

To Hold Up the Mirror: *Hamlet – The Clown Prince* and ‘Sharing History’

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Hamlet – The Clown Prince: directed by Rajat Kapoor. Wits Theatre, Johannesburg. September 2013.

The concept is clear enough from the title: *Hamlet – The Clown Prince*. In this production, performed in Johannesburg as part of the High Commission of India’s seventh Shared History Festival (“The Indian Experience in South Africa 2013”), a troupe of variously motivated and demotivated clowns perform their motley version of *Hamlet* in English and “Ghibberish” – their specific practice of gibberish – before the yet unknowing world. Since its debut in 2008, the production has toured extensively with its original cast and has been performed more than 150 times. The two shows in Johannesburg, following sold out performances in Delhi, marked 5 years of touring and, with one of the actors leaving the company, an indefinite hiatus for the project.

The play inducts its audiences through a backstage story. Out of work and at their lowest ebb, the clowns gather together and try to decide on their next act. Noticing the audience, they jump to attention and introduce themselves. There is Popo, Sujay Saple’s pompous ringleader who will play Laertes while vying for the role of Hamlet; Namit Das’ sweetly desperate Nemo, bound to play Polonius gagged; and tiggerish Fido (Neil Bhoopalam), who will upstage and burlesque at every opportunity with his unfaithful renderings of Claudius and the Ghost. Wide-eyed naïf Fifi (Rachel D’Souza) is a clear set-up for Ophelia and an effective contrast with her competitor for Hamlet’s love, Puja Sarup’s florid Bouzo, whose tottering performance in the role of Gertrude discloses a bad drinking habit and a poorly resolved backstage relationship with the actor who now plays her son, to the embarrassment of the clowns. “She is always bringing the bedroom onstage!” they complain. The introductions are important. Popo, Fido, Nemo, Bouzo, and Fifi, near relatives of the buffoons of *commedia dell’arte*, are ‘characters’ in the seventeenth century sense: humoral types. Each character is defined “by the o’ergrowth of some complexion” (*Hamlet* 1.4.27), “the stamp of one defect” (1.4.31) that becomes more obvious as the play continues.¹ Dippy dipsomaniac Bouzo carries the blame for letting her life dictate her art, but the lines apply equally to the whole troupe. These clowns can only ever play themselves.

One clown is missing. But the audience has already seen the actor who will play “Hammie”. Before we meet the clowns, the spotlight falls on the head and shoulders of Atul Kumar. His face lost in darkness under a hat, holding a suitcase, the actor appears as a scarecrow or a cipher. Violins play an ominous *martellato*. He raises his eyes to meet the audience and speaks possibly the most compelling words of the play. What he delivers is gibberish – Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* darkly garbled, a rich line of nonsense shot through with words audiences find hard to ignore: “Man, family, progress, apprehension, angel, progress, imagine, god, Man,

1. Laurence Olivier used these lines as an introduction to his 1948 film version in order to bolster his presentation of Hamlet’s ‘tragic flaw’, though in fact they refer to Claudius’ excessive Danish drinking. All *Hamlet* quotations in this review are from the Norton edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katherine Eisamann Maus (New York: Norton, 1997).

Man”. It is a breathless and demanding performance, both for actor and for audience. As the play begins, the clowns swarm the stage, accosting the actor with various props and demands. At this moment, Kumar appears to be Hamlet, isolated centre-stage, viewing the Shakespearean characters that inhabit his play and their mechanical gestures as so much senseless clowning. His moments as Hamlet are riveting. His is, importantly, the only case in the production where character can be distinguished from clown, though this is a deliberate effect of the company. Kumar’s clown character Soso arrives in the show a good fifteen minutes late, blaming his delay on local vagaries (the Joburg traffic, the confusing layout of the campus), quickly winning over the audience and picking up the part of Hamlet. Roles now clear, the clowns deliver the tragedy in their flat-footed, ham-fisted and occasionally tongue-tied way. The ghost’s message is delivered in the language of charades; the clowns choose to silence Nemo-Polonius with a roll of masking tape.

The choice of *Hamlet* might be seen as arbitrary, the pun sufficient justification for the clowns’ choice of play.² As Fido’s scene-stealing digressions demonstrate, a word and an association are enough to set a man clowning. The members of The Company Theatre are as much interested in the universality of clowning as in the universality of Shakespeare. This Mumbai-based company, headed by Kumar, celebrated its twentieth year in 2013 and has acquired a reputation for innovative ‘international’ Shakespeare; it was commissioned to produce a Hindi *Twelfth Night* for the multilingual Globe to Globe Festival in 2012. Kapoor has long been interested in *Hamlet*, but a longer fascination with clowns produced what is sometimes called his “clown trilogy”. *Hamlet – The Clown Prince*, first performed in 2008, is the middle child. In 1998, *C for Clown*, Kapoor’s cinematic celebration of a clowning tradition running from Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin to Raj Kapoor, traced out the characters of Soso, Popo et al and the use of Ghibberish (a mixture of French, Italian, variously accented English and, apparently, Swahili). Kumar’s Ghibberish soliloquies in *Hamlet – The Clown Prince* set the stage for *Nothing Like Lear*, which drops the clown ensemble in favour of eighty virtuoso minutes of solo fooling.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark may be a pretext for The Company Theatre’s ongoing work, but for the troupe of clowns they portray it represents a risk.³ Performing at the Salihara Festival in Jakarta, Popo roared: “This is Salihara, a dark and meaningful theatre!” and the crowd roared back.⁴ But Soso’s offhand dismissal of the play (“everyone dies”) creates a flurry of denials and momentary panic among the clowns. In their line of work, there are things which “will never please”, not the ladies nor the gentlemen. Calling to mind the overzealous mechanicals of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the abashed clowns rush forward, handwaggingly (and implausibly) protesting their innocence to the audience: “No, no, no ... no-one dies!”

Of course, as the tagline tells us, “In the end, Gertrude dies. Claudius dies. Ophelia dies. And the audience dies laughing.” There is a standout moment of audience interaction that plays on this. Singling out audience members, playing on audience vanity and vulnerability, is part of the standard standup repertoire. The clowns make ample use of this technique, directing flirtation or abuse into the audience. But Kumar takes it, Hamlet-style, all the way to its ultimate conclusion: an image of *vanitas*, death as the ultimate vanity. The gag’s raw material is found in Gertrude’s first words to Hamlet, urging him to embrace Claudius and end his mourning:

2. By contrast, Two Gents Productions, the two-hander Shakespeare company that shared the stage with Kumar’s company at the Globe to Globe Festival, chose *Two Gentlemen of Verona* as their first performance for its overt reference to their two-man technique.

3. This is in marked contrast with the state of play in theatre, where staging *Hamlet* with a professional cast and a star in the main role practically guarantees an appreciative audience (consider the massive commercial success of Gregory Doran’s 2008 Royal Shakespeare Company production with David Tennant).

4. See Proditia Sabarini, ‘Laughing with “Hamlet the Clown Prince”’ in *The Jakarta Post*, 4th October 2010. Online: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/10/04/laughing-with-hamlet-clown-prince.html>

Do not forever with thy veiled lids
 Seek for thy noble father in the dust:
 Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die
 Passing through nature to eternity.

(1.2.70-74)

The appeal to “common” experience is denied in Hamlet’s barbed rejoinder: “Ay, madam, ’tis common” (75) and only partly redeemed in “To be or not to be” of the ‘Bad’ Quarto. Giving this sentiment to Hamlet, taking it out of Gertrude’s mouth and its strategic deployment in the court, the clowns render the *vanitas* trope gentler and more penetrating – certainly more intimate. Soso puts his arm around a disconsolate Bouzo and explains: “Everybody dies. All clowns die. All these people sitting here, one day will die ... We are all going to die ... [pointing] Even him.” Kapoor recognises, as did Shakespeare, that the heaviest sentiments, sentiments too heavy even for tragedy (because too common), may be expressed by clowns, those sinister tragicomic figures like the Porter in *Macbeth* or the Gravedigger in *Hamlet*, with one foot in hell or at least firmly planted in the rotting earth.

Hamlet is a play about death and sex, or more accurately about corruption: the corruption of the spirit and the flesh that man is heir to in a fallen world. Kapoor’s troupe are adult clowns: they make obscene puns and lewd advances, squeeze breasts and buttocks, and grab their crotches. But what makes these clowns most ‘adult’ is their ability to get hurt. They get hurt not only in the usual way of clowns, who fall down, again and again, for our entertainment (physically in slapstick, emotionally in the *commedia* tradition of Pierrot), but in the way all people do. They age. Madame Bouzo is just the most obvious example. They feel disappointment and regret. The characters’ emotions, their childishness especially, feel distinctly middle-aged. Regret pervades the show. Even the contrast between Bouzo and Fifi, rivals for Hamlet’s love, represents the contrast between love known and love untried more than simple age versus youth.

In The Company Theatre’s retelling, there is little sense of the generational tension in *Hamlet* that makes the duel and deaths of Hamlet and Laertes, Denmark’s young bloods, so affecting. The complex contract between son and father contained in Old Hamlet’s injunction “remember me” (1.5.91) similarly falls away. Kumar’s Hamlet has less manic energy than we might expect from the role, and little or no youthful indecision. When he first appears, with his hat and suitcase, he looks like a salesman going to his death. As the spotlight falls on the actor’s slumped shoulders and he begins to speak, we see that this Hamlet carries all of his anxiety with him already. The ghost of Old Hamlet turns out to be merely a plot device, an opportunity for the uproarious Fido to steal the stage with a game of ghostly charades. Fido earned a roar of approval when he pulled out a gravelly Tom Waits delivery and greasepaint smile, gravely intoning, “Why sooo ssserious?” But it is Kumar who expresses the compelling grimness of Heath Ledger’s Joker – shambling, menacing, opaque, and in all things deliberate.⁵

Hamlet has been punted as “a play about a man who could not make up his mind”⁶. Notwithstanding the theatreland cliché of Hamlet’s morbid indecision, which the clowns have a lot of fun with, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is, at least in its central action, a densely plotted play of surveillance and counter-surveillance, a tightly structured epistemological whodunit. The Prince’s encounters with Ophelia and Gertrude are mounted as elaborate surveillance traps, the women placed to draw Hamlet out so that Claudius and Polonius can spy on him. Erosion of trust and authenticity under constant surveillance goes a long way to explaining the distortions and contortions of character and feeling in the play. Existential doubt no doubt plays a part in

5. There is one moment of tender comedy, when short-statured Kumar advances and drops his briefcase (without missing a beat) to make a staircase to Ophelia’s waiting lips.

6. Notably in the 1948 film version directed by and starring Laurence Olivier.

Hamlet's hesitation, sharpened for an early modern audience by religious controversy.⁷ Hamlet cannot believe a 'ghost' from purgatory, but must proceed on the evidence of his own counter-surveillance. Hence the staging of the Mousetrap. But Hamlet's general anxiety is reasonably explained as the effect of prolonged surveillance, the threat of an unseen audience.

Cutting the plot and reducing *Hamlet* to a play within the play, *Hamlet – The Clown Prince* loses much of the intrigue and urgency in the Shakespearean source. Washington DC-based Faction of Fools' 2012 *Hamlecchino, Clown Prince of Denmark*, a 'full' (135-minute) *Hamlet* performed in the tradition of *commedia*, showed how the play necessarily drags when its plot stakes are compromised.⁸ *Hamlet – The Clown Prince* cuts and runs with Shakespeare's material, selecting and rearranging it to suit the clowns. But even here the pace lags. The clowns stay onstage for the full performance and are often most interesting 'off duty' in the background: Fifi's glances at Soso, Madame Bouzo settling down with her knitting (later a hip flask), allowing the audience to follow the crisscrossing paths of small, personal narratives. But what happens centre-stage can have at times the listless, indifferent quality of a game show. Everything is watched here – not in the sense that anyone is being *spied* on, but rather in the sense that everything can be plainly seen. Fifi's romantic anguish and Madame Bouzo's bitterness are obvious, hidden only by other characters' insensitivity. Thus a play that is all about plucking out the heart of the characters' mystery, their souls' secrets, becomes a performance in which there are no secrets.

Taking their cue from forum theatre, the clowns pause often to consider characters' desires and motives. Taken in this way, *Hamlet* becomes communal property, an exercise in interpretation to be shared rather than a drama to be performed. The inclusive approach takes us rather far from Shakespeare's revisioning of revenge tragedy at the end of the sixteenth century, under the shadow of the interpretive difficulties created by forms of religious and political surveillance. In the forum format that the clowns favour the problem of interpretation is rendered rather basic, primarily a question of pop psychology ("She is always bringing the bedroom onstage!") and empathy: "What would you do?" "How would you feel ...?" Shakespeare's *Hamlet* asks more complex questions about performance, emotion and authenticity. "What would he do", Hamlet asks, "Had he the motive and cue for passion that I have?" (2.2.537-38), reflecting on the player king's performance and his own by extension. And yet, through their bungling, the clowns may nevertheless capture the play's most essential insight into theatre and the problems of interpretation.

While playing the fool with Polonius, Hamlet invites him to see in a passing cloud the shape of a camel, a weasel and a whale (3.2.345-50). Polonius fails to get in on the joke and humors Hamlet, believing him mad. But when Polonius watches the Mousetrap, the play of "one Lucianus, nephew to the king" (3.2.223) who poisons the king "i'th' garden for 's estate" (239), he most likely sees a play of court politics about a dangerously ambitious nephew, while guilty Claudius registers *two* stories about regicide, shrewdly opting to respond only to the picture of the murdered uncle, not the murder in the garden. Noting none of this, Gertrude sees only the problem of the play queen's "o'erhasty remarriage" (2.2.60) and her oath: "The lady protests too much, methinks" (3.2.210). Precisely *because* theatre holds up a mirror to its audience (3.2.20), the Mousetrap is a weak test of guilt, riddled with holes. The clowns are similarly locked in their own narratives and obsessions. And yet they struggle, heroically, to move beyond themselves and to empathise.

The Company Theatre's production of *Hamlet – The Clown Prince* seems to assume knowledge of *Hamlet* in its audience: a global audience for universal Shakespeare. A working

7. Hamlet asks the very Protestant question: is the ghost "a spirit of health or goblin damned"? (1.4.39). See Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

8. "Making Hamlet a clown drains the play of urgency," writes Chris Kilmeac in "A Commedia dell'Arte Hamlet. Ha ha?" Washington City Paper, 4th May 2012. Online: <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/42608/hamlecchino-clown-prince-of-denmark-from-faction-of-fools-reviewed/>

knowledge of Shakespeare's play and its reputation is needed to enjoy much of the production's humour, to appreciate the digressions as digressions from Shakespeare and not just from the clowns' business. Such knowledge is not however required to engage with the play's emotions. Shakespeare's characters in *Hamlet* are all to some degree opaque. The members of the court of Elsinore are expert dissemblers, practiced in the performance and concealment of emotion. But the clowns offer their own simple, naked passions (jealousy, unfulfillment, affection, rejection, betrayal) as proxies, acknowledging perhaps that the most complex and difficult feelings can lead to mawkish, even clownish, behaviour – though for Kapoor, the clown is “pure emotion”: his “class, social persona and all layers of psychology” have been “ripped off”.

“Hold[ing] up the mirror”, showing “the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (3.2.20-22), recent productions of *Hamlet* have shaken off some of the accretions of theatre history and rediscovered elements of Shakespeare's play through their resonance with present concerns. Classic features of the Hamlets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (kept alive in classroom editions) have faded from view as theatre-makers explore the play's *mise-en-scène* and its foregrounding of surveillance and control. Concerned with media, politics and technologies of control, these recent productions of *Hamlet* appear less bardolatrous, though they are still vehicles for celebrating Shakespeare our contemporary.⁹ In current productions, Shakespeare's failed revenger biding his time looks increasingly less like Laurence Olivier's creature of exquisite indecision and more like Edward Snowden. Like the character of Hamlet, the play also becomes more purposive in these productions: its motives clearer, its actions more urgent and more dramatically compelling. But while greater attention to Denmark's repressive apparatus has led to gains in the clarity of some productions, and arguably in fidelity to Shakespeare's intentions, the play has perhaps lost some of its theatricality, particularly its playfulness around theatricality.

Hamlet – The Clown Prince perhaps makes an argument for why we might want to hold on to some ‘misreadings’. For Kapoor, the play “reflects the confusion of the human soul. The characters are torn between love and betrayal, between forgiving and revenge, between action and inaction; echoing the confusions of human existence. This is what makes the play so universal and timeless!”¹⁰ Howsoever the Prince may be engaged in a world of strategic deception and political games, Machiavellian struggles over power and access to information, there is still value in attending to the emotional narratives in the play: the feelings of mothers, sons, lovers. In *Hamlet – The Clown Prince* this involves special levels of audience involvement. The performers demand particularly a quickness of response. When audience members do not laugh, they are berated for being dour or slow. When they do laugh, they can be berated for their unfeelingness. The clowns keep the audience on their toes, with rapid shifts between seriousness and levity that were standard in the early modern theatre but pose a serious challenge to audiences in the more ‘polite’ world of modern theatre. The Company Theatre's production calls for Elizabethan levels of robustness and flexibility from audiences, as it hurls them without warning between extremes of emotion. However, the play also fosters a quick forgiveness, a willingness to laugh (or to cry) even where it might not feel appropriate, and then to move on. *Hamlet – The Clown Prince* ultimately celebrates feelings – less the feelings of its characters, than of its many audiences. Spectators are invited to identify and to admit – in the face of potential mockery – a host of ‘wrong’ readings: fears, weakness, sentimentality, their own prejudices and preoccupations.

It is senseless to speak of a performance like this without speaking of the audience. I watched the company on both nights of their Johannesburg run. The execution on the first night,

9. See Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London, Norton: 1974).

10. Charla Manohar, “Rajat Kapoor's ‘Hamlet: The Clown Prince’ a comic version of a tragedy” in *BollySpice*, 21st November 2010. Online: <http://bollyspice.com/1780/rajat-kapoors-hamlet-the-clown-prince-a-comic-version-of-a-tragedy>

before a well-fed and -watered gala audience, could not be faulted. The performance was warmhearted, professional, engaging and assured. But the performance on the following night, working a slightly bigger and more responsive crowd, hinted at the potential perhaps only glimpsed in this South African run. While the company's first performance felt vital and convincing, the energy felt there was perhaps only the ghost of performances past. On the second night, the play came into its own. Actors found their platform in the energy generated by the audience – less than they are used to, it would seem, but enough to strike a spark. The two and a half hours of the production became a space to be explored, rather than filled. And the results left me convinced that I had seen only a small part of this *Hamlet*. If a review of a performance can be considered a review of the production, there can still be no review without some discussion of the audience.

Brought to the Shared History Festival by Teamwork Arts and the High Commission of India, the production had perhaps not been very widely publicised. The Company Theatre's actors, accustomed to playing to sold-out houses, played to an auditorium at the University of the Witwatersrand at perhaps a quarter capacity. On the second night, an effort appeared to have been made to bring in a larger, livelier audience. The audience that gathered to see the show seemed to be mostly students from the University, friends and affiliates. When I arrived to claim my ticket, seats were being sold on a voluntary 'pay what you will' basis, and ticketholders were calling in friends.

The Wits Theatre in Braamfontein was a suitable venue for Shared History's dramatic contribution to the festival programming: situated on the edge of Johannesburg's rapidly regenerating CBD, where a boom in student accommodation is creating one of the most robust areas of urban regeneration in Johannesburg. Even suburb-dwellers who generally steer clear of the city visit the Juta Street market on weekends. Across the road from the theatre (the notoriously congested Jorissen Street) stand the offices of the University's Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA), whose mandate to contribute to the consolidation of economic, political and cultural relations between India and countries in the Global South echoes the festival's goal to provide "an avenue for cultural and ideological exchange between India and South Africa".¹¹ But, as I spoke with the cast, all much happier with the second night's performance, I wondered how their show might have played at a different venue. *Hamlet – The Clown Prince* is a production all about access, as the bumbling clowns attempt to access something in Shakespeare's play and in their (changing) audiences.

Twenty kilometers West of Braamfontein, in Jabulani, the Soweto Theatre has been designed and built to provide access to arts and culture for residents of Soweto, where (according to the 2008 census) at least a third of Johannesburg's population are estimated to live. The 5900m² building is a flagship model of township development and urban design – though promoting access was always, and remains, a challenge for the theatre. The architects on the project paid special attention to the integration of the theatre space with its surroundings and the design of a canopied foyer space to encourage locals to pass through, feeling that the R150 million investment is a space they have the right to occupy.¹² What might have happened if, instead of selling standard price tickets at the University theatre and then dropping prices to fill seats, Soweto residents had been offered R10 tickets to see the Company Theatre's skilled performers clowning in one of the complex's 90-, 180-, or 420-seater performance spaces? It is impossible to say. At least it seems clear that, while universities and audiences provide companies with a fairly reliable base of material support, the Company Theatre's performers don't need a sympathetic audience when they travel. What their bold clowning needs, and demands, is less agreement and affirmation than energy and a response. A challenge.

11. "Shared History: The Indian Experience in South Africa 2013" (press release). Online: <http://www.wits.ac.za/witstheatre/21298/>

12. "The Soweto Theatre / Afritects" in *ArchDaily*, 16th June 2012. Online: <http://www.archdaily.com/243942/the-soweto-theatre-afritects/>

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