



Hamlet and Putin

by Jami Rogers. Written on 2010-12-03. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Hamlet (2010, The National Theatre, UK).

IN THE POST-WORLD CUP 2018 BID MOMENT, NICHOLAS HYTNER'S PRODUCTION OF *HAMLET* AT the National Theatre gains in relevance. It did not escape my notice watching it earlier this year that Patrick Malahide, with his shaven and balding pate and wiry physique, resembled Russian Prime Minister (formerly President) Vladimir Putin. My suspicion that Claudius equalled Putin on the Olivier stage was confirmed at the interval when one of my companions brandished a torn piece of paper, the remains of Hamlet's travel papers. This scrip had been extra-textually presented by Hamlet to Claudius/Putin for the king's approval signature for the former's return to Wittenberg. Claudius had pointedly ignored his nephew/son, instead signing Laertes' documents and giving Polonius' kin permission to travel from Denmark. The silent rebuff clearly told Hamlet he was not allowed to remove himself from Claudius' sight, which had been the impetus for Rory Kinnear's Hamlet to rip his papers up in frustration and throw them into the audience, where it was leapt on as a souvenir at the interval. Upon inspection, I found that this fragment my friend had acquired was in Russian – or at least, a typeface and letters that looked remarkably like the Russian alphabet. The analogy between Vladimir Putin and Claudius in Hytner's production had been confirmed.

That Hytner's production had been set in an eastern European totalitarian regime was obvious, even without the Putin lookalike as Claudius and the Cyrillic typeface on the discarded paper. The constant watching of characters - particularly Hamlet - constructed the oppressive aura around Elsinore. There were also bits of business that had can be seen as hand-me-downs of previous modern dress productions: Claudius was accompanied by guards in suits, who wore visible earpieces and scanned the area for assassins (signifying political oppression); Laertes returned from Paris yielding a firearm as his weapon of choice with which to confront Claudius; Gertrude numbing her emotional pain with copious quantities of alcohol. These semi-traditional pieces of modern dress performance were mixed with contemporary images that were drawn straight from Russian political oppression. Or, to be precise, images that had been culled from resistance to Russian oligarchy.

I had seen Hamlets draw a smiley face before during the “smile and smile and be a villain” riff – Joseph Millson at Stafford’s outdoor Shakespeare festival, for example. There, it seemed a rather cutsey gesture which was perhaps intended to mark Hamlet’s descent into madness. Within the context used in Hytner’s production, Kinnear’s smiley face artwork was not an isolated incident. It appeared on walls and was handed out by Hamlet in the form of tee-shirts emblazoned with the symbol before the players’ performance of *The Mousetrap*. By then, the smiley face had become the silent symbol of protest against the regime.

Gertrude and Ophelia both donned the tee-shirts, although their complicity with Hamlet in resistance was not fully formed before Hamlet’s exile. Clare Higgins’ Gertrude had exhibited signs of unease with her second husband’s regime from the beginning, however. Her fixed smile as Claudius made his televised address to the Danish population was broken once the cameras had been switched off with a visible sigh of relief and a stiff drink. She thought about being her son’s advocate regarding his exodus to Wittenberg, but decided against it. Her “willow” speech was the utmost act of complicity with Claudius’ regime, as in Hamlet’s absence Ophelia had joined the resistance. For Claudius’ regime, Ophelia was an enemy of the state who had to be dealt with – fatally. Higgins’ delivery made it clear that Ophelia had not drowned, but her utterance was clearly stage-managed and designed to tow the Party line.

While some of Hytner’s choices took liberties with Shakespeare’s text, it was thought-provoking as a critique of the contemporary Russian regime. The analogy with Putin was impossible to ignore, with his paranoiac grip of the state in the onstage Denmark gradually growing in vice-like intensity. With this *Hamlet*, played in the country where the apparent contract killing of Russian defector Alexander Litvinenko by the Russian secret service, the Shakespearean political analogy is particularly apt. The combination of Hytner’s critique and the triumph of Russia in its World Cup bid should raise questions about Putin’s totalitarian regime. Sadly, it is unlikely that the smiley face revolution will happen before the world’s premier sporting event, but Hytner’s work should not go unnoticed as Russia heads into the sporting headlights.