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To Stop Now or Not to Stop?

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ABSTRACT

Hamlet is one of the most popular plays; by Shakespeare. And this is recognized to be the longest play and an atypical revenge tragedy, with multifarious complications in the plot-structure. But the entire play is too lyrical with some soliloquies that might appear to be ruthlessly cruel to the sensitive sections of the audience. And these soliloquies divulge some ugly truths of life and society. So the tenor, temper and tune of the play reflect the truth of the poetic assertion by Keats that "our sweetest songs are those that tell of the saddest thoughts". Apart from prince Hamlet, the other principal characters are Ophelia, Gertrude, Horatio, Claudius, Polonius and the two friends of prince Hamlet. The prince Hamlet's father, King Hamlet was allegedly murdered by Claudius, though this issue (allegation) is factually questionable as the play unfolds it gradually.

The chain of murders with ample bloodshed and the delayed murder of the villain thanks to the procrastination on the part of the prince Hamlet who did plan to avenge the murder of King Hamlet. In the end, almost all the characters were put to death sooner or later thanks to the incidents or the flow of events in a random or calculated manner. And in *Hamlet* play revenge spirals escalated rather than bringing closure to the violence, injury and insults. The message of the play is not 'forgive and forget' but "remember and resist". And the play was quite fit for Elizabethan and Jacobean stages.

"He rais'd a sigh so piteous and profound

As it did seem to shatter all his bulk

And end his being."

Keywords: Ghost, Regicide, Suicide, Homicide, Adultery, Soliloque, Schizophrenia, delusion, Hallucination, Insanity, Crazyness

1. Introduction

A Shakespearean tragedy or, for that matter, any successful tragedy is to be characterised by six Aristotelian criteria viz, 'plot', 'character', 'thought', 'diction', 'melody' and 'spectacle'. In the play 'Hamlet' there are two prime female characters with Ophelia, Hamlet's sweet heart-throb and Gertrude, the bete noir of the principal character, the prince Hamlet and the male characters are quite

numerous in comparison [1-3]. From the body of the text of the play *Hamlet* had an ambivalent attitude to his mother Gertrude. He loved her as a female species, a queen and lulled or nurtured a dream or fantasy of having physical relationship with his mother Gertrude. In that case he would dam himself as an incest.

Hamlet can be classified as a tragedy and a classic revenge play in which the tragic hero prince

Hamlet falls a victim to the corrupting forces of madness, suspicion and revenge. Hamlet's quest to avenge his father's murder had driven a wedge between him and every other character in the play, including his once beloved Ophelia. Shakespeare used a play-within the play, 'The murder of Gonzago'. This was intended to dramatize the death of King Hamlet, which happened before the beginning of the play and to develop the character of Claudius, whose reaction to the play reveals that he is indeed a murderer.

About 400 years prior to the Elizabethan version, Saxo, Saxo Grammaticus told a similar tale in his *Historia Danica* (c. 1200). About 15 years before Shakespearean version, Francois de Belleforest adopted the essential story in his *Histoires Tragiques* (1576), a popular collection of tales in French both of which survive as literary manuscripts [4].

Obviously the prince Hamlet, the son of King Hamlet of Denmark, who was (allegedly) murdered by Claudius. This point over years had grown extremely controversial, thanks to the learned work by Kemp [5]. We would try to expatiate here the core of the controversy which constitutes the crux of the paradox in the Hamlet drama. Thus the plot structure is somewhat complicated. And this does not appear to be a case of clear, simple and linear story-telling; rather the soliloquies, "the play within the play scene" the highly rich philosophical utterances, his dramatic postures with rich elocutions verbiages, rhetoric's render the play to be a complex quizzical box filled with riddles and 'antic dispositions'.

In fact, the entire play opens up a valley of deaths, starting from King Hamlet, further of prince Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude and then one after another thereafter.

2. Allaying Few Misconceptions

But the fact of the matter is, quite simply, that all the interpreters, without exception, have worked under a misunderstanding which is the direct cause of their failure. This misunderstanding, this false assumption, is that Claudius was guilty of the murder of his brother, King Hamlet. Claudius was not guilty of that murder. True, he used the occasion of his brother's death to acquire both his throne and his queen; and the latter acquisition was

in those times incestuous, so that he was a sinner; but he was not a murderer. Kemp emphatically remarked "I repeat, he was not guilty of his brother's murder".

Preposterous? On the face of it, yes. But first let us consider the source of our information about King Hamlet's death. The source is, of course, the Ghost of the murdered king (for he was murdered). By his own open admission, King Hamlet was fast asleep in his orchard when the crime was perpetrated! He begins his story, told to Hamlet his son on the battlements of Elsinore, "Sleeping within my orchard," describes with what quicksilver rapidity the poison worked, and concludes,

"Thus was I sleeping by a brother's hand
Of life, of crown, of queen at once
dispatched."

It is obvious that a man killed in his sleep, even though he later has the power to return from the grave, is not the most reliable of witnesses, for the simple fact that he is not a witness but merely the oblivious victim. His story and his false accusation are so powerfully expressed, under such awesome circumstances, that his son believes him at the moment of telling. Moreover, the Prince is so profoundly horrified by the sinful and hasty marriage and the lack of proper mourning that he is ready to believe almost anything about his uncle and his mother. We are not in the same emotional state and should not permit ourselves to be convinced so easily.

All tragedies, especially Shakespearean tragedies have some common features. The principal character or the protagonist himself or herself suffers from a fatal flaw of character. In case 'Hamlet' the malady is his remarkable lack of decisiveness, eclipsed by an extremely hesitant nature with no power of prompt decision-making in a smart manner. In fact, Hamlet could be viewed as 'confusion' personified. The bigger this lack of firmness, the harder will be the fall. In case of 'Hamlet' as the decisive action of 'revenge' was delayed, his fall did not materialise too soon. Thus that appeared to be a very time-taking process, thanks to his procrastination.

William Shakespeare's Hamlet is a revenge tragedy primarily made up of characters teeming

with emotional and mental instability. Throughout the events of this play, Hamlet, the protagonist, finds himself amidst a quandary. Because of Hamlet's philosophical and contemplative nature, he remains in a constant state of distress, which the audience perceives sporadically throughout the play as Hamlet expresses his feelings concerning the events taking place. He becomes further confused in his efforts as he continues to contemplate the consequences of his decisions. Hamlet's main expressions of his emotionally torn state are made known primarily through his renowned soliloquies. In his famous "to be or not to be" speech, Hamlet contemplates death and discusses how, in his eyes, death may prove to have relieving qualities in that if he commits suicide, he will no longer have to worry about making his decision. Hamlet appears to be the character most concerned with reality, but seems to be the least tied to it, due to this, he is left in a state of sheer mental distress that only he can get himself out of. As the events of the play progress the audience perceives that Hamlet develops an inward struggle as he attempts to decide whether or not to avenge his father's death by killing his murderer, Claudius. His continuous awareness and doubt delays him from acting. To highlight Hamlet's inability to take action, Shakespeare includes a number of other characters capable of taking resolute and headstrong revenge as required. In one instance Fortinbras travels many miles to take his revenge and ultimately triumphs in conquering Denmark. In another instance, Laertes schemes to assassinate Hamlet as an act of avenging the death of his father, Polonius. Hamlet finally acts to kill Claudius, his father's murderer, only after realizing that he himself is poisoned. By procrastinating, everyone whom he ridicules and targets also dies along the way. Rene` Girard's comments on Hamlet's predicament in his essay "Hamlet: the Pseudo-Procrastinator" when he says: [6]

3. Semiotic stint in 'Hamlet'

Hamlet play is symbolised all the time by a "Yorik Skull" which addresses its Semiotic feature. Semiotics is the study of sign action (semiosis). As such, it is a purely human endeavour. All life forms engage in semiosis, all use signs, only humans know they exist. Only humans engage in inquiry into

semiosis, or sign activity. As Deely (1990) observes, "at the heart of semiotics is the realization that the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs. Hamlet, in life, was a scholar, a thoughtful man with some cynic components, misogynic traits and a firm believer in human frailty and mortality. The skull represents a man who is no longer alive and thus smack of mortality of man. And this is universal. The remnants of the mortal body is reduced to either ashes or a set of bones-damaged, decayed or otherwise. Ultimately, essentially this point of view leads to the essence of the existentialist core content of this, Shakespearean play entitled 'Hamlet' [7].

Very rightly Shakespeare must have realised that in the theatre the very sound of the lines, apart from their rhythm, meaning has patent force. Mellifluous utterance does not suffice. Indeed a honey-like sweetness will be apt to pall and cloy. The stage demands constant variety and bold emphasis. In this context, Nicoll [8] maintained that

"The result is that Shakespeare's language is full of sharp alliteration in key passages, alliteration so blatant one might certainly have condemned it non-dramatic verse, but, being designed for drama continually stirring in mind and challenging attention."

4. Life-Lessons from the play 'Hamlet'

So, here are a handful :

1. "The world is a prison," Hamlet sighs. This is not just a statement of his mental state. Shakespeare's play is also a drama of surveillance in a police state. Everyone is being watched. This once required expensive and expansive networks of spies. Now it simply requires the use of the internet.
2. "To thine own self be true"- NOT. People tend to forget that this line was put in the mouth of the Daddy of all windbags, Polonius, and was heavily laden with irony. Polonius's self-serving drivel is an endless source of amusement.
3. "Were you not sent for?" Never trust your friends. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they might have been sent for by your ever-

- loving parents and be secretly plotting your execution.
4. "Mother, you have my father much offended". Hamlet doesn't know if his mother was in on the murder of his father. The Nazi jurist, Carl Schmitt, felt that Gertrude's guilt functions like a dark spot in the play. The lesson seems to be - you'll never figure out what your mother wants. Leave her to heaven, as the Ghost says.
 5. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." In other words, believe in ghosts. In a world where time is out of joint and the air is filled with war and rumours of war, the dead are the only creatures courageous enough to speak the truth.
 6. "I did love you once... I loved you not." Let's just say that Hamlet has commitment problems, while the ever-faithful and naïve Ophelia is the one labelled a Janus-faced whore. It's good to remember that this war between the sexes has gone on for hundreds of years and men cannot tolerate the question of what a woman wants.
 7. "Tender yourself more dearly." Polonius's seemingly affectionate paternal advice circles around the valuation of his daughter Ophelia as a commodity to be brokered on the marriage market. Lessons on money abound. Here and everywhere in Shakespeare, the language of love degrades into the language of commerce.
 8. "O shame, where is thy blush?" Hamlet accuses his mother of acting shamelessly in marrying his Uncle in rude haste after the death of his father. But the truth is everyone in Hamlet acts shamelessly and for us the moral of the play is the production of shame in its audience. Not too much, just enough.
 9. "Stay, Illusion!" Illusion is the only means to action. The only thing that can save us in this distracted globe is theatre. The only truth is found in illusion.
 10. In understanding this 'play' and some other Shakespearean plays the role of the

supernatural elements, like 'ghosts', 'weird sisters' (for Macbeth) are not to be devalued; rather these elements assume much importance and of highly significant import [9].

5. Hamlet under a Psycho analytic Scanner

Freud's assumption is that the presence of Gertrude evokes a sense of guilt and discomfort (as a result of his Oedipal yearnings) which Hamlet is unable to tolerate. Hamlet's own allusion to Nero is based on a similar situation - although derived from quite different events. Nero was reputed to have slept with his mother, Agrippina, and then to have murdered her out of a sense of guilt. Oedipus or Orestes? In both cases, there is an argument to be made that the target of Hamlet's aggression would more appropriately have been his mother, rather than his step-father.

If we want to understand the psychological implications of *Hamlet*, the primary focus should be on the character Hamlet and how he develops and modifies throughout the play. In order to gain a true understanding of most of the detail that is implied through Hamlet's way of portraying himself to others, it is vital to look deep into the actions that are carried out, and analyze them psychoanalytically.

The play is built up on Hamlet's hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him. The central mystery in it -- namely the meaning of Hamlet's hesitancy in seeking to obtain revenge for his father's murder -- has been called "the Sphinx of modern literature". Freudian critics then go on to address what they consider the heart of the matter in *Hamlet*; the reasons for Hamlet's seeming delay in killing Claudius. For them, Claudius represents, in flesh and blood, the embodiment of Hamlet's Oedipal urges. He has actually killed Hamlet's father and is sleeping with his mother. Hamlet's hesitation in killing Claudius, according to Freud, has to do with his deeper association with him. Claudius serves as a flesh and blood expression of his own repressed childhood fantasies, and to kill him would be to murder a part of his own inner self already associated with self-loathing. The "clincher" on Freud's solution to what he called "The Problem" has to do with not only Hamlet's delay in killing the

king, but also with the actual murder of Claudius. The long-awaited event can only take place when Gertrude has died. Hamlet is then free to act because the cause of his repressed guilt has been eliminated, and he kills Claudius immediately.

In the actual play, one of the principle arguments is whether Hamlet is truly mad or not. To analyze this for validity, we would have to look at the linguistics of the play and the situations that play out within it. There is concrete evidence, as well as implied detail, which lead one to believe that Hamlet is only acting as if he were mad in or not. Throughout the play, we come across Hamlet's often strange and erratic behaviors such as—his fondness for ridiculing, his cruelty toward Ophelia, his broken sleeps and bad dreams, his melancholy, his desire for secrecy, in the scene of Ophelia's funeral. Hamlet's these attitudes are mainly outcome of his frustration and mental disturbance. In Act-I Scene-V of the play, when the ghost unearths the conspiracy of his murder allegedly involving Gertrude, Hamlet pours out his frustration about both his mother and Claudius in such a manner,

"O most pernicious woman!

Oh villain, villain, smiling damned villain!

That one may smile, and smile and be a villain;"

Such psychological disorders result from Hamlet's mental disturbance. Compulsive obsessive disorder is an abnormal state of mind in which the subject is unconsciously forced to involve in an activity repeatedly. This, usually, is an outcome of some emotional turbulence and needs a clinical treatment.

Soliloquies in Shakespearean tragedies display the innermost layers of human psyche. Like a tip of the iceberg, outward behavior demonstrates only tenth part of what a person is. Hamlet's following soliloquy, shows that human mind is highly erratic and volatile.

"What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, ... and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

However, the most soul-searching soliloquy appears in Act-III Scene 1 which shows the conflict of human

mind that tortures almost all the human beings at one or the other stage of life, and that is,

"To be, or not to be, that is the question;

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing end them; To die – to sleep,

...

To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub: ..."

Soliloquies are the most authentic means to analyze the inner psyche of any character. His or her inner struggle is revealed in such a situation. In Shakespearean tragedy, there is always an element of psychomachia or the struggle within the soul; which may be externalized in many ways.

In a nutshell, we can say that Shakespeare's Hamlet has surpassed the confines of the Psychologists' capabilities and it has been a usual practice of the psychologists to treat Hamlet as a psychological patient rather than as a character [10].

6. Reviews on Stage-Productions of 'Hamlet' Plays: A Bunch of flowers

Maxine Peake's face gleams keenly under an immaculate, straw-coloured David Bowie baret. She wore a dark blue trouser suit that might have been imagined by a fashion-conscious Chairman Mao. She is a stripling prince, almost pre-sexual, who glides, without swagger and without girlishness. Straightaway, Maxine Peake knocked on the head one of the paradoxes of Hamlet. The speeches that come out of the prince's mouth are about dissolving, yet the person who delivers them has to be the most distinct, intense character on stage.

Peake's delicate ferocity, her particular mixture of concentration and lightness, ensure that one wants to follow her whenever she appears. Anger is her keynote. Her voice was reedy with indignation. The speeches tumbled out at high speed, as if she was surprised by her own fervour. Some dark and disturbing notes she made did not hit. She was precise rather than cloudy, cutting

rather than meditative. She was a damn good fencer.

This is not the apex of Peake's stage career, but then the bar was high. She would be hard-put to equal the incandescent fervour she mustered when delivering Shelley's *The Masque of Anarchy*, directed by Sarah Frankcom at last year's Manchester international festival. Still, it is a considerable achievement, and the more prominent as hers is the first female Hamlet on a major stage since Frances de la Tour 35 years ago. At first that does not seem surprising, but there is a long, strong tradition of women performing the role, which can hardly be said to demand Schwarzenegger attributes. Sarah Siddons took it on in Manchester in 1777. Victorian actresses, amateur and professional, played the part regularly. Sarah Bernhardt, the first actress to be filmed in the part, declared it should always be performed by a woman.

Tony Howard's interesting programme note suggests that the dip in female Hamlets in the supposedly feminist 20th century is due to the rise in importance of directors, until recently usually male. That seems right. Put two women in charge of theatres – Sarah Frankcom at the Royal Exchange and Josie Rourke at the Donmar – and there is a sudden burst of parts for women over 40 by cross-gender casting. This autumn, two years after she appeared at the Donmar as Brutus, Harriet Walter will star there as Henry IV.

Frankcom was in effect creating England's first mainstream feminist theatre. She has done so not only by cross-casting but by her choice of plays, among them *The Last Days of Troy* and *Orlando*. Her production of *Hamlet* has a Player Queen (the powerful and mellifluous Claire Benedict), female gravediggers (Michelle Butterly is a jaunty scouser) and a knowing biker of a Rosencrantz (Jodie McNeen). Gillian Bevan makes her courtly adviser ("Polonia") a fusspot, continually tweaking her dark suit into place and accompanying her orotund phrases with redundant flourishes of her hands. She is highly entertaining, though not a major contributor to the sinisteress of Elsinore. These gender switches may unsettle for a moment but they did not distort the play.

Amanda Stoodley's design provided some distracting moments. Ophelia's grave was a jumble of garments. Why? Did this refer to apparel oft proclaiming the man? Yet it supplied a marvellous entry for the Ghost. John Shrapnel, doubling as an impressive, stentorian Claudius, was heralded by the lowering of a forest of lightbulbs which, accompanied by a clanging chime, glow and fade to the bewilderment of watchers. In general the staging is simple, in line with a stripped-down text that had no Fortinbras in it and therefore little political content. As someone who never held her breath for Fortinbras to appear, the audience find this more a theoretical than actual diminishment. The important thing was that *Hamlet* should take you into its speech, and so into the archaeology of everyday conversation. Which this production does, clearly, energetically though not superlatively [11].

By a strange coincidence, Andrew Scott is the first major Hamlet London has seen since his Sherlock co-star Benedict Cumberbatch. Even odder was the fact that the two actors suffer a similar theatrical fate, in that their Hamlets transcend the productions that surround them. Robert Icke's version at the Almeida is cool, clever, chic and has some good ideas, but also some that strike me as eccentrically wrong-headed.

Icke and his designer, Hildegard Bechtler, make it clear that we are in a totally contemporary world. There is news footage of the state funeral of Hamlet's father, and his Ghost makes his first appearance as an image on the closed-circuit screens of the Danish security guards.

Surveillance is, in fact, a key part of this world. Polonius is constantly wired up so that he can report the latest news of Hamlet's mental state, Hamlet himself eavesdrops on Claudius and Gertrude's post-honeymoon canoodling, and hand-held cameras track Elsinore's leaders on all public occasions. No one is ever quite alone in this corrupt kingdom.

Scott's performance fits the quiet, non-declamatory tone of the production. He is, for the most part, soft-spoken and gently ironic with a perceptible Irish lilt. There are flashes of genuine rage as when, observing his mother cuddling up to Claudius, he roars: "Frailty, thy name is woman."

Confronting Laertes over Ophelia's grave, he also goes into ranting mode. But Scott's Hamlet is most memorable for his charm, self-mockery and ability to speak directly to the audience.

With "To be or not to be", one feels Scott is engaging us individually in his own moral dilemma about the pros and cons of self-slaughter. This Hamlet also has the ability to send himself up. One must have always been puzzled by Hamlet's clearly bogus assertion that he has been in "continual practice" at fencing: here it becomes a conscious joke about his palpable unfitness and secret death wish.

In short, this is a good performance. Icke's production also has some highly intelligent touches. The viewer loved the staging of the play scene so that, with Claudius sitting in the Almeida front row, a camera tracks every shade of his reaction to the mimetic re-enactment of his own crime. It was also fascinating to see Ophelia in the mad scene played as a hospitalised patient rather than as someone licensed to do a peculiar cabaret turn.

But one or two of Icke's ideas strike us as dotty. One cannot fathom why Claudius should make his confession of murder not to an unseen divinity but to Hamlet standing in front of him holding a pistol. Why, if the king came clean, wouldn't his nephew shoot him?

Even if there are odd features to the production, the performances are generally fine. Angus Wright and Juliet Stevenson for once present us with a Claudius and Gertrude who are physically wrapped up in each other and lose no opportunity for making love, even when there is a diplomatic mission on the doorstep.

Jessica Brown Findlay, though she occasionally drops her voice at the end of lines, charts the progressive stages of Ophelia's downfall. Peter Wight as a sinisterly snooping Polonius and David Rintoul, doubling as the Ghost and Player King, both exude great authority.

It's a long, four-hour production and one that mixes insight and occasional absurdity, but it is Scott's sweet prince the reviewer shall remember best [12].

After all the hype and hysteria, the event itself comes as an anticlimax. The reviewer's initial

impression is that Benedict Cumberbatch is a good, personable Hamlet with a strong line in self-deflating irony, but that he is trapped inside an intellectual ragbag of a production by Lyndsey Turner that is full of half-baked ideas. Denmark, Hamlet tells us, is a prison. So too is this production.

What makes the evening so frustrating is that Cumberbatch has many of the qualities one looks for in a Hamlet. He has a lean, pensive countenance, a resonant voice, a gift for introspection. He is especially good in the soliloquies. "To be or not to be", about which there has been so much kerfuffle, mercifully no longer opens the show: I still think it works better if placed after, rather than before, the arrival of the players, but Cumberbatch delivers it with a rapt intensity. He is also excellent in "What a piece of work is a man" and has the right air of self-doubt: in the midst of his advice to the First Player on how to act, he suddenly says "but let your own discretion be your tutor", as if aware of his presumption in lecturing an old pro.

It is a performance full of good touches and quietly affecting in Hamlet's final, stoical acceptance of death. The problem is that Cumberbatch, rather like the panellists in "I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue", is given a lot of silly things to do. He actually opens the show, sitting in his room poring over a family album and listening to the gramophone, which denies us the propulsive excitement of the Ghost's first entries on the battlements. Later, in assuming an "antic disposition", Cumberbatch tries on a Native American headdress and then settles for parading around in the scarlet tunic and peaked helmet of a 19th-century infantryman. At one point he even drags on a miniature fortress – where on earth did he find it? – from which he proceeds to take pot shots at the court.

Whimsical absurdity replaces genuine equivocation about Hamlet's state of mind and the effect is not improved by having him later strut about Elsinore in a jacket brazenly adorned on its back with the word "KING". All this is symptomatic of an evening in which the text is not so much savagely cut as badly wounded and yet which crudely italicises what remains. A classic example

comes in the inept staging of the normally infallible play scene.

The whole focus should be on Claudius's reaction to this mimetic representation of his murder and Hamlet's eagle-eyed observation of his uncle. Instead, Turner starts the scene with the spectators in shadow and their backs to the audience. Even when they turn round to face us, Turner has Cumberbatch himself act out the lines of the villainous Lucianus. In consequence, Claudius's abrupt departure seems less the product of residual guilt than a hasty response to Hamlet's rude intervention.

The real problem, the reviewer suspects, is that visual conceits have taken the place of textual investigation. Es Devlin is a fine designer, but she and Turner have succumbed to the kind of gigantism that marked their recent collaboration on *Light Shining In Buckinghamshire* at the National, which was rather like seeing Samuel Beckett reimagined by Cecil B DeMille. Here, Devlin has created a massive permanent set in which Elsinore resembles a decadent, baroque palace filled with wrought-iron balconies and Winterhalter portraits. The reviewer remembers a similar design for a visiting Romanian production, but where that evoked the sleazy opulence of the Ceausescu period, this one falls apart in more blatant fashion. In the second half, the palatial set is filled with mounds of rubbish and overturned chairs, just in case we'd missed the point about Claudius's collapsing tyranny.

One or two effects are striking, such as the gale-force torrent of leaves that invades Elsinore at the end of the protracted first half. But that is no substitute for the exploration of relationships. To take the most obvious example, just who are Claudius and Gertrude? For a couple supposedly bound together by reckless sensuality, Ciarán Hinds and Anastasia Hille show a remarkable lack of interest in each other and suggest nothing so much as a frigidly elegant pair used to giving cocktail parties in the Surrey hinterland.

Aside from Cumberbatch, there is only a handful of interesting performances. Leo Bill's Horatio is a stalwart, backpacking chum, Jim Norton makes Polonius an anxious fusspot who even reads out his carefully prepared advice to Laertes, and

Sian Brooke is a genuinely disturbed Ophelia, with an equal devotion to Hamlet and the piano. But it says much about the evening that its single most memorable moment is a purely visual one: Ophelia's scrambling final exit over a hill of refuse, watched by an apprehensive Gertrude.

The reviewer is not against radical new approaches to Shakespeare. But this production does nothing more than reheat the old idea that Hamlet is the victim of a corrupt tyranny and is full of textual fiddling. To take one tiny example, Gertrude here tells us that Ophelia drowned herself where a willow "shows his pale leaves in the glassy stream" as if we were too dumb to work out the meaning of the original text's descriptive epithet, "hoar".

The pity of it is that Cumberbatch could have been a first-rate Hamlet. He is no mere screen icon, but a real actor with a gift for engaging our sympathy and showing a naturally rational mind disordered by grief, murder and the hollow insufficiency of revenge. He reminds me, in fact, of a point wittily made by George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* that, if his father had only lived to a good old age, Hamlet might have got through life with "a reputation of sanity, notwithstanding many soliloquies and some moody sarcasms towards the fair daughter of Polonius".

Cumberbatch, in short, suggests Hamlet's essential decency. But he might have given us infinitely more, if he were not imprisoned by a dismal production that elevates visual effects above narrative coherence and exploration of character [13].

The final visiting production in the invigorating Globe to Globe season is a much-travelled Hamlet, dating back to 1997, from Lithuania's Meno Fortas company. With its recurring Magritte-like visual motifs, including kettles, cabinets, scrolls and huge-bottomed classes, Eimuntas Nekrošius's production is certainly never dull. What struck me as strange is that in a play that deals so much in madness, either feigned or real, virtually everyone behaves throughout as if they have assumed an "antic disposition".

Some of Nekrošius's teeming ideas strike me as rather good. I liked, for instance, the

overhanging overcoat that acts as a constant reminder of the Ghost's presence, the iconic pose struck by Hamlet with Yorick's skull as if invoking centuries of stale tradition, and the evocation of the climactic duel through the swishing sound made by what I took to be riding crops. But, while I'm always happy to see Hamlet reimagined, other Nekrošius notions seemed to me absurd: among them were Claudius's willingness to participate in the play scene by noisily re-enacting the murder of Hamlet's father, and the Ghost's re-emergence as Fortinbras to provide an artificial sense of closure.

Given the absence of any indication of an Elsinore on a war footing, this is Hamlet without the politics or indeed any sense of developing character: Viktorija Kuodyte's Ophelia, first seen leaping manically in the air and smoking her brother's pipe, seems well on the way to madness from the off. What we get, in the place of unfolding character or narrative, is a series of striking visual tableaux accompanied by continuous piano music from Tadas Sumskas. Thus the greying, unusually mature Hamlet of Andrius Mamontovas discovers the dagger with which he is to kill Claudius concealed inside a block of ice, or curls up foetally in the play scene inside a dangerous metallic Heath Robinson contraption. Polonius (Povilas Budrys) is later bundled, during the strangely sexless closet scene, into a similarly confined cabinet from which Hamlet cuts off the air supply.

I wouldn't deny there is often something eccentrically memorable about Nekrošius's unbroken chain of surreal images. What I missed was the polychromatic diversity of Shakespeare's indestructible play [14].

There is something spiritually refreshing about this new RSC Hamlet. It is not merely that the highly expressive 25-year-old Paapa Essiedu leads a predominantly black ensemble. It is that the director, Simon Godwin has taken a play conventionally wreathed in what a senior critic once called "baffled half-lights and glooms" and staged it with a vivid Technicolor brightness.

Even if the text has not been radically altered, it is clear from the start we are in for something different: the opening image is of Hamlet getting his degree at Wittenberg University, Ohio. A

fascinating parallel is drawn in the programme with Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, who on returning to Africa in 1949 after studying in London, dwelt obsessively on mortality. How much more extreme is Hamlet's dilemma in that he comes home to confront familial murder, a ghost and incitements to revenge. Godwin's production might, in fact, do more to define the precise nature of Claudius's regime: a military tyranny is implied but, when Hamlet holds up a copy of Time magazine with Claudius on its cover, we are never quite sure whether this is because the leader is a western puppet or a dangerous despot.

The focus is less on politics than on the predicament of a prince who finds himself an outcast in his own land. Essiedu is strikingly snubbed at court when Claudius turns immediately towards Laertes. Hamlet's wounded feelings are instantly clear when Essiedu later says to Gertrude: "I shall in all my best obey you, madam." This is a prince who is palpably isolated and bereft, even before the injunction to murder.

The prime fact about Essiedu, however, is that he is an intensely likeable Hamlet. He is young, quick-witted and, even in his rootless uncertainty, sportive: to convey his "antic disposition" he dons a paint-daubed suit and goes around doing subversive graffiti and big, splashy canvases like a mixture of Banksy and Jackson Pollock. For all his gun-toting, I never quite believed this Hamlet when he said: "Now could I drink hot blood." But Essiedu has a priceless vitality, speaks the verse intelligently and catches the contradictions of a prince who, even when knowing that his father is in spiritual limbo, heartlessly dispatches two fellow students, "not shrieving time allowed".

But this is far from a one-man show. If Clarence Smith is an impressively composed Claudius, Tanya Moodie is an even more startling Gertrude: you see her shedding tears of outright contrition in the closet scene when she tells her son "thou hast cleft my heart in twain". Natalie Simpson excellently suggests that Ophelia, in her madness, poses a physical threat as she lunges at the onlookers with undisguised menace, and Marcus Griffiths's Laertes, arriving at court by helicopter, has a speech of fire that fain would blaze. But every

part tells. A white Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive at court with patronising tourist gifts and the latter role is invested by Bethan Cullinane, herself a former Ophelia, with a deceptive chumminess.

What is heartening is to find the play so extensively rethought: we normally approach the graveyard scene expecting rustic gags from a wizened sexton, but here Ewart James Walters (who earlier plays the Ghost) and his assistant preface their daily rituals with a calypso. This is a reminder that the percussive music of Sola Akingbola makes a vital contribution to a production that makes you feel, even if you are seeing Hamlet for the 50th time, that you are experiencing it a new [15].

I shall long treasure the moment when Ophelia announces, "I squeeze thy balls like juicy persimmons", and it is hard not to giggle at Hamlet's determination to 'rain dew' on Ophelia's "parchid earth". It is the mixture of the lyric and lewd that is so incongruous [16].

7. 'Hamlet' in present author's Eyes: Creme' de la Creme'

The author is a septua-generarian person of extreme ill-health. So the adage by Shakespeare, "frailty thou name is women" is to be changed "frailty thou name old age". So the dreams of death are somewhat perennial to me for the very long period in past. The dilemma of to be or not to be, rather let me call it 'di(e)lemma', is quite common to me in the form of "to exist as a biped or not to exist" anymore. In fact, I'am too tired in life in every conceivable way. I am really in a state of putting up a question to my kins "Do you hear, let me/ us be well used; for we are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After your/ our death (you) we were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you (we) live" To die; to sleep; No more; and by a sleep to say we end/ the heartache and the thousand natural shocks/ that flash is heir to, 'tis a consummation/ Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep; To sleep: perchance to dream: aye there's the rap; For in that sleep of death. What dreams may come when we have, Shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause: ther's the respect. That makes calamity of so long life / For who would bear the whips and scorns of time"

"and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'er-hanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire – why, it appeareth no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"[17]

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