatrical roots, even as it sanctions his immediate return to Hollywood form with his very big *Hamlet* film (1996) produced only one year later.

Though Branagh denies the fact that *A Midwinter's Tale* is “pure autobiography,” he admits that “[t]he gap between life and art in this case was quite narrow” (*Midwinter* vi). Shot in black-and-white to convey a retreat in time and the feel of docu-drama, *Midwinter* unfolds through a motley ensemble of characters who replay scenes from Branagh's lifelong battles between theater and film, regional authenticity and Hollywood commercialism, company integrity and individual success, cultural marginality and the mainstream. Accordingly, we might view this film in light of what Hazel Carby describes as the search for a “usable past.” Of paramount importance for marginalized or diasporic peoples, the journey into the past as a form of cultural retrieval acquires a particular urgency in the context of the “postmodernist urge to exalt indeterminacy” which, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes, too frequently obscures the fact “that ‘cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories’” and, therefore, invite imaginative reconstruction (201). As an internal émigré from a war-torn Belfast to English suburbia, Branagh frequently thematizes his own fractured sense of personal identity in his films. *Midwinter*, however, combines this personal occasion with a postmodern one, staging the collective madness of a culture bent on “going to pieces” (*Midwinter* 59) while using these same pieces to generate an “imaginative reconstruction” of Branagh’s own past and, as we shall see, his future.

But Branagh has his work cut out for him, for within postmodernity, as Fredric Jameson observes, “the subject has lost its capacity ... to organize its
past and future all blend into the "eternal present" of commodity culture, wherein the simulacrum replaces the original, "real' history' gives way to "the history of aesthetic styles" (20), and the globalization of capital creates "a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced ..." (18). In this constant shuffle of surfaces without depth, the postmodern subject experiences spatial and temporal disorientation as a staple of everyday life. Perhaps a more important consequence of the subject's inability to negotiate the confusing space-time of postmodernity is the emotional disposition of the subject, which, according to Jameson, is characterized by an almost universal "waning of affect," indeed, the "virtual deconstruction of the aesthetic of expression" itself (11). Liberated from the psychopathologies of the monadic ego associated with modernism (15), the so-called "decentered subject" of postmodernism experiences "not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling" (15, emphasis mine). In other words, in a culture that privileges exchange values over human values, the aesthetic of individual expression is replaced by an anaesthetic sensibility, which stems from the fact that our cognitive and affective structures have not evolved in tandem with the cultural forces of postmodernity, as Jameson concludes: "there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace" (38).

Providing a local habitation and a name for this disturbing "waning of affect," Peter Sloterdijk posits cynicism as the principal strategy for negotiating emotional survival in an increasingly impersonal culture. "Today," Sloterdijk explains in his Critique of Cynical Reason, "the cynic appears as a mass figure ... because advanced industrial civilization has produced the bitter loner as a mass phenomenon" (4). But if cynicism has become the default vehicle for voicing discontent in postmodern culture, it, too, has undergone a mutation. No longer the solitary gaze of the wise but bitter critic secretly hoping to change the system, the new cynicism "successfully combines enlightenment with resignation and apathy" (Huyssen xvii). This latest incarnation of cynicism, then, is best described by the paradox of "enlightened false consciousness." Emerging "with the passing of defiant hopes," the new cynicism is distinguished by a pervasive sense of acting against better knowledge: "[I]t is afflicted with the compulsion to put up with preestablished relations that it finds dubious, to accommodate itself to them, and finally even to carry out their business" (Sloterdijk 6).

Offering a brilliant variation on this theme, A Midwinter's Tale explores the connection between theatrical performance and the idea of literally "acting against better knowledge." The film's preoccupation with cynical reason

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is announced in its opening frames, cued by Noel Coward's musical recording of "Why Must the Show Go On?":

Why must the show go on?
It can't be all that indispensable.
To me it really isn't sensible
On the whole
To play a leading role
When fighting those tears you can't control.

Why kick up your legs
When draining the dregs
Of sorrow's bitter cup?
Because you have read
Some idiot has said
The curtain must stay up....

Oh why must the show go on?

Substituting "Shakespeare" for "show" as the object of its cynical refrain, *A Midwinter's Tale* relentlessly asks: why must *Shakespeare* go on? What can Shakespeare possibly offer Branagh in the bleak midwinter of his discontent—let alone offer a postmodern culture bent on maintaining a chiseled neutrality as the great modernist investments in art and affect "go to pieces"? Indeed, it is not only the "aesthetic of expression" but the *aesthetic itself* that is jeopardized within postmodernity. As Jameson explains: "There is a sense in which the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds—they've already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible" ("Consumer Society" 190). Hence, Jameson concludes, the only viable aesthetic practice within postmodernity is pastiche—the random assembly or uninspired "imitation of dead styles" (*Postmodernism* 17-18). But if this is the case, then why must the show or, for that matter, Shakespeare—the quintessential "dead poet"—go on? Branagh's challenge in *A Midwinter's Tale* is to call the bluff of this question by staging a retreat into a theatrical world of *Hamlet*, wherein the past, far from being a dead-end source of artistic (im)possibility, becomes a place for mapping the future. What is so initially striking about this resolutely *auteur*biographical film, then, is the fact that for the first time in Branagh's directorial career, he is not "in" the film as a character. However, this distancing strategy enables him to engage in cynical speculation about the future of his filmmaking enterprise and, more profoundly, about the viability of any postmodern project cobbled together from the "shreds and patches" of Shakespeare.7

It seems only fitting that *A Midwinter's Tale* stages doubts about the cultural value of Shakespeare by using the Bard's greatest doubter. Hamlet, as

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7. See Hamlet's cry upon seeing his father's ghost, "A king of shreds and patches —" (3.4.102).
the showcase for this behind-the-scenes drama. Not coincidentally, *Hamlet* has great personal significance for Branagh, for this is a play which, he claims, "has obsessed me for the last twenty years" (*Midwinter* vi). Branagh identifies Hamlet as a figure who embodies all of his personal and professional doubts. For example, in his autobiography, *Beginning*, Branagh frequently refers to his tendency to get depressed as "the recurrent Hamlet in me" (127, 137). And, where there is depression, there is usually guilt, an emotion that also finds its point of reference in *Hamlet*, as Branagh professes: "[Hamlet's] words continue to haunt me. I have always suffered from original guilt. About everything. I don't know whether it's a peculiar part of the Irish inheritance, but it's a powerful and motivating force in me, and my acting has never been free from its grip" (58). In *Midwinter*, our first glimpse of the "Branagh" character, Joe Harper ("Harper," significantly, is Branagh's mother's maiden name), reveals a man haunted by a Hamletian nature. Outfitted in all black, Joe (Michael Maloney) addresses the camera directly to perform a rather unusual opening soliloquy. "I was thinking about the whole Christmas thing," he explains, "and quite frankly I was depressed. I mean I'd always wanted to live my life like in a[n] old movie—a sort of fairy tale you know? Mind you, I suppose if you think that a lot of fairy tales turn out to be nightmares, and that a lot of old movies are crap, then that's what I did" (*Midwinter* 2-3). From the very beginning, *Midwinter* offers cynicism as a strategy for negotiating the disappointing gap between fairy tales and reality, between the "make-believe" and the "make-behave." But Joe has not given up hope altogether. Despite the fact that he is in the throes of unemployment and the end of a relationship with "a psycho from hell" (2), he claims that the one thing which can save him from personal suicide is to engage in what his agent describes as "professional suicide" (3): to exorcise his lifelong obsession with *Hamlet* by forming an ad-hoc company to perform this play in the provinces at Christmas. Disregarding the slew of warnings from his savvy agent, Margaretta D'Arville (Joan Collins), Joe proclaims: "I have to do this play. I've given my life a deadline" (3).

Despite Joe's determination to put his life on the line for the future of Shakespearean theater, we soon learn that he is leading a *double* life, for *Midwinter* revolves around Joe's psychomachian struggle between the forces of theater *and* film. Claiming he's "just curious" about his standing following a read-through for a leading role in a "stupid science-fiction film" (3), Joe is informed by Margaretta that his arch-rival, American actor Dylan Judd, is in line for this promising three-picture deal. Joe's inquiry resonates as the first autobiographical flashback in Branagh's search for a "usable past"—his search, that is, for a place where the memory of use value is *not* effaced, and where, consequently, belief in Shakespeare and human values like "hope" remains unsullied by cynicism and the relentless pursuit of exchange value. Accordingly, the conversation between Joe and Margaretta signals a point in Branagh's past wherein this fault line between belief and cynicism is first etched. The beautiful and sophisticated Margaretta D'Arville, for example,
offers an unmistakable portrait of Branagh’s consummately cosmopolitan agent, Pat Marmont, the figure who first tempted Branagh with what he describes as “the lure of a big American movie for the English acting profession” (106). Convinced he was a shoe-in for the lead in Amadeus, Branagh lost the lucrative part to American actor Tom Hulce; bitterly, he recalls rehearsing his Oscar acceptance speech when the telegram from Marmont arrived with the bad news. But there is a future, as well as a past. at stake in Joe’s seemingly flip inquiry about “that stupid science-fiction film,” for here Joe alludes to an even bigger American movie deal in the works for Branagh: George Lucas’ Star Wars prequel trilogy.

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As early as 1994 when Branagh was composing the screenplay for A Midwinter’s Tale, talk began about young Kenneth starring as the even younger Obi-Wan Kenobi, a part that would enable him to follow in the footsteps of another Shakespearean master, Sir Alec Guinness, the original voice of “the Force.” Believing that this opportunity of a lifetime was his for the asking, Branagh maintained that “I’m an actor for hire at the moment, so if George chooses to give me a call, I’ll be all ears ...” (qtd. in Parks 4). All ears and better yet all eyes on a huge budget and a projected astronomical gross. With preliminary plans underway for launching an epic film of his own—the full-text Hamlet—Branagh was well aware that this dream-film would require an unprecedented amount of financial backing, which the timely Star Wars deal would conveniently ensure. But time was also the crucial problem posed by this otherwise fortuitous conjunction of Shakespeare and Star Wars. To put it simply, by the time shooting for Lucas’ trilogy would be finished, Branagh would be too old to play the lead in his own Hamlet film. Branagh firmly believes that Hamlet should not be played by an actor who is older than thirty-five, and in 1994, when plans were underway for Lucas’ first picture in the trilogy, The Phantom Menace, Branagh was thirty-four (Kaye 74). To make matters more complicated, Branagh’s initial hyping of his prospective Hamlet as an “event film”—a potential blockbuster on a par with Lucas’ pending trilogy—only led to a negative comparison of Shakespeare with Star Wars. Branagh soon learned that while an event film for Lucas translates into a base-line production budget of $100 million for merely one of three films, the same does not apply for Shakespeare. Branagh’s spirited negotiations with Castle Rock Productions led to the revelation that Hamlet would be a discount dream or no dream at all, with the glass ceiling set at $20 million. This quantitative difference of $80 million separating Shakespeare from Star Wars begs the question of the qualitative:

8. In a 1993 interview with Sam Crowl, Branagh explained that the fate of his dream-Hamlet would depend on “the commercial success of Much Ado About Nothing. If I can’t make Shakespeare live for a broad audience with all the Hollywood that got packed into the film,” Branagh sighed, “then I doubt I will be able to raise the financing for a Hamlet film” (qtd. in Crowl 8).
can Shakespeare really galvanize a “force” of his own in the face of a millennial craving for intergalactic melodrama? Who will win this battle for Branagh’s and the filmgoing public’s soul: Hamlet or Obi-Wan Kenobi?

Generated in the crux of these two movie opportunities, A Midwinter’s Tale reflects Branagh’s attempt to work through this provocative dilemma. It is important to note that when Midwinter was being filmed, Branagh was still very much in the running for the part of Obi-Wan Kenobi, for it was not until 1997 that Scottish star Ewan McGregor won the role. Believing he would have to choose between his dream-Hamlet and Lucas’ trilogy—between, in a sense, the “make-behave” and the “make-believe”—Branagh seems to have been quite tantalized by the Star Wars option, explaining that he decided to “mak[e] the little Hamlet film, A Midwinter’s Tale as a sort of premature consolation” in case he didn’t produce the real Hamlet film (qtd. in Arnold, “To Film” 41). Accordingly, Midwinter reveals its preoccupation with Branagh’s extra-diegetic dilemma in its repeated attempts to lure “Joe” away from his Hamlet production with a “big movie” offer involving a “sci-fi trilogy” which, in turn, is identified with Star Wars through a series of more specific allusions. For example, as opening night of the Hope Hamlet approaches, we are told that a major film company is scouting locations for a futuristic film nearby. Mirroring the production plan of the original Star Wars approaches, we are told that a major film company is scouting locations for a futuristic film nearby. Mirroring the production plan of the original Star Wars trilogy, this production company is “doing the interiors in America and the cheap locations in Europe” (Midwinter 62). Subsequently, hoping to draw the filmmakers to see the Hope Hamlet, a member of Joe’s acting company suggests courting the film producer by greeting him “in an R2-D2 party hat ...” (85). And, nearing Midwinter’s climactic moment, Joe’s agent will inform him with hilarious naïveté that he is being offered a role “in a movie concept that could be Star Wars all over again” (86). Ultimately, Joe will have to make a choice between Shakespeare and this Star Wars knock-off, but unlike Branagh, Joe will accept the offer of a guaranteed contract in the sci-fi trilogy despite the fact that he will have to abandon his tired troupe of actors hours before opening night, leaving them with no director and no one to play Hamlet. But ’tis the season for miracles, and Joe will return in the nick of time to deliver his opening lines, having rejected the cynical sale of his soul to Hollywood megabucks. Midwinter thus resonates as what Slavoj Zizek identifies as a fantasy of renunciation, a fantasy that is about the rejection, as opposed to the gratification, of selfish desire (Tarrying 281). As we shall see, however, only by going through cynicism, having unmasked this coping mechanism as a postmodern cop-out, is Branagh able to renounce this alternative to “hope” and Hamlet. By undertaking an imaginative reconstruction of his past through Joe, Branagh is able to construct an illusion of choice—the choice, that is, of Shakespeare—in a profitable present which, ironically, will never include an offer from Lucas.
What is particularly striking about the dilemma Branagh faces in *A Midwinter's Tale* is its distinctly postmodern quality. For not only are both Lucas and Branagh demonstrating the confusing space-time of postmodernity by creating prequels that glance simultaneously in past and future directions, but they are also “knocking off” their own work, exposing the postmodern aesthetic as a vacuum for the self-conscious deployment of dead styles, blank parody, and pastiche. The question is, in this striking concurrence of filmmaking enterprises that leads to implicit comparisons between Branagh and Lucas, Shakespeare and *Star Wars*, is there also critique? *Midwinter* models a range of responses to this question through Joe, a mock Faustus figure torn between the conflicting interests of capitalism and conscience.

Though Joe is introduced to us as someone who initially attempts to resist the temptation of Hollywood and its cynical ethos of self-advancement, he does so only by resorting to a strategy of overcompensation, which entails taking great pains to promote his theatrical production as an explicit rejection of exchange value. Offering a Utopian vision of shared labor replete with psychological fringe benefits, Joe’s *Hamlet* is invested with an aura of spiritual payoff. His advertisement, for example, calls for “six fellow journeymen” willing to undertake a “Co-operative Experience” of “PROFIT-SHARE, ‘SPIRIT-SHARE’ ... ACCOMMODATION AND ‘INSPIRATION’” (*Midwinter* 4-5). Of course, this experience of “profit-share” and “spirit-share” will be brought to us by “Shakespeare.”

Quite different from Branagh’s other film adaptations, which represent Shakespeare through an array of lush cinematography, all-star casts, and extensive marketing campaigns, *Midwinter* attempts to posit Shakespeare as the site of a “surplus value” removed from the exigencies of market capitalism. Shot in black-and-white through a camera inflected with an almost news-like objectivity, *Midwinter’s* production values offer none of the visual seduction of Branagh’s other Shakespearean *mise en scènes*. Nor does *Midwinter* add “color” in other ways, for it resists the lure of Hollywood name recognition in its casting (with the notable exception of Joan Collins), as well as the promotional gigs and metadramas for which Branagh, like other postmodern auteurs, has become known. Rather, *Midwinter’s* insulation from a media- and money-saturated society is reflected in its extraordinary self-containment as a film which mirrors its own process of production;

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9. In the context of postmodernity, wherein, according to Jameson, the cultural producer is destined to repeat the styles of the past, “parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody...” (*Postmodernism* 17).

10. Of course, Joan Collins poses a major exception to this otherwise low-key cast of English theatrical “stars.” For American audiences, Collins represents the glamorous, Hollywoodized, honorary Brit-turned-“American” for a culture raised on *Dynasty* and Collins’ unforgettable role as Alexis Carrington. In *A Cinema Without Walls*, Timothy Corrigan observes that the *auteur* today is a “commercially conditioned” figure who has become associated more with “the hyping of” rather than “the making of” films.
for *Midwinter* is both produced by and is about the production of “profit-share” and “spirit-share” in the name of Shakespeare. Thus, the surplus value associated with Shakespeare in *Midwinter* is disentangled from the postmodern web of exchange value and re-enlisted in the service of a struggle over *human* values—specifically, the affective deprivations and excesses associated with cynicism and hope, respectively.

*Midwinter* plays out this struggle between cynical self-interest and shared hope through its changing representations of Shakespeare’s status as an “ideological quilting point.” Slavoj Zizek explains that “society is always traversed by an antagonistic split which cannot be integrated into the symbolic order,” and the stake of ideological quilting “is to construct a vision of society which does exist, a society which is not split by an antagonistic division, a society in which the relation between its parts is organic, complementary” (*Sublime* 126). In Branagh’s *oeuvre*, this “quilting” function is consistently assigned to Shakespeare and, by extension, to Branagh-as-director. In *Midwinter*, however, Branagh defers the second half of this operation to Joe, who explains his theatrical plans to his agent:

Joe: People need to know it’s an ensemble …

Margaretta: … and that you’re the biggest ensembler. (*Midwinter* 5)

 Appropriately, Joe’s interest in creating an organic ensemble of actors who share their artistic “spirits” and their actual “accommodations” also involves a social mission. For we soon learn that the location of the production will not only be staged in Joe’s hometown of “Hope,” but also in a church that he intends to save from the capitalistic clutches of a property developer who plans to demolish it. Positioned in the postmodern breach between “profit-share” and “spirit-share,” Shakespeare emerges in *Midwinter* as a suturing mechanism par excellence. But as Zizek warns, “perceived as a point of supreme plenitude,” the quilting point merely “holds the place of a certain lack” (*Sublime* 99). Posing a stark contrast to Branagh’s previous films, *A Midwinter’s Tale* stages an ongoing struggle with this “lack,” exposing the cynical cracks in Joe’s Shakespearean mortar as early as the audition sequence, where we find him hysterically insisting that the audition piece “doesn’t have to be Shakespeare.” The production, he stammers, will be “a really collaborative piece but—if you’d-like to do something, it doesn’t have to be Shakespeare—you know—whatever—this production wants to be extremely innovative in the way we communicate—” (*Midwinter* 6, emphasis mine). Joe’s chop-logic betrays his fear that Shakespeare might *not* be the best vehicle for the “collaborative” and “cooperative,” let alone “innovative,” parameters of his project. *Midwinter* thus begins rather inauspiciously, already calling Shakespeare into question as the raw material of Joe’s quilting operation.

It is no coincidence that Joe’s plan for an innovative ensemble production that promotes actor autonomy offers a botched blueprint of Branagh’s own Renaissance Theatre and Film Company. This company, Branagh explains, was formed in the interests of creating a “practical realignment of the collab-
orative process between writer, actor and director that would step up the con-
tribution of the performer,” a company that would do away with the philo-
osophy of the “director-as-guru” (Beginning 169-70, 177). In A Midwinter’s
Tale, however, Joe’s “wide-eyed and optimistic” (Midwinter 6) attitude
toward such a collaborative enterprise deteriorates over the course of the
auditions, and he finds himself reverting to the “director-as-guru” role in dis-
cussions of how Shakespeare is “to be or not to be” performed. The first audi-
tioner, for instance, certainly meets Joe’s requirement for “innovative
communication”—so innovative that what she’s communicating is not intelli-
gible, as she holds flip cards which read “THIS IS TO BE OR NOT TO BE”
while tap dancing. Next, a young actor performs a hideous impersonation of
Laurence Olivier as Richard III, a self-conscious nod to Branagh’s own habit
of revering, but never satisfactorily appropriating, his Shakespearean prede-
cessor’s inimitable style. Concerned that the young actor has not quite made
the part his own, Joe directs him to “drop the voice ... and drop the hunch
and the gestures” (Midwinter 7), following which the eager auditioner does
some loosening-up preparations and delivers the lines in exactly the same
way as before. The exit of this first-time actor is followed by the entry of the
veteran Henry Wakefield (Richard Briers), who strikes another blow to Joe’s
growing need to assert creative control by refusing to audition and insisting
that he play the king: “Less of the director bullshit love—just say yes” (8).
After several more auditioners come and go, Joe is crestfallen but still hope-
ful, continuing to insist that the production be “free and experimental” (11).
Yet, a variety show ventriloquist with a Cockney dummy who yelps “alas,
poor Yorick. I knew him ...” (8) is not what Joe has in mind. Neither is drag
queen Terry du Bois (John Sessions), who traipses into the audition announc-
ing: “I’m not playing Polonius darling. Dirty Gerty’s got my name on it. I’m
here to play the queen” (10). Sessions’ character is central to Branagh’s
“imaginative reconstruction” of his past, for ever since Branagh and Sessions
attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art together, Sessions has been a
continual source of comic relief for Branagh. But by the end of the audition
sequence it is Joe who is in need of comic relief, as a cynical smile signals the
retreat of his directorial verve into the muted recognition that certain differ-
ences simply cannot be “quilted over.”

The aesthetic antagonisms that threaten Joe’s vision of an organic society
during the audition sequence are quickly dodged with the return of the spec-
ter of big business, against which Joe is able to reinvest himself in his
company ideals. While discussing practicalities of the production with
Margareta, the film’s principal representative of what Linda Boose and
Richard Burt call “the bottom-line only mentality of the 1990s” (16), Joe
sheds his cynical smile in favor of a rekindled idealism. With elitist detach-

11 Sloterdijk explains that the new cynical posture is often marked by a “fatally clever smile” that “plays
on the lips of those in the know”—those who know better, that is—who maintain “a radical, ironic
 treatment . . . of ethics and social conventions, as if universal laws existed only for the stupid . . .” (4).
ment, Margaretta claims that she'll never get “people in the business” to attend Joe's production of *Hamlet* in the “God-forsaken venue” of the Hope Church, to which Joe curtly replies: “It's not for those kind of people” (*Midwinter* 14). “Those people” are people who have bought into the conflation of “show business” with “big business” and who remain, therefore, unmoved by appeals to social missions or higher principles alone; for such people, Joe implies, “beliefs” are formulated only by the prospect of financial backing. Eager to distinguish himself as someone who stands above bottom-line bullying, Joe proceeds to formulate his personal belief in the value of the Hope *Hamlet*: “Look,” he explains, “it's a one-off production by a group of (I suspect) mad, but passionate people who are really hungry to do it, who will be performing it in a place that really needs us. If we do it well and honestly, everything else will follow” (14). Joe's taking-the-high-road tone clearly evinces the idea of doing things “the hard way”—without the corrupting forces (or finances) of the proverbial establishment—as a litmus test for gauging his own and, eventually, his castmembers' commitment to the project. But Margaretta quickly lures Joe toward the low road, calling his sappy bluff in the interests of shrewd business:

Margaretta: Ooo I love it when you get all visionary.
(Pause). Oh, you know you really were close to that movie.

Joe: Oh really?

As we shall see, such subtle interjections of filmic temptation repeatedly occur in the midst of Joe's most “visionary” theatrical manifestos, progressively chipping away at his hard-way-or-bust resolve. But for the sake of the ensemble, at least for now, Joe manages to maintain his evangelical sense of purpose, which he articulates upon the company's arrival at the Hope Church: “Well, this is it folks, the old hill church of Hope. We’re not just doing a play. We’re here on a mission. To save this place. To get the developer out and the people back in” (19). As the group “oohs” and “aahs” at this beautiful setting for *Hamlet* and their new-found sense of importance, it seems as though Shakespeare just might be the opium that these masses are looking for to fuel their social mission. But Joe's sister and Hope-resident Molly bursts onto the scene with a reality check: “Oh God, you!” Molly cries, glaring at Joe, “I thought you'd got it wrong. It's not this church. Everybody loves this church. It's the big one on the edge of the village” (19). Unable to conceal his disgust, Joe exclaims: “Not the big horrible red one?” (19). Suddenly, the hard way and the high road fork as the gross materiality of the “big horrible red” church—where the company will be eating, sleeping, and acting—makes it all too clear that the work that lies ahead is, unavoidably, dirtywork. Not surprisingly, the group falls to bickering, foreshadowing the inevitable point at which their collective project will, in fact, “go to pieces.”

One of the founding beliefs of Branagh's own theater and film company is that Shakespeare brings people together by offering “something for every-
one" (Beginning 193). While films like Henry V and particularly Much Ado About Nothing successfully negotiate the challenge of generating an unprecedentedly mass audience for Shakespeare, Midwinter assumes a cynical position toward the Bard’s “ensembling” power. Molly initiates the attack as she waxes romantic about the ability of a good theatrical performance to revive feelings of community; unaware of what play the company will be performing, she muses: “I hope it’s something Christmassy, a comedy” (30). When she is informed that the play is by Shakespeare—and worse, that it is Shakespeare’s Hamlet—Molly replies with a scathing impromptu soliloquy: “Hello kids. Do stop watching Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and come and watch a four-hundred-year-old play about a depressed aristocrat. I mean it’s something you can really relate to” (30). Molly’s attack on Shakespeare is particularly damaging because it occurs in the same breath as her articulation of the need for “community.” Explicitly undermining Joe’s use of Shakespeare as an ideological quilting point, Molly represents the classic cynical posture of being “in the know,” the stance of the embittered bystander whose privileged access to truth expresses itself as conscientious objection. Her tirade underscores the bleak “truth” that the entire company, and particularly Joe, have been trying to avoid: that nobody can, in fact, “relate to” Shakespeare in a society saturated by the ever-morphing mass media and the mighty seduction of spectacle.

Molly thus poses the central challenge of A Midwinter’s Tale: rearticulating the value of Shakespeare in a culture wherein value is measured exclusively in economic terms and being “in the know” translates too easily into “not knowing one’s Shakespeare.” As Boose and Burt explain, if the model of reception offered by the smash hit Clueless (Heckerling 1995) is any indication of Shakespeare’s future in media culture, then pride in not knowing one’s Shakespeare may carry the day (8-11). Indeed, the obsession with conspicuous (and vacuous) consumption of everything but Shakespeare that Clueless thematizes is yet another symptom of the postmodern pathology that supports “superficiality” as its “supreme formal feature” and an affect-less “neutrality” as its principal “aesthetic of expression” (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 68-70). And, as Sloterdijk observes, where such cynicism is a cultural dominant, “too little ... is felt,” and when it is felt, “it is expressed in a language of worldly concerns: too little money, too little time, too little sex, too little fun, too little security, and so on” (285). In this context, we must wonder whether or not Shakespeare does indeed have any “special effects” up his four-hundred-year-old sleeve. Joe’s (and Branagh’s) implicit challenge, then, is to locate a surplus value in Shakespeare that cuts...
through this culture of consumption without accountability, by using Shakespeare to create special *affects*—foremost among them, hope.

On the eve of the first rehearsal, however, Joe is prepared to forsake hope and *Hamlet* in the interests of becoming something of a Mighty Morphin Power Ranger himself, confessing to Nina (Julia Sawalha) that “[r]ight now I wish I’d got that stupid part in that stupid film and just had to turn up for six months in a funny suit and drink tea all day” (*Midwinter* 32).13 The fact that there is no tea to be had during the next morning’s read-through only adds insult to Joe’s sense of injury over the filmic “fringe benefits” he has sacrificed for “the hard way” of theater. As a menacing cloud of cigarette smoke quickly emerges in the absence of tea (the English arbiter of civility), it becomes increasingly apparent that “the hard way” is only succeeding in producing what Sloterdijk describes as “hard subjects”—the cynical facades of a postmodern culture slouching away from the suturing of humanity toward the “splitting of humanity” (325). The first “split” in the fabric of Joe’s quilting operation reveals itself when Henry Wakefield discovers that his Queen will be played by the drag queen Terry Du Bois, a revelation that sends the repressed tensions among this group of strangers in search of instant scapegoats as a vicious cycle of glares and petty squabbles sweeps through the cast. As if on cue, Noel Coward’s voice-over of “Why Must the Show Go On?” returns at full volume, suddenly sounding very much like a critique of Joe’s directing. “[Y]ou’re not giving us much fun,” the voice complains, “This laugh-cry-laugh routine’s been overdone”:

*Hats off to show-folks
For smiling when they’re blue
But more cameo po-folks
Are sick of smiling through…
(Midwinter 34-35)*

As Coward drones on, Henry suddenly announces that he’s through, storming out of the reading in a homophobic rage, exclaiming: “I can’t stand pouffes!” (35).14 Henry’s destructive outburst sends a domino effect rippling through the cast as the threads of community begin to unravel: Tom (Nicholas Farrell) catalogs his personal affliction with the cuts made to his already-bit parts, Camforth (Gerard Horan) drinks himself into the disinterested stupor of a functional alcoholic, and the typically mild-mannered Nina accuses the sharp-witted Vernon (Mark Hadfield) of “being a naughty cynical sausage”

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13. Joe’s description of his role in such a film suggests Branagh’s prospective role as Obi-Wan Kenobi, which would indeed involve a lot of sitting around in a funny suit and drinking tea while large segments of the action—the “special effects”—are computer-generated.

14. As the only figure who speaks with a distinct accent (in this case a lurid “camp” inflection) and suffers from stereotypes intended to render him an “alien” or unnatural man, Terry Du Bois functions as the film’s representative of cultural marginality, as well as a subtle reminder of Branagh’s own “unnatural” status as an Irishman who impersonates an Englishman for a living. Placing the burden of cultural difference on his English-born, RADA schoolmate, Branagh is able both to deflect and to imagine the resolution of his own very real experience of cultural anxiety through Sessions, whose veneer of marginality falls with the curtain at the end of each working day.
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(39), a remark that applies to the entire ensemble. Thus ends the first day of rehearsals for the Hope Hamlet.

As the remainder of the week’s rehearsals take their cues from here, Joe is confronted not only with the hard fact that there is no second week of rehearsals, but also with the hard faces of a cast whose gloomy expressions silently insist that the Hope Hamlet honeymoon is over (61). With four days to go until opening night, the odds of pulling off this small victory for Shakespearean theater are tantamount to those of the English troops faced at Agincourt. Clinging to his last shreds of idealism nonetheless, Joe attempts to muster his weary acting troupe by launching into a somewhat deflated thespian equivalent of Henry V’s famous battle speech, “once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more”:

We have set ourselves a challenge there is no doubt. But at Shakespeare’s own theatre, a six-week season would have produced thirty-five performances of seventeen different plays including at times four world premieres, so ... I don’t think we should lose our nerve. (62)

Joe’s tangential idealization of Elizabethan stage practices offers a momentary distraction, but not an answer, to the question that plays on the lips of all the castmembers: if not “why Shakespeare,” as Molly questioned earlier, then “why now?” After all, this is the 1990s, not the 1590s. And, as Terry puts it in his unmistakably camp dialect, why bother when “Sally Shakespeare” is so bloody difficult ... Especially for us new girls” (63)? Rather ingeniously, Midwinter stages a reply that justifies the existence of Branagh’s own company. Appropriately, this reply proceeds from the mouth of one of Renaissance’s founding members, the stalwart Shakespearean Richard Briers, who plays the crotchety old homophobe Henry. Picking up where Joe’s nostalgic speech left off, Henry explains that he always wanted “to do the classics” in the popular style of “the old Shakespeare Companies” (63). “Unfortunately,” Henry sighs, “I was born out of my time. When I joined the business it was ... divided in two. There was the ‘proper’ theatre, you know Stratford and all that, and then there was the commercial stuff” (63). In describing the “breach” in his own life that the Hope Hamlet is destined to “quilt” over, Henry actually creates the demand for a company like Renaissance, which Branagh formed in the spirit of eliding the gap between the “classic” and the “popular” Shakespeare with his “‘total’ theatre, a combination of high and low culture that [is] visually exciting, fast and intellectually stimulating” (Branagh, Beginning 182). But the enthusiasm Branagh once articulated for the company ideals of his dead poet’s society is the stuff of the good old days of Renaissance. The fact that he feels compelled in Midwinter to justify his company’s mission in the first place suggests a certain degree of doubt about the future of Renaissance and its predominantly Shakespearean repertoire. Thus, as Branagh grapples Luke Skywalker-like outside of the diegesis with the “light force” of Shakespeare and the “dark force” of Star Wars, we think back to Joe’s battle cry only moments ago, and hear very faintly: “once more unto the breach, dear Ken, once more.”
Branagh’s professional use of a Shakespearean repertory serves a very personal purpose for this Belfast-born bardolater, for Branagh appropriates Shakespeare’s transcendent cultural status as the quilting point that keeps his own hyphenated, Anglo-Irish identity from splitting at the seams. Not surprisingly, during the final, intense days of rehearsal for the Hope Hamlet, we watch each character operate under similar auspices, aligning their professional interest in Shakespeare with the hope of piecing their personal lives back together. This tendency to mask the “personal” beneath the “professional” is a defining feature of the new, enlightened cynicism, offering a poignant illustration of its governing ethos of acting against better knowledge. According to Sloterdijk, what enlightened false consciousness ultimately produces among subjects is the specter of the “cynical functionary,” whose “hard,” “official” posture conceals a “privately sensitive soul” that has been victimized by its “affliction with enlightenment” (6-7, emphasis mine). Thus, what distinguishes the new cynic from its more traditional precursor is the ability “to work in spite of anything that might happen, and especially, after anything that might happen,” a strategy that glosses over a personal sense of futility with an abundance of professional engagements (Sloterdijk 7, emphasis mine). But for actors, especially Method-trained actors, the personal and the professional are not so easily separated. Indeed, the idea of “acting against better knowledge” takes on a whole new meaning for Joe’s zany castmembers, who know very well that what they are doing will not prevent them from going to pieces all over again once the curtain falls.

Accordingly, as each character takes his or her turn at revealing the personal breach which Shakespeare is presumed to suture, the collaborative facade of the company deteriorates altogether, offering a compelling illustration of the paradox whereby “the cynic-as-bitter loner” is produced “as a mass phenomenon” in postmodern culture (Sloterdijk 4, emphasis mine). Henry’s disclosure concerning his personal investment in this professional production of Hamlet sets the stage for the confessions of the cast’s younger generation, who similarly wish to remove themselves from the ranks of “bitter loners” by casting their lot with Shakespeare. Carnforth is the first character to come forward, explaining his haunting preoccupation with the fact that he hasn’t “dealt with parental expectations terribly well” (Midwinter 57). Carnforth’s parents, particularly his mother, were “rather disappointed” with his decision to become an actor; but, he adds, “they d[id] a lot of scrimping to put me through drama school ... they really believed in me” (57). The problem is, Carnforth has not yet delivered a performance worthy of their “scrimping,” and thus he is particularly invested in his Shakespearean role as a rite of passage into the ranks of both thespian and parental acceptance.

Significantly, Branagh, too, recalls his parents' “immense bewilderment” at his decision to become an actor rather than fill the vacancy his brother left in the family business (*Beginning* 33). Nonetheless, when it came time for young Ken to depart for RADA, there was a hard-earned £100 wrapped up in a sentimental card from his mother, and a heavy burden of parental expectations on his shoulders. Later, during another break in the action, Nina reveals that she has experienced an equally disturbing lack of expectations from her parents ever since she decided to become an actress. Her father insists to this day that her interest in “working in the theatre is just a terrible passing phase” (*Midwinter* 58). Nina adds that she does have one staunch supporter—her husband—but he happens to be dead. All that Nina has left, in other words, is her ability “to work in spite of anything that might happen, and especially, after anything that might happen.” For Nina, life itself is a form of theater, and the only way to survive is to act against better knowledge, as she explains to Joe: “Life is a silly old business—you fall down, you get up, you fall down, you get up” (59). Shakespeare is quite literally a reason to get up in the morning, and, like Carnforth, Nina looks to the Bard as a maker, rather than a breaker, of families.

What all of these actors fail to comprehend in the midst of their searching moments of personal truth is the fact that they are all “acting out” the part of Hamlet. Whether realized in the form of the bad child, the bereft lover, or the jaded philosopher, Joe’s castmembers are all unconsciously performing just another face of Shakespeare’s mercurial Dane. Joe, however, prefers to believe that the barrage of provocative, personal confessions stems from his own directorial focus on Method acting, a performative mode that requires actors to adopt the stance of “bitter loners” through challenging moments of psychological reflection on their characters’ inner lives. Attempting to inspire his troupe to new histrionic heights, Joe offers a veritable encomium to the Method in the following set of directions: “I think we have to worry a little less about the exterior of these characters ... and concentrate a little more on each individual’s needs, their drives. What is it they want and need? Why ... ? Not how. The How will take care of itself if we ask always, why, why, why?” (62). Unwittingly, Joe has just delivered the death blow to his own need to carry off this production, for without the alibi of the “how,” the “why” will eventually be left with no answer other than “why bother”? Indeed, Joe’s directorial method quite literally backfires during the final two days of rehearsal, precipitating a chain not of emotional breakthroughs, but of emotional breakdowns, among the cast. Consequently, Shakespeare becomes synonymous not with hope, but with cynicism, and we recognize the strange appropriateness of Sloterdijk’s contention that behind a “capable, collaborative, hard facade,” cynicism merely “covers up a mass of offensive unhappiness and the need to cry” (5).

This affective change is initiated by Terry, who undermines Nina’s equation of Shakespeare with “family” by using Shakespeare to articulate his own experience of social antagonisms. In the midst of rehearsing the famous bed-
chamber scene between Hamlet and Gertrude, Terry stops abruptly and, with a sigh of desperation, tells Joe he cannot go on (Midwinter 67). In the spirit of a well-meaning but naive Method-trained director, Joe urges him: “You must [go on], you must. You’re just avoiding confronting it as an actor that’s all, you have to feel her guilt, you have to confess to your son—” (67). Bursting into tears, Terry responds: “I tried, I tried,” and dashes out of rehearsal, adding: “he wouldn’t listen” (67). Terry’s dramatic departure leads to the confession that his one sexual encounter with a woman led to a child who hates him: “He was ashamed of my job and what I was. Am,” Terry corrects himself, “And [he] never wanted to see me again” (68). But suddenly Terry dons a revelatory facial expression, conjuring Shakespeare as a source of cynical knowledge about the futility of family ties: “The thing is,” he explains, “this play brings it back more than I thought possible. Shakespeare wasn’t stupid. Families you know, they don’t work do they?” (69, emphasis mine). As if to add an exclamation point to this statement, we cut back to the rehearsal, where Joe is giving Nina’s Ophelia the following too-close-to-home instructions:

Ok. Ok, let’s go again from Ophelia’s song and please, please give this scene the intensity it deserves. You’re all shying away from the power of this play. Now this scene is about loss … crucially the loss, the death of someone [you] have … experienced a profound love for … we have to believe you have suffered such a loss. (71)

The book-end scene to Terry’s emotional exit, here Nina breaks down crying and charges out of rehearsal, overwhelmed by Joe’s inadvertent allusion to the very real and recent loss of her husband. As Joe’s organic community of actors crumbles one by one, it becomes increasingly obvious that the common culprit is Shakespeare. Indeed, if Shakespeare is serving as a quilting point for Joe’s production, then it is only in the form of generating—on a collective scale—“a mass of offensive unhappiness and the need to cry.” Thus, as Shakespeare exposes the desperate fissures in the cast’s personal and professional lives, “the hard way” becomes too hard even for Joe, who calls his agent and asks, with a tremor of desperation in his voice, “Have you anything exciting to tell me?” (71).

Joe’s question sets the stage for Midwinter’s climactic showdown between the forces of theater and film. With the landlord of the Hope Church demanding a week’s advance rent for the pending two-week Christmas run of Hamlet, Joe’s excuse for calling Margaretta is to borrow money to foot the bill, but we know that what Joe really wants is a long-term financial fix through that “stupid science fiction film.” Margaretta proceeds to inform Joe that Dylan Judd’s agent has blown the negotiations, and now the notorious Hollywood producer Nancy Crawford (Absolutely Fabulous’s own Jennifer
Saunders) is scouting for a lead and for locations near—of all places—the town of Hope. With this filmic seed planted and the Shakespearean chips down, Joe paces back to the church for the final day of rehearsal only to find that the two castmembers who haven’t yet blown their fuses (Tom and Vernon) are now at each other’s throats. “Right,” Joe cries in exasperation, “that’s it, that’s it, that’s it. That. Is. It” (73). As the cast stands completely dumbfounded by this unanticipated stage direction, Joe launches into a suicidal tirade which tears away the veneer of the “professional” concealing everyone’s all-too-personal investment in the Hope Hamlet:

What is the point? ... we all want to do what’s best for the show, but look at us? We argue. We’re depressed. We’ve set ourselves too great a target. It is too personal for us all. It’s a big play and we keep running up against it and hurting ourselves.... This whole idea, oh God, I see it now ... it’s just pointless. Churches close and theatres close every week because finally people don’t want them. The Hope Hamlet is a loser, led by the chief loser, yours truly, and circumstances just force me to ask myself, not only what is the point of carrying on this meaningless shambles, but as the Yuletide season takes its grip I ask myself what is the point of going on with this miserable tormented life? I mean can anyone tell me, please, please, what makes this fucking life worth living? (74, emphasis mine)

When the professional fails, personal knowledge prevails, emerging, as Sloterdijk provocatively puts it, in “the fireworks of meaninglessness that begins to understand itself” (196). Here, Joe’s expository “fireworks” bear the mark of his unbearable understanding that he can’t work in spite of anything that might happen, as his once formidable personal resolve dissipates into professional disaster. Yet, in the next few delicate hours following this outburst, the company climbs out from under Joe’s death sentence and rallies, putting on an incredible rehearsal and pitching in all their savings to pay off Joe’s debt. Triumphantly, Molly announces: “We paid it this morning Joe. The show can go on” (Midwinter 78). But this small victory for theater is punctuated by an urgent phone call from Joe’s agent, who is about to wage an epic challenge to Joe’s Shakespearean resolve in the name of film.

After a brief bout with “hope,” then, this message from the voice of big business contains Joe’s cynical wake-up call. Astonished, Joe listens as Margaretta tells him that he has earned the film offer of a lifetime. Explaining that American actor Dylan Judd is literally out of the picture, Margaretta tells Joe that “[t]hey want you for the three pictures guaranteed. Guaranteed Joe ... and I’m going to fight for a cut of the merchandising” (86). Apropos of Branagh’s brewing Star Wars “offer” during Midwinter’s creation, this sci-fi trilogy deal quickly assumes Lucas-like contours, as Margaretta informs Joe that he has been chosen for the key “sidekick” role (86). Of course, Branagh’s projected role as Obi-Wan Kenobi is also a sidekick role, for Lucas’ trilogy prequel revolves around the story of Darth Vader and his “sidekick” Kenobi before the dark side of “the Force” came between them. This Star Wars subtext becomes explicit as Margaretta continues her bid, informing Joe that “[w]e can’t hold them for ransom if the first picture’s a monster hit, but we do get three years’ money and six months a year
employment guaranteed, *in a movie concept that could be Star Wars all over again*” (87, emphasis mine). But there is a catch. In his excitement and rush to get back to rehearsal, Joe hangs up with Margaretta before she can tell him that Nancy Crawford’s plane leaves tonight—with Joe and *without Hamlet*. Thus, it is in the midst of the technical rehearsal only hours before opening night that Margaretta intrudes with the message that Joe must choose between what he aptly refers to as “*The Job*” (93) and the financially good-for-nothing Hope *Hamlet*. “It couldn’t be more last-minute,” Margaretta exclaims. “It’s a wonderful opportunity for Joe. *And there really isn’t a choice. I’m sure you’ll all understand but there really is no choice*” (94, emphasis mine). Between theater and film, in other words, the “choice” is obvious. Reduced to spectators of their own tragi-comedy, the cast watches as Joe’s social mission to save Hope and *Hamlet* from demolition is itself leveled by the false choice of film and “the force” of financial security. With the exception of Nina, the castmembers congratulate Joe through clenched teeth, echoing Terry’s conclusion that between film and theater, “there’s just no comparison” (*Midwinter* 95). And, with one more twist of the knife, Joe offers a brutal rationale for his decision, betraying the cynical proselyte he always already was:

Joe: *Finally it’s Shakespeare and nobody’s interested.* (95)

Deaf to Nina’s retort, “They’re interested in Hope” (95), Joe embraces the cynical ethos of acting against better knowledge; he “knows what he’s doing but he’s doing it anyway” as he relinquishes his discount dream of Shakespearean theater for a big-budget, albeit “stupid,” science fiction film.

But it is not long before the theatrical “empire strikes back,” as this scene’s provocative pairing of “Shakespeare” and “Hope” creates a force of its own to battle Joe’s celluloid sell-out. Against all odds, Joe’s company once again rallies without him, and Molly, Joe’s sister but non-castmember, offers to play Hamlet in his place. Much to the company’s surprise, the Hope Church fills to capacity, and its “rapt and riveted” audience members include Terry’s estranged son, Carnforth’s overbearing mother, and Nina’s disapproving Dad (*Midwinter* 101). Even before the performance begins, then, Shakespeare is becoming a quilting point for otherwise antagonistic entities. And, when Joe, the pivotal “ensembler,” returns just in time to deliver his opening lines, we sense that Shakespeare has indeed returned to the haunts of “hope.”

Accordingly, in the dazzling and bizarre performance that follows, Joe’s and Branagh’s recipe for a “total theatre” materializes in a production that indeed offers something for everyone. For example, Carnforth’s opening line “Who’s there?” resonates with an enticing paranoia, rising above the flurry of fog and phony machine gun fire that sets the audience not merely on the edge of, but also under, their seats. Later, an Ophelia scene played with soap opera melodrama musters catty “ooohs” and “aahs” from a crowd eager to participate in the action. And, by the final scene, when Horatio poetically sends Hamlet to the hereafter with “flights of angels,” handkerchiefs appear in the hands of even the most stoic spectators. Following wild applause, the performance of ideological quilting continues backstage, where a host of reunions
occur in the name of Shakespeare: Carnforth’s mother offers him the long-awaited approval he desires, Terry’s son tells him he’s a “wonderful queen, in every way” (Midwinter 111), and Nina’s father is finally convinced of his daughter’s acting ability. And, as the cast’s personal belief in the value of Shakespeare brings broken families together, Shakespeare’s collective use value is reinforced by the fact that the Hamlet production saves the Hope Church from destruction. As one critic concludes, then, “Joe’s production (and, by extension, Branagh’s) is reclaimed for a social purpose beyond critical appraisal. Great art, it is implied ... is universal: it can rally a community that has lost sense of its identity, and weave tight the straggling threads of family” (Jays 47).

Yet even as Shakespeare and theater emerge decisively on the side of “hope,” we realize that Joe’s production and Branagh’s film smack rather oddly of a Hollywood ending. Accordingly, Midwinter saves its most “special affect” of all for the film’s closing moments, when we learn that Joe has actually renounced Hollywood and the sci-fi trilogy offer. Virtually beaming with self-righteousness, Joe tells a dumbstruck Nina that “it isn’t often you turn down life-long financial security and a great career” (Midwinter 117). This trump card materializes Midwinter’s and, by extension, Branagh’s “fantasy of renunciation” which, Zizek reminds us, offers a “narcissistic gain” despite its apparent rejection of selfish desire (Tarrying 281 n12). The “narcissistic gain” that Joe derives from renouncing “life-long financial security and a great career” crystallizes in the distinction he earns as an authentic “artist.” Destined to remain a scraping, screwy, underappreciated prodigy with a purpose who rises above the cynical clutches of multinational capital and Hollywood fame, Joe glibly assures Nina of his acceptance of this role in the film’s final exchange: “You know,” he sighs, “despite my immense purity of soul and being cleansed by my art, I’m still always going to get depressed and mad” (Midwinter 118). Yet while we may applaud Joe’s decision here, it is difficult to applaud Branagh’s, for in the film’s final frames Branagh goes over the top to make Joe’s choice of the theatrical “high road” literally a no-brainer.

At the end of A Midwinter’s Tale a crude set of distinctions emerges between true art and mass art, classy and tacky, England and America. These lines are drawn when Absolutely Fabulous star Jennifer Saunders appears on the scene as the hotshot Hollywood film producer Nancy Crawford. Entering the otherwise low-key opening night of Hamlet as though it were a once-in-a-lifetime photo-op, Crawford sports loud clothing and a London Times reporter at her elbow because, she drawls in a thick Texas accent, “He figured it would be good to cover me catching some art” (103). Between conspicuous chews of her bubble gum she adds: “That’s a good paper, isn’t it?” (103). Here, Branagh throws down a rather heavy-handed gauntlet, establishing a series of unflattering contrasts between Joe’s “art” and Crawford’s (mere) entertainment, between England’s sophistication and America’s “lack” of culture. and, finally, between the small, refined feel of the Hope
Hamlet and the big (don't mess with) Texas aura of Crawford's star persona. These distinctions serve their purpose to a point, but Branagh is intent on going to disturbing extremes to render Joe's sci-fi film opportunity completely odious, producing an allegorical representation of Hollywood as a grotesque female monstrosity. This monstrosity emerges when Crawford announces the sci-fi trilogy's replacement hero and the victory of a filmmaking enterprise shamelessly fueled by exchange value. Having taken a liking to Tom's sexy but poorly acted performance in Joe's play, Crawford approaches the cast to explain that despite Joe's rejection of her offer "Still, as in all box-office hits we do have a happy ending"; pointing to Tom, she exclaims: "I'd like you all to meet the new 'Smegma'" (113). Objectifying both Tom and Joe as commodities ripe for exchange, Crawford surveys the "new Smegma's" bare-chested physique with a bigger-is-better grin, adding with painful slowness: "taller and chunkier, chunky is good" (112). But in case not everyone "gets" the Smegma joke, Branagh has Tom's girlfriend, "Fadge," sign on as Crawford's set designer, which leads to mistaken pronunciations and renderings of Fadge as "Vadge," "Snatch," and "Snot" in the film's closing moments (115). Between a Hollywood run amok with infectious feminine fluids and a pure and cleansing run of Hamlet in the provinces, what choice is there indeed? Clearly, this sci-fi trilogy has less to do with "the Force" than it does with farce.

* * *

In the search for a usable past, we cannot be content, as Sloterdijk argues, to "only stir up old stories. The innermost reflection leads not to a story but to a force" (287). Branagh's search for a usable past leads both to a force and a farce, embodied in A Midwinter's Tale and Hamlet, respectively. Created at a personal and professional crossroads, Midwinter embarks on a cynical detour that engages questions about the market value of Shakespeare in order to arrive at a vision of Shakespeare reinvested with hope. And, as Cornel West writes in Restoring Hope, this affect is gravely endangered by the cultural pathologies of late capitalism: "The quality of our lives and the integrity of our souls are in jeopardy.... Market moralities and mentalities—fueled by economic imperatives to make a profit at nearly any cost—yield unprecedented levels of loneliness, isolation, and sadness. And our public life is in shambles, shot through with icy cynicism ..." (xi). Like Sloterdijk, West aligns cynicism with the role of the passive spectator who watches this bleak parade with self-serving indifference and disbelief. Hope, on the other hand, is the site of an interventionist belief that "enacts the stance of the participant who actively struggles ... in order to change the deadly tide" (xii, emphasis mine). It is from the perspective of this affective shift—from complicit cyn-

16. West is careful to distinguish hope from mere "optimism." The optimist, in a sense, represents the flip side of the cynic, for the optimist likewise "adopts the role of the spectator" but does so to "survey[e] the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better" (xii). "Yet," West adds, "we know that the evidence does not look good" (xii).
icism to hopeful activism—that we must understand the force articulated by *A Midwinter’s Tale*, just as we must reverse the trajectory to understand the farce staged by *Hamlet*.

While the romantic ending of *A Midwinter’s Tale* strives to suggest that all that glitters is not gold, as use value wins out over exchange value and hope surmounts cynicism, the buck does not, in fact, stop here. For as we follow the film’s yellow brick road to restoring the lost place of art and affect in postmodern culture, we realize that *Midwinter* resonates with a subtle cynicism of its own. After all, given Branagh’s ensuing production of *Hamlet* and its valorization of the bigger-is-better filmmaking that *Midwinter* takes pains to reject, *A Midwinter’s Tale* comes to represent the road not taken—becoming, perhaps, a blank parody of its own idealism. As a profit-sharing, independent, petite *Hamlet* prequel that actively struggles against market mentalities both within and beyond the diegesis, *Midwinter* points toward a democratic revitalization of public life for which Shakespeare provides the unlikely alibi. In Branagh’s big *Hamlet* sequel, however, Shakespeare himself is rendered complicit in an economy of spectacular consumption, where contestation over the value of Shakespeare is measured in exchange value, as stars like Robin Williams, Jack Lemmon, Billy Crystal, Charleton Heston, and Gerard Depardieu vie to make their bit parts outshine the short frames of an impatient camera. This is a vision, then, of *Hamlet*-as-“star wars,” and its cynical logic betrays the very fear presumably purged by *Midwinter*—that Shakespeare is not a “star” in and of himself—that Shakespeare cannot speak to contemporary audiences without first being seen through a barrage of familiar faces and bankable bodies. Shot in 70-millimeter film, filled with 500 castmembers, and replete with textual additions from the second quarto and sexual additions from Branagh’s imagination, this four-hour epic is, to use Nancy Crawford’s unmistakable words, a “chunky” *Hamlet*. In short, this film, like its *true* prequel, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, puts the “brawn” back in Branagh.

Ultimately, *A Midwinter’s Tale* seems to offer a cleansing interlude for Branagh, who “proves”—through Joe—that he too can resist the lure of multinational capital and Hollywood fame and, by doing so in this fairytale, he doesn’t have to in reality. For we know that Branagh doesn’t have to renounce lifelong financial security in favor of personal integrity, nor does he have to renounce *Star Wars* in favor of Shakespeare. It is particularly odd, then, that with both of his *Hamlet* dreams come true, Branagh emerged from his search for a usable past feeling somewhat empty-handed, professing a rather profound uneasiness toward the future. Still unable to achieve the precious balance between the personal and the professional that abandoned him after *Much Ado About Nothing*, Branagh has recently confessed that “I’m certainly much more tortured by life than I am by the work. I’m certainly better at the work than at life. I’m always trying to transfer it back the other way” (qtd. in Kaye 81). Branagh’s work assures us that where there’s a “Will,” there is a way, but why Shakespeare continues to possess this power-
ful force in everyday life and art at the advent of the new millennium, is a question Branagh resists answering: “I want to resist becoming, through the power of movies, some kind of representative for Shakespeare in the popular mind . . . I think it’s very dangerous for me as an artist to feel as though I know what I am doing” (qtd. in Crowl 89). Offering a curious variation on a cynical theme, Branagh suggests that he “doesn’t know what he’s doing, but he’s doing it anyway.” Several years later, at the end of the “Hope” Presidency, this slogan sounds uncannily familiar—far too like the “compassionate cynicism” that threatens to divest the arts, education, and vital social programs of their future under the guise of reinvesting in the past and “the [already privileged] people.” Indeed, when viewed through the lens of the recent election year, the cultural politics of Branagh’s A Midwinter’s Tale resonate with an unexpected, if not allegorical, relevance. On the one hand, Midwinter exposes the fact that hope does not trickle down, but rather, like the most productive ensembles, is built from the bottom up. But on the other hand, when viewed in relation to Hamlet, Midwinter seems to suggest that when big (don’t mess with Texas) business deals are brewing, it’s best to ride the wave rather than risk being the one church—or child—that gets left behind. The truth, as campaign 2000 has shown, lies somewhere in the middle. Under the circumstances, as A Midwinter’s Tale proleptically implies, perhaps the best we can hope for is a Hollywood ending.

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