

PROSCENIUM

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924. The company's first production was the now little-known *The Tide* by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base since 1945. In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

Chairman
MARK SUTHERLAND

Artistic Director
CRYSTAL ANTHONY

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PROSCENIUM

Hamlet

By William Shakespeare

Hamlet

23rd, 24th, 25th and 26th October, 2002
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

CAST

Ghost.....	David Watkins	Rosencrantz	Rob Hurcum
Claudius	David Pearson	Guildenstern.....	Charles Anthony
Gertrude	Evelyn Moutrie	Osrick	Charles Anthony
Hamlet.....	Vincent Eavis	Bernardo.....	Paul Ewen
		Marcellus	Alan Bobroff
Polonius	Colin Hickman	Ladies of the court....	Palesa Hyde
Laertes	Julian Wood		Alex Jenks
Ophelia.....	Christina Baker	First Gravedigger....	Robert Ewen
Reynaldo	Amit Ghelani	Second Gravedigger ...	Paul Davis
		A Priest.....	Nick Baker
Horatio	Mark Sutherland		
Fortinbras	Dominic Blackwood		
Ambassador	Dhires Kerai		
A Captain.....	Amit Ghelani		
Player King	Michael Williams		
Player Queen	Izzie Cartwright		
Third Player (Lucianus)	Denise Bone		
Players.....	Sarah Ellis, Paul Davis, Amit Ghelani		
Directed by.....	Rod Moor Bardell		
Assisted by	Susi Thornton		

DATE AND SOURCE

Hamlet was first performed in 1600, a usefully firm date for the greatest classic of the English stage. Shakespeare, in his mid-thirties and at the height of his powers, was just beginning the second half of his career. The histories and comedies were behind him, the other mature tragedies followed rapidly. *Hamlet* has at once the freshness of a beginning and the completeness of peak achievement.

The story of *Hamlet* comes from the world of Scandinavian myth and legend: the name Hamlet (Amleth) is derived from an old Norse word which means idiot, or one who feigns idiocy. It deals with a brutal society of which blood revenge seems a natural part: a characteristic detail is that when the equivalent of Polonius is killed, his body is chopped into pieces and thrown into a sewer for pigs to eat. The story had already been dramatised in the Elizabethan theatre. The play is lost, but there are several references to it. In 1596, Thomas Lodge alluded to *the ghost which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster wife, 'Hamlet, revenge'*.

COMMENTARY

Jan Kott asserts that *the bibliography of dissertations and studies devoted to 'Hamlet' is twice the size of Warsaw's telephone directory. No Dane of flesh and blood has been written about so extensively as Hamlet.*

In the seventeenth century British critics saw Hamlet as primarily a bitterly eloquent and princely avenger and did not seem to notice his delay in carrying out the Ghost's commands. The eighteenth century too, mesmerised by Garrick's celebrated performance, saw the prince as a character of *great delicacy and melancholy cast*, and Romantic critics, with typical self-absorption, tended to see themselves in the character. The nineteenth century concentrated more on the procrastination and the real or assumed madness, while in the early twentieth century critics began to analyse Hamlet's supposed Oedipus complex.

Voltaire, in 1748, said that *Hamlet is a vulgar and barbarous drama, which would not be tolerated by the vilest populace of France, or Italy ... but amidst all these irregularities, which to this day make the English drama so absurd and so barbarous, there are to be found in*

'Hamlet', by a bizarrerie still greater, some sublime passages, worthy of the greatest genius.

But G.H. Lewes, in 1855: *'Hamlet' is the most popular play in our language. It amuses thousands annually, and it stimulates the minds of millions. The lowest and most ignorant audiences delight in it. The source of the delight is twofold: first, its reach of thought on topics most profound; secondly, its wondrous dramatic variety.*

THE PRINCE

A lovely, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away.

Goethe 1795

He is the prince of philosophical speculators; and because he cannot have his revenge perfect, according to the most refined ideas his wish can form, he declines it altogether. Yet he is sensible of his own weakness, taxes himself with it, and tries to reason himself out of it.

Hazlitt 1817

Hamlet's character is the prevalence of the abstracting and generalising over the practical. He does not want courage, skill, will, or opportunity; but every incident sets him thinking. I have a smack of Hamlet in myself.

Coleridge 1827

Hamlet as a prehistoric Dane is morally bound to kill his uncle: he has no doubt as to his duty in the matter. But when fully convinced he finds to his bewilderment that he cannot kill his uncle deliberately.

Bernard Shaw 1921

I despise Hamlet. He is a slob. A talker, an analyser, a rationaliser. Like the parlour liberal or the paralysed intellectual, he can describe every facet of a problem, yet never pulls his finger out. You may think he's a sensitive, well-spoken fellow but frankly, he gives me a pain in the ass.

Charles Marowitz

OTHER CHARACTERS

The critical canon is dominated by speculation on Hamlet himself, but there are some interesting reflections on the other characters. G. Wilson Knight, in 1930, thought Claudius *a good and gentle king, enmeshed by the chain of causality linking him with his crime. His later actions are forced on him. As King, he could scarcely be expected to do otherwise. Hamlet is a danger to the state, even apart from his knowledge of Claudius' guilt.* L.L. Schucking, in 1935, takes a more conventional view: *The King, at the outset calm and certain of himself, loses something of his self-confidence as his position grows more difficult; in the end he is forced to drop the mask of honesty which he has so long successfully worn, and to appear in all his villainy.*

Peter Hall considers the dilemma of Ophelia: *Ophelia has been brought up in a male-dominated family. Polonius, her father, is extremely authoritarian, very repressive; so is her brother, Laertes. Repressed by both she has presumably no-one to talk to or turn to. There is an extraordinary relationship with Hamlet which suggests that she's very spirited, intelligent.*

Jan Kott, 1964, discusses the importance of Fortinbras: *Who is this young Norwegian prince? What does he represent? Blind fate, the absurdity of the world or the victory of justice? Shakespearian scholars have made a case for all these interpretations in turn. Fortinbras is a young, strong and cheerful fellow. On his arrival he delivers a speech to this effect: 'Take away these corpses. Hamlet was a good boy, but he is dead. Now I shall be your king. I have just remembered that I happen to have certain rights to this crown.' Then he smiles and is very pleased with himself.*

CONTEXT

Elective Monarchy

Denmark was an elective monarchy in Shakespeare's day. The election was in practice limited to members of the blood royal; in other words, on the death of King Hamlet the choice lay between his son and his brother. In the eyes of seventeenth century spectators, therefore, Hamlet's disappointment would seem just as keen and his ambitious designs just as natural, as if the succession was legally according to the principle of primogeniture.

Ghosts

Most Catholics of Shakespeare's day believed that ghosts might be spirits of the departed, allowed to return from Purgatory for some special purpose ... But for Protestants the matter was not so easy. It was not possible that they were spirits of the departed, for Purgatory being an exploded tradition, the dead went direct either to bliss in heaven or to prison in hell ... The orthodox Protestant conclusion was that ghosts ... were generally nothing but devils. From J. Dover Wilson.

Wherever the ghost comes from, Addison, in 1711, was most impressed: *the Appearance of the Ghost is a Masterpiece in its kind, and wrought up with all the Circumstances that can create either Attention or Horror. His dumb Behaviour at his first Entrance, strikes the Imagination very strongly; but every Time he enters he is still more terrifying. Who can read the Speech with which young Hamlet accosts him, without trembling?*

Politics

The significance of *Hamlet* changes with the context in which it is performed. Jan Kott recalls a production in Cracow in 1956: *I saw in it a drama of political crime. To the classic question, whether Hamlet's madness is real or feigned, the Cracow production gave the following reply: Hamlet feigns madness, he puts on, in cold blood, a mask of madness in order to perform a coup d'etat; Hamlet is mad, because politics is itself madness when it destroys all feeling and affection.*

ACTORS

John Gielgud thought that *Hamlet must be rediscovered, recreated, every ten or fifteen years.* Certainly the range and complexity of the character means that every actor has found something different. A contemporary reports of Garrick: *his whole demeanour is so expressive of terror that it made my flesh creep even before he began to speak .. At last he speaks, not at the beginning, but at the end of a breath, with a trembling voice.*

Of Irving, Edward Russell said: *The immortality of his Hamlet is immortal youth, immortal enthusiasm, immortal tenderness, immortal nature.* Tynan thought Gielgud's Hamlet had *a defiant melancholy, overcast by wisdom and the traditional poet's sadness,* while Hugh Leonard described David Warner's as *a gangling young swine in an Oxbridge scarf who spread woe and disquiet,* and James Fenton reports that Jonathan Pryce's face betrayed *behind what was masculine, aristocratic, commanding an aspect of infantility, a tendency to self-pity, vulnerability.*

Finally to illustrate the hazards of touring an extract from Macready's diaries of 1849 recalling a performance in Cincinnati: *Went to a rehearsal. Found a most disgracefully imperfect Horatio, who had rehearsed on Saturday and now knew nothing of the words or business, one of those wretches who take to the stage as an escape from labour, and for whom the treadmill would be a fitting punishment. Acted Hamlet to a rather rickety audience. In the scene after the play an occurrence took place that, for disgusting brutality, indecent outrage, and malevolent barbarism, must be without parallel in the theatre. Whilst speaking to them about the pipe, a ruffian from the left side of the gallery threw into the middle of the stage the half of the raw carcass of a sheep.*

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If you would like to find out more about Proscenium, please contact :

The Secretary, Proscenium, 020 8954 2761

<http://www.proscenium.org.uk>

Next production

One For The Road by Willie Russell. Directed by David Watkins.

'One For The Road' starts with the mid-life hero torn between the security of married life in a dormer bungalow on a new estate and dreams of being a rucksacked super-tramp. It's a world where Beethoven Underpass leads to Wagner Walkway and where anyone who doesn't join Weight Watchers or the Ramblers Club is regarded as a social deviant.

Traveller's Studio. 15th - 18th January 2003. 7.45 pm.
Tickets £6.50.

Forthcoming productions

Alphabetical Order by Michael Frayn
Traveller's Studio. 26th - 29th March 2003

Stepping Out by Richard Harris
Traveller's Studio. 4th - 7th June 2003