



## Hamlet: Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory

by Pete Kirwan. Written on 2008-11-25. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Hamlet (2008, Cube Theatre Company, UK).

CLOCKING IN AT 3 HOURS 45 MINUTES, JONATHAN MILLER'S NEW PRODUCTION OF *HAMLET* WAS something of an endurance test in the cramped and stifling auditorium of the Tobacco Factory, still fundraising for a badly-needed ventilation system. The ceiling was low, the room was pitch-black and the seats very close together, making for an extremely uncomfortable experience on a hot spring afternoon. Despite all that, it's a great space, and the extreme close quarters allowed for an intimate, near-full text production that concentrated on providing a clear, no-frills interpretation and some fantastic performances.

Leaping straight in with the main source of praise for the production, Jamie Ballard's Hamlet was a revelation. I've seen Ballard a few times before, notably as a solid Mercutio in Nancy Meckler's *Romeo and Juliet*, and I knew he had promise, but I wasn't prepared for Ballard's phenomenal energy and commitment. Never dull for a moment, this Hamlet was by turns hysterically funny and gut-churningly moving, desperate and confident, brutal and gentle, and yet never self-contradictory. Ballard's Hamlet was a deeply troubled young man who embarked on a scheme and followed it through to its inevitable conclusions, weathering everything that he encountered and single-handedly bringing down the state in doing so. And he did it with a smile.

Ballard's greatest strength is his ability to not only be very funny, but to be funny while also being desperately sad (witnesses of his performance as Flute-as-Thisbe in Greg Doran's 2005 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may recall how he turned the riotous comedy into a sobering lament in his final moments). His Hamlet began slumped on a chair, but as soon as his course towards death was begun by his encounter with the ghost, his own personal comedy began. No-one was safe from his dark humour - Yorick's skull was mercilessly turned into a ventriloquist's doll before being tossed aside, Laertes had faces pulled at him as their duel began, Polonius was treated to insults even as his dead body was tugged away and the jokes he made to Claudius as his banishment to England was pronounced were scathing in their sarcasm. For most of the middle three acts, almost every word Hamlet spoke was with a jest, and yet behind it all

Ballard's eyes remained serious and joyless, watching the reactions to his words with deep interest and using it to his advantage.

Yet the veneer of humour was frequently broken. As Annabel Scholey's Ophelia tried to hug and caress his face during the nunnery scene, the tears he shed while shouting at her became real. Ophelia was his weakness, the hardest part of his life to reject (his joking with her during "The Mousetrap" was particularly cruel), and his screams as he realised whose funeral he was watching were heartfelt. Elsewhere, his screams at the weaselly Guildenstern who tried to play upon him belied the feeling of betrayal he felt from his former friends, while his interview with Gertrude became desperate in his imploring of her. Hamlet's humour was his key to survival, and when the humour was removed one could see how close to the edge events were drawing him. His wonderful delivery of 'To be or not to be', making it sound like a genuine part of the character's mental process rather than a set-piece, epitomised the skill and dexterity with language that Ballard brought to the role.

Desperation was also a key part of Jay Villiers' excellent Claudius, an unusually sympathetic reading of the villain. No apologies were made for his murder, but his love for Gertrude was genuine and almost every action he took during the course of the play was an attempt to survive the aftermath of his crime with minimum disturbance. One could almost believe that he would be a good king, were it not for the albatross weighing him down. As he and Gertrude spoke in the bedroom after Polonius' murder, he kissed her with a desperate urgency, fearful of his sin catching up with him and clinging on to a true and pure feeling of love. His attempts at contrition seemed genuine and, in one of the play's most powerful images, he accepted his death unconditionally. Facing Hamlet, he closed his eyes and spread his arms wide, exposing his chest and embracing oblivion. He willingly drank from the cup of poison, and his final act was to crawl across the floor, touching the hand of the fallen Gertrude in a final gesture of genuine love which Hamlet, amazed, finally accepted, placing the cup next to their hands but leaving them linked in death.

The other two characters who emerged in this production in particularly clear focus were Polonius, played capably by Roland Oliver, and Nicholas Gadd's Osric. Polonius was the central figure at court, running events while the smiling Claudius sat in a pew at the edge with Gertrude. Bustling and comic as one would expect, this Polonius nonetheless felt like someone who achieved things and had a real power and influence, the King and Queen accepting his recommendations unhesitatingly. Osric, on the other hand, only gradually came to prominence. Serving as the court clerk throughout, he was present at the sidelines of all the dodgy transactions that took place, receiving his education through watching Claudius and becoming increasingly embedded in the seedy world of the court while simultaneously

becoming dissatisfied with the intrigues. When he finally came to his invitation to Hamlet, he gave it with a dignity unique to this character, and Hamlet's bawdry teasing of his manners was made to seem ridiculous by his calm and slightly despising attitude towards the prince. This Osric was not ostentatious and had no time for jokes, the severity of events having made such an impression on him.

Scholey didn't stand out in her early scenes, but was excellent in the scenes of Ophelia's madness - made up in the garish face paint of the players and stabbing a straw doll brutally with a twig before clutching at whoever was closest, her depiction of Ophelia's mental collapse was deeply affecting. Elsewhere, Philip Buck and Francesca Ryan provided excellent support as Horatio and Gertrude, the latter particularly coming into her own in later scenes as the enormity of events started to oppress her.

Despite being excellent throughout, the play managed to step up a gear for the final scene, coaxing a final amazing display of energy and skill from its cast. The fencing duel was spectacular (all credit to Kate Waters' fight direction), Ballard and Oliver Le Sueur's Laertes diving about the stage and Laertes eventually being smashed painfully into a pillar. Hamlet deliberately swapped rapiers, grabbing Laertes' as he thrust it, tapping the end in full knowledge of what was going on and tutting at his opponent before lunging at him in anger. His final death, too, had a powerful impact, he suddenly collapsing and spluttering out his final words in Horatio's arms. A gripping end to a wonderful reading of the play, it's only a shame that it didn't get a chance to tour.