

Campania felix plays in Laura Angiulli's film *Il re muore*
(2018; after William Shakespeare's *Richard II*)

Reviewed by Anna Maria Cimitile

Laura Angiulli's *Il re muore* (2018, "The king dies") is a film inspired by the Shakespearean historical tragedy *Richard II*. Angiulli is first and foremost a theatre director, and her film combines a deep understanding of the play as *theatre* – and of Shakespearean drama in general, as over the years Angiulli has staged a number of Shakespeare's texts at Galleria Toledo, Teatro Stabile d'Innovazione, which she founded in 1991 in Naples and has directed since its opening to this day – and an evident love for her region, Campania, which the Romans knew as *Campania felix*, a territory fraught with history, beautiful natural sites, and buildings and architectural remains from all epochs – from the classical age to the Renaissance and the Baroque, and beyond. Several of Campania's historical edifices or natural sites were chosen by Angiulli as suggestive locations for her film. Some of them are possibly not so well known as other sites are – not so famous as Pompei, for example – but they are an important presence in the shots and, in the film, they gain new life.

Angiulli's take on the Shakespearean play is to focus on its key moments/scenes, starting with the dialogue between John of Gaunt and the Duchess of Gloucester (scene 1.2 in *Richard II*); this is preceded by the opening titles shot, in which the characters are introduced one by one, shown as they walk by a coffin in a church to pay homage to the dead Duke of Gloucester, as we may infer. Indeed, in this art film, scenes from the Shakespearean play alternate with creative interpolations, which are rather brief shots with no dialogue, some of them almost oneiric in the blurred camera effect; they are added to refer to a past event, or to show a recollection (by one of the characters?) or even an imagining (as spectators might do?) of a past event. The cinematic language leaves interpretation open for those shots. Central to Angiulli's view is also the individuality of each character rather than their public role. Richard is shown as a little child grabbing a crown in the first shot, then as a young king (played by Luciano Dall'Aglio), then again as a young boy in a brief scene halfway through the film and elsewhere. In his fragility, and as his story reveals "the failure of an ideal" in Marjorie Garber's words, he is often shot in close-ups or appears alone 'on stage' – indeed, the film retains an important theatrical imprint in both recitation and choice of frames. In a similar way the Duchess of Gloucester (played by Alessandra D'Elia), the "lamenting chorus" in *Richard II* according to Peter Ure, appears in added scenes with no dialogue; in one, she is alone and silent as she walks barefoot among rough wooden crosses planted in the ground, by a lake, heading towards the water to take her life by drowning.

To go back to the use of some of Campania's historical venues: in the 'translation' from stage to cinema, the scenes of the playtext, some of which are shot in the style of *tableaux vivants*, have each a different setting; exploiting the region's long history, Angiulli shoots almost all the scenes in historical buildings and natural sites, thus placing the characters in a time-space that, in bringing together venues from different past epochs, is quite distant from the present of the spectators, while also being an *imaginary* past, as it does not belong to one specific period only. For all viewers, Angiulli re-creates a past time that is in fact a

combination of epochs; for the viewers who recognise the venues, that past is, besides, a *familiar present* in the shape of architectural remains. I have watched *Il re muore* several times over the years since its first release: the first time was at Galleria Toledo in January 2020, then at an open air summer screening, in the gardens of Villa Pignatelli in Naples (18th June 2022), when I besides had the honour of introducing the film to the audience, and several more times on the internet. Being a Shakespearean scholar and a spectator from this part of the world, every time I watched the film my first impression was confirmed: for me the chosen regional venues are one key feature in the film, a collective protagonist in its own right, playing an important part. Dating back to different epochs, all together they give a new meaning to the ‘past’, indeed to the ‘pastness’ of the past, by placing it in the *here and now* of natural sites, archaeological remains and historical edifices shown in their present state of conservation: Castel Sant’Elmo and Castel Capuano, the San Carlo theatre, the Capodimonte Museum and the Archivio Notarile in Naples, the Real Sito di Carditello in San Tammaro, the theatre/temple in Pietravairano, regional parks and lakes, and other venues. And this, I think, is the novelty of Angiulli’s version of *Richard II*: in a film that does not set the story in the present (as Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet* [1996], or Almereyda’s *Hamlet* [2000] do for other Shakespearean plays), but keeps it in the past, the director does not attempt to bring back to life the Middle Ages; she does not resort to ‘masquerades’ to reproduce the sense of what is past for us as being Richard II’s present; in other words, she does not create a setting for the viewers of the film to enjoy an immersive experience of the Middle Ages. Rather, Angiulli leads us in a journey through what is extant today of past times, choosing as shooting locations more or less well-preserved – indeed, sometimes not so well preserved – historical sites.

In the use of historical venues – at times even decaying ones – I see Angiulli’s personal, most original way of making the story of Richard II and its tragic conclusion stay with us, here and now: a story for all times in its ‘non-actuality’.

The film was sponsored by Regione Campania and the Italian Ministry of Culture. It was screened at the 66th Taormina Film Fest (July 11-19, 2020). The full video can be viewed at MIT *Global Shakespeares: Video and Performance Archive* (<https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/il-re-muore-angiulli-laura-2018/>).



Fig. 1: The Duchess of Gloucester takes her life. Screen capture from *Il re muore* (dir. Laura Angiulli, Italy, 2018: 29'25", <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/il-re-muore-angiulli-laura-2018/>)



Fig 2: “Sometimes am I king” (Richard II’s monologue from Act 5, scene 5). Screen capture from *Il re muore* (dir. Laura Angiulli, Italy, 2018: 60'41", <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/il-re-muore-angiulli-laura-2018/>)