



## Not Prince Hamlet, nor Meant to Be

by Charles Weinstein. Written on 2011-02-02. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Hamlet (2011, National Theatre Live, UK).

HORATIO LOVES HAMLET; HE MAY EVEN WANT TO BE HAMLET. BUT WISHES ARE NOT HORSES, and it makes no sense to cast a born Horatio as Hamlet. Rory Kinnear is a thirtyish, balding plodder with all the charisma of a substitute teacher. He is not unintelligent: he has considered his lines, and he conveys their meaning clearly if not trippingly. (He has even come up with a new reading: “Soft! You, now! The fair Ophelia!”).

But he has no charm, no brilliance, minimal wit and limited powers of invention and variation. In brief, he is ordinary. Ophelia tells us that Hamlet is the undisputed Star of Elsinore, and even Claudius admits that the common people adore him. These accolades sit uneasily upon Kinnear, who turns *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* into *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*.

Nicholas Hytner has surrounded him with minimalist scenery and a few familiar concepts. For the second time in a year, we see Denmark as a 21st-century police state. Hytner has replaced Gregory Doran’s surveillance cameras with a bevy of Secret Service men, but the idea is the same and entirely wrong, for as a police state Denmark is ridiculous. The “dangerously mad” Hamlet puts on an unvetted play attacking second marriages before the newly-remarried Queen. He runs riot during the performance with obscenities, jeers and threats. He nearly kills the unguarded King at his prayers but decides to wait. Instead, he visits the Queen in her room where he promptly kills Polonius. Doran and Hytner wanted to convey the oppressive omnipresence of Big Brother, but what we see are the serial pratfalls of Keystone Kops.

Matters are not helped by their depiction of the Chief Spymaster. When Peter Hall first directed *Hamlet* (1965), he reconceived Polonius as a cunning politician using the mask of befuddlement to accomplish his ends. Kenneth Branagh did much the same in his 1996 film. Unaccountably, Doran and Hytner opt for a traditional comic dullard, further dispelling the Orwellian ambience. At least Doran’s Polonius was funny. In contrast, David Calder loses laugh after laugh through bad timing and off-kilter rhythms. (He does the same as the Gravedigger in Act

V). I have happy memories of Calder’s fantastical, dream-struck Falstaff, but that was fifteen years ago.

In truth, *Hamlet* will not bear too much updating. If you choose, like Hytner, to present Ophelia as a thoroughly modern young woman – sexy, feisty, jousting with her strange anachronism of a brother – you raise the question of why she yields so quickly to Polonius’ silly edicts. Why does her liberated mind give way before the mundane pressures of a bad love-affair and an aging father’s death? Sensing these discrepancies, Hytner suggests that Ophelia does not drown under the weight of her own distraction, but is instead murdered by the royal goons. This doesn’t help, and Ruth Negga is too pedestrian an actress to make sense of the muddle.

On the plus side of the ledger, Patrick Malahide is a refreshingly slimy Claudius, a serpent in the orchard indeed. (Some actors try to ennoble the character. Nonsense: the man murders his brother and marries his sister-in-law for gain, and then engineers the murder of his stepson). Clare Higgins fleshes out the underwritten Gertrude in both senses, showing us a once-beautiful woman whom years and alcohol have thickened into a harsh, unlovely middle-age. Her gratitude to Claudius is keen, but her resentment at the passage of time is greater.

Among the ensemble, Matthew Barker impresses as the Norwegian Captain (a small part, but there are no small parts), while Ferdinand Kingsley, son of Ben, is an efficient, yuppified Rosencrantz. Giles Terera looks like Eddie Murphy and plays Horatio about as well as Murphy could. The tearful Alex Lanipekun shows us Laertes the sentimentalist but not Laertes the fanatic avenger. James Laurenson was an embarrassing Gaveston to Ian McKellen’s Edward II (1970); as the Ghost and the Player King, he seems to have finally ripened into competence.

“Hamlet without the Prince” has become a metaphor; unhappily, Kinnear and Hytner literalize it. In Doran’s production, we saw Hamlet as Harlequin. This was shallow, but more diverting than Hamlet as Prufrock. One has seen worse – one has seen Beale – but one has also seen much better.