

HAMLET IN TOWN

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How often would a *Shakespearean* classic on the silver screen evoke an overwhelming response at a small town cinema theatre in the South – especially a theatre that catered to a preponderantly rural audience and specialized in dishing out ‘Republic’ Serials, Westerns, Swashbucklers and Slapstick comedies? It was therefore quite a surprise to see *Lawrence Olivier’s* Hamlet drawing a full house when it was first released in 1949 at a local theatre in Trichy. Obviously the blurbs must have done the trick. ‘A story of passion and revenge’, cried the posters which also carried a still of Hamlet and Laertes crossing swords. The audience was expecting to see an action – packed swashbuckler. I wondered how it would react to *Shakespearean* poetry.

The opening scene was well received. The imposing castle of Elsinore, Soldiers standing guard on its ramparts, the sudden appearance of a ghost clad in full armoured splendour – all these were ingredients that could never fail to impress any audience. Then followed scene after scene of dialogues and soliloquies in verse and the audience started growing restless. The scene in Hamlet confronted Gertrude in her bedroom was a minor disaster. The audience had somehow got the impression that Hamlet was going to molest his own mother. There were cat – calls and boss. ‘Take your hands off the lady, you brute!’, cried one angry voice. Luckily the appearance of the ghost saved the situation. This was regarded as divine intervention to protect the honour of the lady.

At last came the scene for which the audience had been eagerly waiting – the fencing contest between Hamlet and Laertes. Compared to the many Hollywood swashbucklers that it must have seen, this was a tame affair. But the gusto with which *Olivier* fenced and the final leap with the cry ‘The point envenomed too! Then venom to its work!’ was greeted with resounding applause.

Having got its money’s worth, the audience did not wait to see the end. Soon the theatre hall was empty. In general the audience was disappointed as it had clearly not bargained for what it actually saw. Unlike audiences leaving a theatre hall in India, this one was unusually quiet. But one spectator seemed to sum up their impressions when he remarked aloud ‘I think Hamlet was quite mad’. There was a finality about that judgment that set me pondering. One of the weighty issues in English Literature that had defied some of the greatest scholars and critics had been so effortlessly disposed of ! Truth, it would seem, may come out of the mouths of not merely babes and sucklings but the rustic spectators of Trichy too!