

With 'Dead Again,' Branagh does it again

Dead Again

Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson, Derek Jacobi, Andy Garcia and Robin Williams

directed by Kenneth Branagh

Ram Triple
967-8284

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Every few years, a new wunderkind appears in the movie business. While adoring fans hunger for new material from this young star, rivals and critics wait in the wings for the new blood to stumble.

Following in the (rather large) footsteps of Orson Welles, Steven Spielberg, Sam Raimi and others, Kenneth Branagh shook things up with his first feature, 1989's *Henry V*. (Let me say right up front that I have not seen *Henry V*. I don't like sequels.) He rattles even more cages with his new thriller, *Dead Again*.

If Branagh shocked critics by tackling Shakespeare in his first feature,

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his audacity really shows in *Dead Again*, which takes on *Citizen Kane*. Like Welles, Branagh both acts and directs, but his dual (or triple) duties don't dampen his talent.

Dead Again begins with a young woman (Emma Thompson, Branagh's real-life wife) who has lost her memory; she doesn't know her name, and she can't speak, but she does keep having nightmares about a composer killing his wife. Detective Mike Church (Branagh) is hired to find out the identity of this woman, whom he calls Grace.

Grace undergoes hypnosis (administered by Derek Jacobi) and learns that the couple she is dreaming about really existed. Composer Roman Strauss (Branagh, again) and his wife, Margaret (Thompson, again), were the toast of the town in the late '40s, but at the height of his career, it seems Roman killed Margaret and died in the electric chair. Grace appears to be the reincarnation of Margaret,

Church is the reincarnation of Roman, and if fate has its way, there will be another murder.

The script, by newcomer Scott Frank, has more twists than a Chubby Checker look-alike contest. *Dead Again* is one of the best murder mysteries I've seen, although the undisputed champ remains Dario Argento's *Tenebrae*, from which the finale of *Dead Again* is seemingly stolen.

The movie is surprising, particularly because the audience has no idea what to expect in a thriller from a Shakespeare fan. Fortunately, it's not too artsy or deep — the film is pure entertainment. Branagh takes the material seriously, but at the same time, it's obvious he realizes it's just a piece of entertaining fluff. He only wants to thrill the audience, and he does a good job.

Thompson is instantly likable as both Grace and Margaret. Her poise and girl-across-the-street-and-two-houses-down good looks make her a natural for both parts. Jacobi does a fine job as the hypnotist/antiques dealer who is incredibly generous and may be more than he seems. Andy Garcia appears as a reporter infatuated with Margaret. Robin Williams

is hilarious as the foul-mouthed shrink-turned-grocer who spends most of his time in the store's freezer. And newcomer Campbell Scott (star of *Dying Young*) appears briefly, but makes an impact. This young man is someone to watch.

Most importantly, credit for the overall success of the movie must go to Branagh for two reasons:

Reason Number One: Branagh's Talent. No bones about it, *Dead Again* is a great movie. Branagh shines in both of his roles. When the audience first meets Church, it isn't sure what to think of him. He seems lifeless, but his love for Grace transforms him into a complete character. And from the moment Roman Strauss appears on screen, he is a looming, larger-than-life character. His booming voice and icy stare make his character leap off the screen. To play one of these characters would be a feat. To play both of them to the extent that Branagh achieves is sheer brilliance.

As a director, Branagh obtains realistic performances from his actors. It feels as if one is looking in on real people, instead of watching a film. He makes great use of some unusual locations, including Church's castle-like

house and Grace's art-deco apartment. There is even a gratuitous "Hey mom, look at this!" dolly, which I always love to see.

Reason Number Two: Branagh's Bravery or Stupidity. Either Branagh has guts or brain damage, I'm not sure which. As I said earlier, Branagh tackles *Citizen Kane* in *Dead Again*. Several scenes parallel those found in *Kane*. The flashback scenes in *Dead Again* take place in black and white. Because most audiences prefer color, Branagh is taking another big risk. But his black and white photography is stunning and adds another edge to this already brilliant film. Besides Welles and Argento, Branagh also mimics Hitchcock. But a prediction: Branagh soon will no longer be the mimicker, but the mimicked.

Please do not be scared off by the title or by the fact that you may have never heard of Kenneth Branagh. Most people won't have anything to do with a film that has "dead" in the title. *Dead Again* is not a horror film, per se. It is suspenseful and has some violence at the climax, but it is a wholly enjoyable cinematic experience nonetheless.

It's all true. I swear.

'Castle' explores God and happiness, French-style

My Mother's Castle

Philippe Caubeine, Nathalie Roussel directed by Yves Robert

Varsity
967-8665

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My Mother's Castle, directed by Yves Robert, is one of those films with a very literary quality to it. Set in turn-of-the-century France, it's almost like sitting through a novel. Which makes sense, considering *Castle* was derived from a work by French writer Marcel Pagnol.

Castle explores life through the eyes of a child, a pre-pubescent boy named Marcel. As in most movies derived from works of fiction (for example, Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*), an adult Marcel is reflecting upon his life. We never see

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him, we only hear his voice. It's not an original approach, but Robert makes it work well, integrating the dialogue with comments from the humble narrator.

Because this movie is so like a novel, it is full of themes and symbols. If interpreting and analyzing appeals to you, you'll have a field day with this one.

An interesting aspect of the film is that Marcel, ever since childhood, has taken for granted that God doesn't exist because his father, a school-teacher named Joseph, played by Philippe Caubeine, told him so. Marcel is agnostic, but puzzling over the existence of God just isn't his thing; he's too busy living his young life to worry about it. Marcel accepts his father's view of things because he holds so much respect for him.

Meanwhile, Joseph and his brother Jules have friendly conversations about religion, even though Joseph is an atheist and Jules, a devout Catholic. They not only tolerate each other but actually like one another. Very unrealistic, but a good message that certain religious fanatics ought to take under consideration. Jules never forces his beliefs on his brother, he calmly and rationally discusses them with

him. Joseph and family have a tiny country estate, Bastide, that they visit only on holidays, even though they really love it there. But Joseph's obligations as a teacher in the city, coupled with the fact that the closest trolley stop is four hours' walk from Bastide, hinder the family's visiting. Somehow they can afford to maintain a country home, but not carriage fare from the trolley. Carriage fare must be really expensive in France, or it's just a minor plot flaw.

The country home, with its surrounding hills, comes to represent the family's happiness, especially that of Marcel and his mother, Augustine (Nathalie Roussel). Marcel and his mother constantly try to talk Joseph into making weekend trips to Bastide, and when talking fails, Augustine engineers a scheme to arrange it.

As if you couldn't tell, this is where things get interesting. The family begins to encounter obstacles to their happiness, as is wont to happen in movies about life.

The four-hour walk becomes a real drag every weekend, what with having to carry their own luggage and all, not to mention Augustine's frailty. So a short cut through the local nobles' estates soon becomes necessary.

Augustine's "castle" is on the only estate where crossing is a little sketchy. The family makes friends with the other nobles, but the castle estate is kept by an ill-tempered guard (dressed

in black, of course) and his oversized bulldog. The anxiety Augustine experiences while cutting through this one estate, along with the guard's threats, eventually make the short cut not worth taking.

The guard, of course, gets his just desserts. It involves digging meticulously through a pile of dog doo-doo. The movie is worth seeing just to see how this sequence unfolds.

Robert makes a good attempt at showing how class distinctions are really so much bull. He treats the upper and lower classes pretty much favorably, while showing that rotten apples can emerge from both barrels.

The harshest judgment is reserved for those who try to put on airs and act high class, whether they are or not. This is shown through the family of Isabelle, Marcel's first love.

Isabelle uses Marcel's love for her against him, more or less making him her little slave.

Isabelle's father is an alcoholic copy editor who envisions himself as a poet, even though his work makes Jimmy Stewart's lame attempt at verse seem astute. The poet wanna-be's wife clings to him, hoping he will lift her to greatness and status with him.

When the prim and proper Isabelle gets diarrhea, the true essence of her existence is revealed and little Marcel's innocence is shattered.

Marcel's experience with Isabelle reminds me of the metaphor in Ayn Rand's novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. The

hulkingshade tree worshipped by the main character as a child is struck by lightning and revealed to be hollow, having rotted from the inside out. This shows that things aren't always what they seem, even if they seem to be flawless.

But enough of this serious stuff. This is a really funny movie. Some of the most comical scenes come when Marcel's little brother, Paul, and his best friend, Lili, catch him catering to the whims of Isabelle.

The humor, however, is overshadowed by the suffering that the main and minor characters go through. That is basically the film's overriding theme, that life is nothing more than moments of joy overshadowed by ones of sorrow. Hence, one must live for the joys of life. Assuming God doesn't exist, there is really nothing else to live for. It may be a little simplistic, but this film has a lot more substance than most.

Robert has another film that opened last week, *My Father's Glory*, which is a companion piece to *Castle*. So if you're into subtitles and want to hear a lot of cool-sounding French, go see these films, both playing at the Varsity. If you're not artsy or can't appreciate a film with some meaning, don't. I give it three blobs, because it's not that profound, but, all in all, a very enjoyable flick.

THE RATINGS

- — wait for the video
- — go to the dollar theater
- — only pay matinee price
- — pay full price
- — take your sister, too

William Hurt
The DOCTOR
★★★★★
MAGNIFICENT! A GIFT TO MOVIEGOERS!
MY FATHER'S GLORY MY MOTHER'S CASTLE

A look at things to come. OMNIBUS. Thursday.