



PROJECT MUSE®

Hamlet (review)

Elizabeth Pentland

Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 27, Number 3, Fall 2009, pp. 475-477 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.0.0091>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/316786>

to the door. As she struggled to open it, crying, “Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight” Thompson grabbed her around the waist and threw her across the room onto the bed before wrestling her back and, after what seemed like an eternity, smothering her. After the discovery by Emilia of Desdemona’s innocence, Othello returned to the bed and gently held her in his arms, uttering “cold, cold my girl.”

Emilia’s small but meaty part in the play’s second half has the potential, in the hands of a capable actress, to assume tragic dimension. Kate Forbes, who has played Helena, Portia, and Desdemona herself, was easily up to the challenge. Her Emilia was clearly beleaguered from the first moment we saw her in Cyprus as Iago loaded her down with everyone’s coats, while, in stark contrast, Othello carried Desdemona offstage and Emilia looked on in wistful admiration. Later, she watched from the shadows as Othello and Desdemona argued over the handkerchief, her face revealing her divided loyalty. Emilia’s motive for taking the handkerchief is one of the play’s cruxes. In this production, Forbes made it clear that she did so in an attempt to win Iago’s love or approval. This made her heroic revelation that she stole it all the more wrenching. As Emilia defended her mistress to the frenzied men encircling her, it seemed as if Desdemona’s other self were speaking. It was one of the most powerful moments in this exquisitely powerful production.



Hamlet

Presented by the **Necessary Angel Theatre Company** at **Buddies in Bad Times Theatre**, Toronto, Canada. November 20–23, 2008. Directed and designed by Graham McLaren. Lighting design and production management by Andrea Lundy. Music and sound design by Alexander MacSween. Fight choreography by Simon Fon. With Gord Rand (Hamlet), Steven McCarthy (Horatio), Robert Persichini (Ghost, Player King), Laura de Carteret (Gertrude), Tom McCamus (Claudius), Christopher Morris (Guildenkrantz), Stephen Ouimette (Polonius), Tara Nicodemo (Ophelia), and Shaun Smyth (Laertes, Player Queen).

ELIZABETH PENTLAND, *York University*

Last November, Toronto’s Necessary Angel Theatre Company staged a “World Sneak Preview” of their new production of *Hamlet*, scheduled to have its official premiere during the company’s 2009–10 season. Presented as “a work in progress or an open rehearsal,” this production was framed

as an exploratory engagement with Shakespeare's play, balancing a desire, on the one hand, to stay close to "the facts of the play" with a methodology intended to privilege the vital and continuously evolving work of the actors. As the play's Scottish director Graham McLaren explained, "we have not yet blocked a scene or made any permanent decisions on how the scenes should be played; we have instead attempted to keep the work alive, the acting improvisational, the music and lighting reactive to the continuously evolving staging." McLaren's operative principle was that the words of the play should "serve the actors as much as [the actors] serve the words."

The "radical" approach taken by McLaren, who began working with Necessary Angel in 2008–9 as part of their Associate Artist Program, was to cut the play down to a "unique, immediate, and violent" 110 minutes, paring the cast to only nine actors (Fortinbras was nowhere to be seen, and Hamlet's "friends" Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were reduced to a single character, Guildenstern) and reorganizing scenes and speeches in the process so as to revisit *Hamlet's* roots in the complex tradition of Elizabethan revenge tragedy. Alluding to the classical origins of this tradition, McLaren invited his audiences to imagine what the result would be "if Seneca were the dramaturge and Shakespeare the playwright."

McLaren's Seneca was distinctly postmodern in his sensibilities. Our first glimpse of Denmark was not of Elsinore's foggy battlements, but of a banquet table strewn with empty beer cans and discarded champagne bottles. Somewhere off-stage, the party was still going on. Alone on stage, Hamlet, sporting an updated version of Ethan Hawke's disaffected twenty-something "grunge" look—a black Ramones t-shirt under a loose hoodie, baggy grey pants sitting low on his hips, and woolen cap with ear flaps—slouched in a dim corner of the room away from the revelry. Suddenly, a door opened at the far end of the room and a pair of revelers entered—a blonde woman reminiscent of Ann Darrow or Marilyn Monroe in a tight white gown and red stilettos, and a man in an ape mask giving chase. Thinking they were alone, the two partygoers were about to have sex on the banquet table when Hamlet turned up the lights, catching Claudius, to great comic effect, with his pants down. The dialogue then opened with Hamlet's "too too sullied flesh" speech. McLaren's punning reference to *King Kong* in this scene ("kong" is, appropriately enough, the Danish word for "king") was the first of many clever allusions to contemporary pop culture—during the closet scene, for example, the pictures of his father and uncle to which Hamlet pointed were photos in a celebrity news magazine. The same glossy magazine (aptly filled, one assumes, with

"slanders"), had figured prominently in 2.2, lending additional irony to Hamlet's remark that he is reading "words, words, words."

This production sought to elicit a visceral response from its audience. There was nudity, sexuality, and (thanks to Shakespeare) coarse language in abundance. The violence was more intense, more graphic, and less cerebral than one might have expected, without ever seeming gratuitous. During the "to be or not to be" speech, for example, we watched as Hamlet taped a clear plastic bag over his head. Contemplating that "undiscovered country," death, he took himself to the brink of suffocation before tearing the bag open and gasping for breath. It seems, moreover, that when Seneca the dramaturge has his way with Shakespeare's script, it is not enough simply to stab Polonius once or twice through the arras; the poor old counselor must instead be dragged from under the banquet table, cloth and all, and violently bludgeoned to death by the enraged prince. In short, as a result of McLaren's formal and philosophical experiment, *Hamlet* became a much bloodier play; and in fact, the viscous red fluid that smeared the stage during the closet scene remained there for the duration. In the scenes that followed, Claudius rubbed Hamlet's naked body in Polonius's blood, and I found myself worrying, during the mad scene, that Ophelia would stain her white dress with it as she dragged herself across the stage. The fight scenes were more visceral and immediate in this version—the final duel took place not with swords or épées but with very sharp hunting knives—and the ghost was not a remote, dark, and fearsome presence as it is, for example, in Kozintsev's film, but rather a large, sweaty, middle-aged man who held Hamlet in a tight, uncomfortable embrace while he recounted the horrors of his own murder.

Tom McCamus as Claudius was the most fluid and naturalistic of the actors. His presence on the stage was commanding, in control. He seemed always to be manipulating and planning ahead. Others, like Ophelia, seemed frozen in space when they weren't speaking. Her mad scenes were powerful—the more so, perhaps, because her demeanor through much of the play had been so distressingly blank, passive, or naïve. It seemed to this viewer that she had been brought to life, paradoxically, by her impending death. As for Polonius, the pared script meant that there was more of the overbearing father and king's accomplice in him than of the verbose and foolish sycophant. And lastly, a very tall, bespectacled Horatio, dressed in a priest's cassock, haunted the edges of scenes. He was an eerily silent presence through much of the play—there only, it seemed, to witness the unfolding tragedy.

