

THE BADLANDS COLLECTIVE
presents



DEAD AGAIN

KENNETH BRANAGH EMMA THOMPSON
DEREK JACOBI ANDY GARCIA
ROBIN WILLIAMS HANNA SCHYGULLA

DEAD AGAIN



A 35mm presentation
REGENT ST CINEMA
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Though largely forgotten today, *Dead Again* was a decent hit on its release in 1991, spending three weeks at the top of the U.S. box office and going on to gross over \$38 million. In considering it today, we note with some nostalgia how such an everything-and-the-kitchen-sink oddity could be an acceptably mainstream release in Hollywood cinema not really all that long ago, and we note with considerable satisfaction how surprising it might be to audiences who only know Kenneth Branagh from his majestic Shakespeare adaptations and elegant work as a studio journeyman.

Film critics, wary of theatre crossovers and prestige projects, have often been sniffy about Branagh's film work. But *Dead Again* marks him as a delirious cinephile auteur, and it is, more clearly than ever when we look at it in retrospect, one of the films where his ambition, imagination and sense of humour have most run wild. He turned 30 as he directed and starred in this film, hot on the heels of international success and Oscar nominations for his adaptation of *Henry V*, yet he was already keen not to be stigmatised as just the British classicist. This is the upstart auteur borne of excess.

Here is a film that opens with a naked Hitchcock reference - a headline screaming the word "MURDER!"; as part of a 1940s death-row preamble - then flashes forward to establish a typical noir set-up, with a mute amnesiac showing up at an orphanage out of the blue and a private eye investigating the case. From there, *Dead Again* careens through lightning storms, hypnosis, flashbacks to past lives and an odyssey through a cast of seedy, secretive oddballs. It is brazenly melodramatic and unconcerned by its own corniness, with a confrontation, climax or twist in every reel.

The casting is emblematic of what a strange brew this all is: Branagh not only plays the Los Angeles private eye, Mike Church - a composite of noir heroes from Philip Marlowe to Sam Spade, and a glimpse of how Branagh could play an eccentric American seven years before his channelling of the Woody Allen persona in *Celebrity* - but he also plays the brooding, domineering Austrian composer Roman Strauss in the highly stylised black-and-white flashbacks. Emma Thompson not only plays the mystery mute, given to gasping, jerking fits of fear, but in the flashbacks gives us Margaret Strauss, poised, thoughtful and romantic, until becoming the victim of the murder

mystery. The supporting cast is an idiosyncratic mix of different worlds - theatre legend Derek Jacobi, savouring the ludicrousness; matinee idol Andy Garcia, going overboard in embittered, alcoholic journalist shabbiness; Robin Williams, at the height of his comedy career, foreshadowing his tormented roles in *Insomnia* and *Good Will Hunting* by playing a snarling disgraced doctor and low-rent fink; Rainer Werner Fassbinder muse Hanna Schygulla as a pained enigma; and familiar, slightly goofy Hollywood supporting faces like Campbell Scott and Wayne Knight.

All this adds up to noir through the looking glass, a mishmash of tropes and eras which Branagh hurls at the blockbuster audience with delight. Along with screenwriter Scott Frank, who also wrote *Get Shorty* and *Out of Sight*, Branagh displays a genre literacy that goes beyond the superficial - *Dead Again* is a psychological jumble that recalls Hitchcock's more elaborate pictures, like *Spellbound* or *Stage Fright*. Like many of the great noirs, *Dead Again* is fixated on the elusiveness of truth - it's a film of duality and shifting personae, with the whole story always just out of reach, and these ideas are accentuated to breaking point by Branagh's vivid theatricality. He brings an almost madcap energy to the film, a frenzied flamboyance that verges on the camp. His technical panache is evident throughout, with the kind of grandiose, adventurous camerawork that he would return to again and again in his more theatrical pictures, from his four-hour *Hamlet* to this year's *Murder on the Orient Express*. Indeed the film is a goldmine for Branagh aficionados, with coded references to his work peppered throughout, including a newspaper dated the director's birthday - which in turn is the date of this very screening.

Intriguingly, in 1991, *Dead Again* was seen by some critics as a bellwether for how Branagh's directorial career would unfold. Roger Ebert said the film would inspire comparisons to Welles and Hitchcock: "I do not suggest Branagh is already as great a director as Welles and Hitchcock, although he has a good start in that direction. What I mean is that his spirit, his daring, is in the same league. He is not interested in making timid movies." Though Ebert's vision for Branagh did not exactly come to pass - he has indeed made some movies that may more easily be called "timid" - it does help us see the director's work in a more individualistic light, less burdened by the reputation of prestige. Dig a little deeper into the filmography, delve further beneath the classical Hollywood sheen, and the adventurous artist is always there: take the whipsmart, anarchic spirit of *In the Bleak Midwinter*, the Chekhovian edge bubbling under in *Peter's Friends* or the manic flamboyance of *Frankenstein*.

For today, though, it's our pleasure just to rediscover *Dead Again* - colourful and loud, too elegant to be totally insane, too insane to be totally ordinary, and a delicious anomaly in the modern history of studio filmmaking and this formidable filmmaker's career.



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