



iTunes, There's the Rub: Hamlet and Technology Meet Again at Bard on the Beach

by Cameron Butt. Written on 2013-07-16. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: *Hamlet* (2013, Bard on the Beach). See production details at the end of the review.

THIS YEAR'S *HAMLET* AT BARD ON THE BEACH SHOWS A LOT OF PROMISE, BUT THERE ARE A FEW things that need to settle into place if the performance is to reach its full potential by the end of the run. Nonetheless, the production is memorable for its integration of modern technology, not to mention a couple of really neat gender switches.

Let's start with the technology. Director Kim Collier employs several familiar devices as stage props, arming Hamlet with an iPhone, for example, to combat his sea of troubles. As if trying to maintain some control over his chaotic environment, Hamlet frequently selects and plays songs from an iTunes playlist. During his early brooding scenes, therefore, his musical choices give the audience privileged access to his angst-ridden emotions, even before he starts going on about his "too, too sullied flesh." Later, Hamlet tries to intimidate Claudius by blasting punk rock throughout the castle, affirming the villain's suspicions that the prince's wavering mental health has become a threat to the state. That Hamlet controls the production's music gives him an artful authority over Claudius, who struggles to contain his nephew's inner turmoil.

The devices also serve to contextualize the events within the twenty-first century. Messengers deliver news holding iPads, Claudius's special agents speak frantically on mobile phones when searching for Polonius's body, and a high-definition TV screen shows silent news footage of Claudius delivering political speeches or Fortinbras advancing on Elsinore.

But transplanting a story like *Hamlet* into the twenty-first century poses a major challenge for the rendering of the Ghost. Ghosts are, if you'll pardon the turn of phrase, things of the past, and Collier's Ghost sequences stand out as odd moments in an otherwise modernized version of the play. Collier's ghost is a powdered-up medieval spirit who sleepwalks about the stage. But the time is out of joint. In a production that so pointedly makes use of modern technology, why not smooth things over by making the Ghost a technological apparition rather than a supernatural one? Wouldn't that be more appropriate? To Duncan Fraser's credit, he has a great

Ghost face: open-jawed and slanted like he's been tossing and turning in a grave. But to see a new-age iPhone-wielding Hamlet cower before a fairy tale apparition seems inconsistent. Then again, ghosts can't be expected to follow the natural order of things, so perhaps I'm completely out to lunch here.

At other times, the technology seems more a novelty than a necessity. During the performance I attended (6 July), the footage on the too-small television screen was largely ignored by characters and audience members alike, and was only really part of the action when it was wheeled on- and off-stage with the rest of the furniture. In other words, it wasn't always clear what the technology was doing. It was just there. What's more, the performed use of these devices seemed awfully forced a good deal of the time, especially in Hamlet's unrealistically pronounced iPhone gestures. He accentuated every swipe and tap with a liberal flick or bob, probably deemed necessary to assist the audience in seeing him touch the device. Unfortunately, the whole charade was just distracting.

But the gizmos really find their stride in the scene leading up to the Mouse Trap. First, Hamlet records a video of the Hecuba speech on his iPhone, playing it back for the audience while marvelling at the actor's feigned emotion. The technology thus participates in the troubling process by which feelings can be bottled and reproduced without the immediate presence of their source. It worked really well.

This rendering of the Hecuba speech prepares the audience for the Mouse Trap sequence, a brilliantly weird fusion of reality and performance, which melt together in an absurdist Julie-Tamor-meets-Fear-and-Loathing-in-Las-Vegas amateur art show. Gathered before the court, the thespians film a dollhouse performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* played out on a miniature version of the Bard on the Beach set. Using a tiny video recorder that cheaply captures and projects images onto a larger screen, the players alternate between filming the dolls and themselves. As Claudius and Gertrude whisper to each other during the show, the player holding the camera shifts his attention to them and they too become projected onto the screen. Since their backs face the actual real-life spectators, some of the audience members find themselves projected onto the screen, their collective role as meta-observers captured and reproduced through the lens of technology. At this moment, technology mediates the reality of the play in a hallucinatory performance-induced dream vision. It left me lamenting the arrival of the intermission. I've never seen anything like it.

While Collier's vision for a modern *Hamlet* produces some interesting possibilities, these potentialities are not fully brought to life, perhaps because the cast members have yet to develop a group chemistry worthy of Hamlet, or perhaps because they are still growing accustomed to their roles. For example, Collier's decision to cast Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a couple

(Jennifer Lines and Craig Erickson) opens the door for some promising readings of the text. Perhaps it lends Hamlet's off-stage life at Wittenburg a solitary nuance, like he's always been the third wheel of their university shenanigans. Or maybe their heavy metal attire underscores their opposition to Hamlet, who dresses rather plainly, and marks them less as friends than acquaintances. But the rendering of the conversations between Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern leave these potentialities flatly unexplored, and there is little evidence of any tension when Hamlet calls them out for playing him like a flute.

Similarly, Collier opens the text to a neat reading by casting a female Horatio (Jennifer Lines). As a woman, Horatio might become a rival for Ophelia, with Hamlet favouring a male-female friendship (perhaps sexualized) over his love for Ophelia. Again, however, nothing much was made of this potentiality.

I also question some of the ways that individual roles were interpreted. While Bill Dow embodies an articulate and firm Claudius, his genuine nature seems to leak through and undermine his believability as a furtive villain. Richard Newman's Polonius is adequate as a concerned father, but lacks some of the feckless ignorance I love so much in that character. Todd Thomson's Laertes overplayed his hand at drunkenness, detracting from the gravity of Claudius's plot to murder Hamlet by draping himself inappropriately over a couch and twisting his feet up behind him. Even Jonathan Young's Hamlet, though perfectly adequate, lacks a certain spark. There is little of the mad, unpredictable fervour that characterizes the role in the text, except for the times he holds a scribbled smiley face up to his head as if it were his own. Young instead delivers Hamlet's most contemplative soliloquies like a spoiled intellectual whose heart just isn't really into metaphysics anymore. Without the wild depression, Hamlet's drastic actions lose some of their pathos.

Some of these pedantic remarks are more personal than academic, but if a production is to really hit the mark, the setting, direction, and performers need to cohere. *Hamlet* is a play ripe with potentialities. A good production will open the text to certain readings and a fantastic production will harness them under a unified banner. That certainly happens during the Mouse Trap, and if the other pieces fall into place soon then this version of the play will definitely be the thing.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Hamlet
<i>Year</i>	2013
<i>Theater Company</i>	Bard on the Beach
<i>Theaters</i>	Bard on the Beach Shakespeare Festival (Canada)
<i>Start Date</i>	2013-06-29
<i>End Date</i>	2013-09-12

Cast

OPHELIA	RACHEL CAIRNS
CLAUDIUS	BILL DOW
GUILDENSTERN	CRAIG ERICKSON
KING HAMLET	MR. DUNCAN FRASER
ROSENCRANTZ	MS. JENNIFER LINES
HORATIO	MS. JENNIFER LINES
POLONIUS	RICHARD NEWMAN
QUEEN GERTRUDE	BARBARA POLLARD
LAERTES	TODD THOMSON
HAMLET	JONATHAN YOUNG

Creatives

DIRECTOR	KIM COLLIER
SET DESIGNER	PAM JOHNSON
COSTUMES	NANCY BRYANT