

*HAMLET*: directed by Nicholas Hytner. National Theatre, London (“NT Live” broadcast at Ster Kinekor in Rosebank, Johannesburg), January 2011.

*HAMLET*: directed by James Cairns, Nina Lucy Wylde and Ingrid Wylde (“The Framework”). National Arts Festival, Grahamstown, July 2010; various site-specific performances, Johannesburg, 2011.

SCOTT BURNETT

## Two Hamlets

It is hard to imagine a Hamlet ‘for the ages’. Great productions of Shakespeare’s best-loved tragedy date quickly; they serve as windows into the time of their staging. To the Gothic sensibility, Hamlet is all madness and ghosts. In the nineteenth century, he is bookish and serious, a familiar Romantic hero. Later, Freud and Olivier: Hamlet becomes Oedipus. In the 1960s he is an alienated youth fighting ‘the Man’, *Hair*’s Berger shipped off to death in Vietnam.

While a new staging of *Romeo and Juliet* updates our understanding of love, and a new Richard or Henry reflects contemporary thinking about power or politics, a new Hamlet puts human psychology on the couch. Hamlet’s internal conflict has almost universal resonance: while he must fight the tyranny of the older generation, he does so out of loyalty to his dead father. He must simultaneously love and hate his provenance. No wonder he struggles to “whet [his] blunted purpose” (*Hamlet* 3.4.111).

The National Theatre UK’s 2010 production of Hamlet, shot in high definition and shown in South African cinemas earlier this year, gives us a fully up-to-date Hamlet. Rory Kinnear, weedy and balding at 33, plays Hamlet. Artistic director of the National Theatre, Nicholas Hytner, directs. The production is set in a fictional modern-day dictatorship, and avoids textual adjustments to the quarto/folio composite we have inherited as the ‘standard’ *Hamlet* (at least none that this odd-job scholar could spot). Denmark is quite obviously modern Britain. Hamlet slouches around in a hoodie, very much a citizen of David Cameron’s “Broken Britain”. He’s *well* upset his dad is dead and his mum’s shackled up with his uncle, *innit*? This is a Hamlet we could imagine on the Tube, the contents of his desk in a box on his lap, a lay-off letter from Merrill Lynch stuffed untidily into the breast pocket of his crumpled suit. He yells obscenities at other passengers, cosmic injustice throbbing behind his eyes.

Kinnear is a credit crunch Hamlet. As he moans “O, that this too too solid flesh would melt” (1.2.129) his voice catches slightly in the back of his throat. He is never very far from rage, or despair. He sails into artful madness, blown by a whirling malice. He pulls Polonius, and then Ophelia, into the maelstrom. He is cruel in his anguish, indiscriminate in his anger. No mistake he makes can deflect his unswerving self-righteousness. He has been wronged by the world, and the world must pay. Of course, self-righteousness is the wrong word. It’s not that Hamlet is sure he is right; rather, he is very sure that everybody else is wrong.

Claudius, played as a calculating chief executive by Patrick Malahide, is unrepentant in suit and tie, while Hamlet shuffles about in track-pants and trainers. Men in suits and dark glasses talk into their wrists when he enters or leaves the room. People are tailed as they move around Elsinore. Naive Ophelia is crushed between the cogs of her father’s corporate machinations and her boyfriend’s scheming dishonesty. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are spooks.

Anyone smell fat bonuses for wicked bankers, or sexed-up reports on Iraqi weapons?

I imagine that watching this production in ‘the Colonies’ is different to watching it in London. Filmed (beautifully) at the Bankside home of the National Theatre, this is a British Shakespeare, for Britons. Britons who are terrified of melting ice caps and peak oil. Britons who are terrified that their government is monitoring their every move. Britons who believe we’d

better give up this modern living malarkey and go back to little vegetable patches fertilised with sustainably sourced horse manure before our collective carbon footprints turn the South Downs into the Western Sahara.

In Johannesburg on a Sunday night, the audience was perhaps more concerned that their government would fail to monitor its citizens, than that it would succeed. The shrillness of Kinnear's *Hamlet* – so recognisable to anybody who has met the modern Englishman and engaged him or her on the subject of multiculturalism, buying local, the end of capitalism, or any one of the number of fashionable topics that dominate their discourse – was, to South Africans, off-key. The production was excellent but, *asseblief tog*, I found myself thinking, must he really burst into tears during every soliloquy? That the world is irredeemably screwed has become an article of faith up north. I'm glad I live in a country where we don't need to bring the whole "sterile promontory" (2.2.303) crashing down around our ears every time we feel upset.

A *Hamlet* of a totally different sort was performed recently on Eleanor Street in Troyeville, three doors down from where David Webster was murdered in 1989. In contrast to expectations, there were no clever references to Claudius as the *Groot Krokodil* (P.W. Botha), nor were Rosencrantz and Guildenstern dressed as operatives of the Civil Cooperation Bureau, with moustaches, side partings and grey shoes. Instead, the assembled ragtag of professional, semi-professional, and somewhat-less-than-semi-professional actors offered up a *Hamlet* that sunny Sunday afternoon that eschewed any attempt at relevance to the apartheid or post-apartheid *Zeitgeist*. The actors just spoke their lines, and left it at that.

The performance space, a large Edwardian home, was not dressed as a set – but this served the purpose well. The audience stopped in the kitchen between scenes to munch on crisps and crudités. The action played out in a number of rooms, outside and on the roof, but the link between scene and place was arbitrary. The actors were dressed as they normally would be at an informal get-together on a Sunday afternoon. There was a remarkable lack of boundary between actors and audience.

Some parts had been prepared by more than one actor, and so a facilitator announced the casting before every scene. Props, provided by the audience at the outset, were randomly selected from a bag, and the rules about how actors could use them were explained before the show started (props must be employed according to the usual function of the object, while at the same time being applied to the world of the play).

The approach, which was pioneered by a British theatre company called The Factory, is being tested in South Africa by sister company The Framework. It can descend into farce if not well managed. That some of the players fluff their lines, or deliver them with a sing-song Jo'burg northern suburbs accent, doesn't help. The props can be irritating and gimmicky: witness *Hamlet's* Ghost in a cycle-helmet, miming riding a bicycle through the courtyard while *Hamlet* chases after it. But where the text was allowed to ring out with some fidelity to metre and meaning, the effect was bracing.

Introducing The Framework's maiden performance at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown last year, former assistant director at London's Globe and director at The Factory Tim Carroll silenced a noisy Rhodes Theatre by delivering, with clarity and purpose, *Macbeth's* "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" soliloquy (*Macbeth* 5.5.19ff). The air was suddenly heavy with meaning. The point he was making was simple: the words are enough. Sets, costumes and the process of 'reading ourselves into the text' all obscure the simple majesty of what Shakespeare wrote.

The Framework's methodology is as much about the actors themselves as it is about their audience. Artistic co-director James Cairns told me it is the most exciting thing he has ever done as an actor: "I think this is also the most work I've ever done without getting paid," he joked (n.p.). Co-director Nina Lucy Wylde, together with her mother, producer and director Ingrid Wylde, brought Factory founder Alex Hassell to South Africa in early 2010 to train The Framework. They also organised Carroll's visit to the country in time for the National Arts Festival last year. "Many people talk about the relevance and importance of Shakespeare," affirmed Nina Lucy in an interview. "But very few people are actually doing anything about it." (n.p.)

The Framework performed Hamlet again in the Shakespeare Garden in Emmarentia this May, and then at the Arts on Main complex in the Johannesburg CBD. There will be a further launch at the University of Johannesburg Theatre in the second half of 2011 and, subsequent to this, ample opportunity to experience this dynamic approach to Shakespeare.

One cannot really rival Hytner's production for polish or power. Outstanding performances, mastery of the verse and narrative coherence all tip the scales in the National Theatre's favour. But what Wylde, Cairns and their ragtag crew did on that Troyeville rooftop, as the sun was setting behind the Hillbrow skyline, was something very special. In exploring a methodology that frees the text from a time-bound interpretation, they have perhaps given us a Hamlet that is 'for the ages'.

*With thanks to James Cairns and Nina Lucy Wylde for participating in informal interviews.*