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Theory and Practice in English Studies. 2022, vol. 11, iss. 1, pp. 185-190

ISSN 1805-0859 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/145127>

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Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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PRODUCTION REVIEW:
DOUBLE *HAMLET* – DOUBLE TROUBLE

William SHAKESPEARE: *Hamlet*. Directed by Michal Dočekal, performed by Městská divadla pražská, Prague. Premiered 30 October 2021.

William SHAKESPEARE: *Hamlet*. Directed by Jakub Čermák, performed by Jihočeské divadlo, České Budějovice. Premiered 22 April 2022.

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THE story of *Hamlet*, perhaps the most famous play that there is, has a special position in the history of Czech drama. It has, nevertheless, been absent from Czech theatres for some years. Until October 2021, the most recent staging of *Hamlet* was Zdeněk Dušek's production in the Municipal Theatre Zlín in Southeast Moravia; no new *Hamlet* had been staged in the Czech capital since 2013. After the obligatory coronavirus break, two productions of William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* emerged on the Czech stage – in October 2021 in Prague and in April 2022 in České Budějovice, South Bohemia. Both productions use modern imagery and music; the approaches of the directors, however, differ significantly. As the creators of the pieces claim, the *Hamlet* in Prague is supposed to be “the study of madness in mad times,”¹ whilst the staging in České Budějovice sees the tragedy as a “struggle for love, justice, and power.”²

One Hamlet Cannot Take It All

Hamlet directed by the artistic director of Prague City Theatres (Městská divadla pražská), Michal Dočekal, premiered on October 30, 2021, in the ABC Theatre. Choosing Jiří Josek's translation, Dočekal, together with the dramaturges Jana

¹ From the description on the web of the theatre: <https://www.mestskadivadlaprazska.cz/in-scenace/1511/hamlet/>.

² From the description on the web of the theatre: <https://www.jihoceskedivadlo.cz/porad/2503-hamlet>.

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Slouková and Daniel Příbyl, decided to supplement Shakespeare's text with additional verses from Vladimír Holan's and Ivan Diviš's poetry, a handful of lines from Heiner Müller's postmodern drama *Die Hamletmaschine* and Jean-Luc Legarce's monodrama *Les Règles du savoir-vivre dans la société moderne (Rules for Good Manners in the Modern World)*, as well as passages from Julien Beck's *Living Theatre*. The inclusion of such excerpts aims to emphasize the modernity and topicality of *Hamlet* to the contemporary audience, commenting on the long (and to a certain extent tiring) history of the Danish prince on the European stage. Maybe we have already seen it all? Maybe we are all Hamlet, weary of our maddening everyday existence in the post-covid world?

The set of Dočekal's production, a white space on the stage, is dominated by a framed, life-sized picture of a beach. The characters gather in what looks like an exhibition center or, perhaps, an art venue, where a sofa or a chair can be added, promptly changing the set into a bedroom or a living room. Later on in the play, the picture moves into the background, shifting the focus to a big, frosted glass window, in which, from time to time, a spying Claudius or Polonius can be seen. Breaking the fourth wall, stage left is a vanity table where the characters apply their make-up or change their costumes.

The characters fashionably blend into the white background of the stage. Hamlet (Tomáš Havlínek), contrary to the predominant European tradition, is not dressed in black – at first, he wears striped pajamas, later he changes into casual khaki/beige clothes. Nothing visually denotes his royal heritage, making him, to quote Jan Kott's famous words, our contemporary. The rest of the characters share this contemporaneity – Ophelia (Beáta Kaňoková) wears a chic powder pink dress, Gertrude (Ivana Uhlířová) dons a pantsuit, Claudius (Tomáš Milostný) sports a sweater and a pair of Nikes and only jokingly puts on a plastic toy crown. Yet, despite the visual modernity of the production and the texts supplementing Shakespeare's original drama, it is hard to understand what the director wanted to say with this concept of *Hamlet*. The motivation of the characters is generally confusing, with the actors changing their demeanor every other scene. The best example of this character uncertainty is Ophelia, who oscillates between a modern, emancipated woman in the relationship with Hamlet, and an abused daughter of the physically violent Polonius. Her behavior changes constantly – she is confidently pushing Hamlet away, playing with him, keeping up with his fake madness and, minutes later, without any external pressure, starts hysterically crying. Her madness seems to appear much earlier than in Shakespeare, culminating in her singing Iggy Pop's "I Wanna Be Your Dog," only to later enter the stage with a pack of dry dog food, which she hands out to those around her instead of the usual flowers.

The acting of the cast is not on the same level – Ivana Uhlířová as Gertrude is informally expressive, Filip Březina’s Horatio is angrier than Hamlet but it is unclear why, Tomáš Milostný as Claudius has an obvious problem with speaking in verse and Havlínek’s Hamlet is emotionally distressed from his very first lines, which eventually leads to his inability to escalate his behavior further, forcing the actor to resort to mere outbursts of helplessness (Havlínek’s or Hamlet’s?).

On the one hand, Dočekal’s production features a number of interesting and novel ideas – Gertrude and Claudius behave like teenagers in love, sidelining the question of power; the colorfully dressed troupe of arriving actors, contrasting with the white space, and neutrally colored costumes of the “ordinary” characters, such as the quiet, observant Horatio (who, dressed in black, looks more like Hamlet than Hamlet himself), who is seen typing the story of Hamlet as the play unfolds, ultimately to take on his quest to share the story with the world. However, these ideas do not work together to create a conceptually stable production of modern *Hamlet* and rather present a display of loosely connected, effectively and pleasantly looking scenes. There seems to be no central idea or theme tying the individual scenes together. The numbers are skillfully arranged, full of intertextual jokes and pop-cultural references, but they all function as one-off events, not facilitating any deeper understanding as to why these elements are present. The more the director tries to be provocative (burying Ophelia’s body in a sofa-bed, Rosencranz and Guildenstern looking like hip-hop singers), the more conventional and sterile the production becomes – it never really transgresses the limits of traditional drama as the concept of the production does not attempt to challenge Shakespeare’s text.

Totally Cool Hamlet

After the Prague City Theatres decided to use Josek’s translation instead of the new one by Filip Krajník, the South Bohemian Theatre in České Budějovice unexpectedly decided to make use of the latest version of the play. Martina Schlegelová, the artistic director of the theatre, however, chose to stage their *Hamlet* in the studio theatre, the so-called Půda (the “Attic”), which is usually reserved for experimental and chamber pieces. Another surprising choice was the director of the production – Jakub Čermák is currently known for his radical adaptations of classical dramas (*Maryša* by the Mrštík brothers, Stroupežnický’s *Naši furianti*). It was obvious that Čermák’s direction on a small stage would not be traditional, classical, or idyllic. Yet, what one can do in Prague might not work in a regional theatre, which is heavily dependent on the subscription system and its somewhat conservative audience. This might be

why Čermák's *Hamlet* is not the director's most eccentric piece, even though the production rejects the usual, provincial style and is not afraid to be original and distinctive.

The production works with postmodern references, the plot is set on a stage resembling a cheap disco club, with the central focus on a big photograph of King Hamlet (Pavel Oubram) and his funeral. The whole cast attends, bringing flowers as a sign of formal condolence; only Hamlet is hiding among the audience, occasionally saying "My dad died" to the microphone. Those who would expect a depressed and insecure Hamlet will be disappointed. Dan Kranich as Hamlet is a self-confident man, very loudly expressing his disagreement with his mother's new husband, but it is not clear whether it is because of the Oedipus complex or simple male rivalry, since Claudius is not performed by an elderly actor, but by Kranich's peer, Jakub Koudela. His interpretation of the new king works in the intentions of instinctive and physical dominance, by which he controls everyone around him, most importantly Gertrude.

Čermák uses Kranich's full artistic potential and his musical talent (Kranich is, in fact, the founder of the hip-hop band Past) – some parts of Hamlet's monologues are delivered in the form of a suggestive hip-hop song, which brings the character significantly closer to the younger audience. The prince is the representative of the younger generation, allowing young people in the audience to identify with him as his family problems might be shared by many spectators. Although Kranich does not always keep up with the pace and rhythm of the performance, he dominates the small stage but does not try to steal the spotlight and overshadow his colleagues.

Eliška Brumovská as Ophelia is a great partner for this Hamlet. In her artistic expression, she is neither hysterical nor extreme. It is obvious that the couple's relationship is intimate, and the director is not afraid to emphasize the romantic and sexual subtext of their bond. Čermák's interpretation of Ophelia is not vulgar, but she is not her father's passive and obedient daughter either. She does not hide her sexuality and physical longing for Hamlet – on the contrary, Ophelia is not afraid to demonstrate her desire and simply seduces Hamlet.

The long Shakespearean text has undergone significant changes and shifts. Ophelia's final scene is omitted; instead of giving flowers, Brumovská sings the iconic Czech song "Modlitba pro Martu" ("A Prayer for Martha"). Fortinbras's arrival has also been cut. After Claudius' and Hamlet's deaths, Horacio bashfully puts the royal crown onto his head, concluding the production.

Hamlet and Horacio's relationship is quite specific – next to the handsome Hamlet, Horatio looks a bit like an outsider, wearing glasses, having an odd hair-style and a speech impediment. He is an apparent admirer of his royal friend,

looking up to him, and wanting to be like him. In the finale, the focus ultimately shifts to Horatio, evoking a parallel to the relationship between Tom Ripley and Dickie Greenleaf from *The Talented Mr Ripley*. After a moment with the crown on his head, Horatio stands up and confidently and authoritatively stares at the audience. Such an ending is open to the audience's interpretation: Did Fortinbras not fit onto this tiny stage? Is this scene a metaphor for a tyranny that is being replaced by another? Does this gesture refer to the biblical "the first will be last and the last will be first"?

The interpretation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – in this case, the girls "Guildie" and "Rosie" – is not entirely clear either. Casting women as Hamlet's friends is nothing new, but this gender swap seems to be only superficially motivated. Guildie and Rosie are Hamlet's acquaintances from their wild party years, they share a history and therefore provoke Ophelia's jealousy as she sees them, scantily dressed, embracing and pampering her beloved. Yet they are quick to change sides and allow Claudius to manipulate them into tricking Hamlet, whom they were spoiling mere minutes ago. Despite still being referred to as university students, they are shallow, and the actresses further devalue the characters with unnecessarily eccentric gestures to the point one wonders how the intelligent rebel Hamlet could ever befriend such gold-diggers. Both actresses (Nicole Tisotová and Daniela Šišková) also play the two clowns/gravediggers, dressed in black latex costumes, colored wigs and circus clown masks, balancing between life and death (the similarity with the clown from the horror movie *IT* is surely not coincidental). They put on a deliberately bad puppet show with Yorick's skull, which they subsequently pass on to Hamlet. The moment when Hamlet realizes the transience of life is thus unnecessarily transformed into a primitive routine that lacks the fundamental importance of Shakespeare's writing.

Krajník's translation works well on the stage, it does not bear any signs of excessive word-to-word paraphrasing of the English original. The actors are successful in tackling the Renaissance text even though the level of their rhetorical skills differs from person to person.

After a long time, the two new Czech Hamlets are individuals that the audience finds worth following. The spectators want to experience Hamlet's sorrows and anxiously wait for what will happen and who will kill whom, although the motivation, pace and dynamics of the productions are not always balanced. Regarding the South Bohemian *Hamlet*, it is necessary to appreciate the audience's readiness and willingness to accept a brand-new translation that has previously never been tried on stage. We are excited to see which theatre chooses Krajník's translation, what the academic and critical response will be, and whether it will become a legitimate part of the Czech Shakespearean canon.

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