



Hamnet

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**SIGHT AND SOUND**

## 'Hamnet' Review: Jessie Buckley Delivers a Devastating Performance in Chloé Zhao's Radically Feminine Take on Shakespeare's Family Life

**It's impossible to overstate how radical — and for some, no doubt unwatchable — the 'Nomadland' director's adaptation of Maggie O'Farrell's novel turned out.**

By some perverse coincidence, this year at the Telluride Film Festival there were three movies about William Shakespeare's "Hamlet," but it's the one spelled with the "n" that confronts the specter of death most profoundly — and packs the greatest catharsis.

As conceived by "Nomadland" director Chloé Zhao, "Hamnet" is so emotionally raw as to be almost excruciating at times. Jessie Buckley delivers a heroic performance as Shakespeare's wife Agnes and the mother of his children — although as presented, she could be the mother of us all — the grounded, near-shamanic spirit forced to accept the death of her son, Hamnet. Meanwhile, Paul Mescal plays Shakespeare, who pours his grief into "the Danish play," but both actor and character are eclipsed by the feminine elements of this story.

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Here, I'm thinking about a conversation I had with its creator a couple of years ago. We were talking about the filmmaker Agnès Varda, and Zhao pointed out the way the masculine and feminine forces in our world are completely out of balance. "It's got nothing to do with gender," Zhao told me. She was referring to energy: Civilization is masculine; nature is feminine. "We as an industry are built on celebrating masculine qualities in storytelling and in life." There exists a collective fear of the things we don't understand: oceans, forests and our feminine side — our shadow side. "Hamnet" is Zhao's attempt to balance that, all at once, in a single film, and I'm not sure the world is ready for it. Heck, I'm not even sure Zhao was ready for it, but it's a beautiful, radical, dangerous act, adapted from the novel by Maggie O'Farrell (with the author credited as Zhao's co-writer), that speaks to a part of each and every one of us that we've been taught to distrust.

Of course she would choose a lyrical, Terrence Malick-like style to tell this story, about the romance between the young bard-to-be and Agnes, the free-spirited daughter of a forest witch — the roles played by Mescal and Buckley, respectively. (How perfect is it that the earth mother is named Agnes here, not Anne Hathaway, as the history books have it?) Malick is perhaps the most feminine director of all — a man in touch with his spiritual side, whose camera swirls to capture the world that surrounds the characters. Actors who've worked with him describe how they'll be on set, ready to shoot, and Malick can be easily distracted by a bird or some other animal. That sensibility is there in all his films, as far back as "Badlands."

"Hamnet" opens with Agnes curled in the fetal position at the base of a tree — the Tree of Life — as if held in the embrace of its roots. Soulfully lensed by "Ida" DP Łukasz Żal, the movie is loaded with symbols, some recognizable, others almost subliminal. In contrast with Agnes' organic curves, for example, she introduces William indoors, framed behind rectangular windows. He's working as a Latin teacher to pay off his father's debts, but he's drawn Agnes' energy — or maybe it's Buckley's, as the actor has shown a fierce, rebellious, untamable spirit since the 2018 role that put her on the map, "Wild Rose."

William falls immediately, madly in love with Agnes. He asks her to be handfasted, referring to an ancient ritual of marriage. The story takes place at the tail end of the 16th century, but it's not really a period piece. It's not really about Shakespeare at all (in O'Farrell's book, he's never identified by name), so don't get too hung up on whether "Hamnet" corresponds to traditional ideas of his family history. William and Agnes recognize that their families won't approve of their union, so they make love — indoors, surrounded by fresh round fruit — which in turn makes a child, their first daughter, Susanna (Bodhi Rae Breathnach). Now the world must accept their union, they wager.

When it comes time for Agnes to bear her child, she returns to the forest, giving birth at the base of the tree. It's a difficult, painful process, observed from above in a shot that recalls images from

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Lars von Trier's "Antichrist" — which could be seen as the extreme masculine version of the same narrative: A man and woman lose a child and retreat to the woods, where Willem Dafoe's character confronts his worst fears of the feminine. If you find "Hamnet" difficult to endure on occasion, just tell yourself: At least it's not "Antichrist."

Near the place Agnes delivered Susanna is a hole, more vaginal than the one Guillermo del Toro placed at the base of the tree in "Pan's Labyrinth," and that motif is repeated later, during the climactic scene at the Globe Theatre in London, where Agnes goes to watch a performance of her husband's latest play, "Hamlet." The backdrop depicts a forest, at the center of which is a dark opening — yet another of the movie's many symbols.

Between these two scenes — Susanna's birth and Hamlet's death — is the most agonizing depiction of grief I've witnessed in years. I wish we could spend more time in the radiant glow of William and Agnes' love, but it burns brightly enough at the outset to sustain us. In short order, she's pregnant again, this time with twins. Her mother-in-law (Emily Watson, a von Trier veteran herself) insists that Agnes deliver indoors this time, effectively cutting this earth woman off from her feminine energy. But still, the waters rise to force their way in.

It's a laborious scene, to say the least, as Agnes gives birth to twins, Hamnet (Jacobi Jupe) and Judith (Olivia Lynes). William, the man, sets off for the big city to become the world's most celebrated writer, but Zhao stays behind with Agnes and the family. Hamnet dies — that much is foretold, though the way it happens will break your heart — and his father and mother deal with it differently, to say the least. In turn, Zhao challenges us to confront something we've been avoiding until now. There's the matter of death, which makes everyone uncomfortable, but it's the film's other feminine elements that are most enlightening to see centered this way onscreen. Without giving too much away, William channels his grief into his work ("Hamnet" invites us to see a play the world knows well through fresh eyes, as William assumes the role of Hamlet's ghost himself), while Agnes expresses hers from the foot of the stage. Meanwhile, it was an inspired choice for Zhao to cast Noah Jupe, the older brother of the child who plays Hamnet, as the actor who originated the role of Hamlet onstage, interpreting the character's fade to silence as an echo of the younger boy's death. Sonically, Max Richter's "On the Nature of Daylight" gives this devastating scene an even deeper resonance.

"Hamnet" marks Zhao's first feature since her ambitious Marvel stumble in 2021 (a pivot that alienated some who preferred her magic-hour indie dramas), raising once again that eternal question, "To be or not to be," just not in the conventional sense. In her hands, Shakespeare's indelible line doesn't represent a contemplation of suicide so much as what it means to be — to fully embrace life, when the inevitability of death is enough to paralyze one into a self-protective stupor. Ultimately, the filmmaker invites the world to feel loss in a new way, and in letting go, liberates something fundamental in all of us.

**By Peter Debruge for Variety**

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