

Bell Shakespeare's Hamlet reviewed: the same great themes in some strange new haunts

November 9, 2015 2.51pm AEDT

We cannot help but remember Hamlet: it is iconic. Robin Goldsworthy, Ivan Donato, Philip Dodd, Josh McConville. Photo: Daniel Boud

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Today, Shakespeare's Hamlet is a play that haunts itself. Its saturation into cultural consciousness means that watching a performance is inevitably a process of past ghosts and past echoes framing the current performance. Like the Ghost of old Hamlet's invocation to "Remember me", we cannot help but remember Hamlet: it is iconic.

In one of many infamous scenes, Hamlet says to the players who come to the Danish court:

For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere a mirror up to Nature, to show Virtue her own feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (Hamlet 3.2.19-24)

Of course, theatre doesn't work quite so straightforwardly. The mirror is never a perfect reflection. As the late British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner wrote in his essay, published in 1990, *Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?*:

Neither mutual mirroring, life by art, art by life, is exact, for each is not a planar mirror but matricial mirror; at each exchange something new is added and something old is lost or discarded.

In Bell Shakespeare's production of Hamlet, currently showing in Sydney, the "mirror" held up to

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nature feels not like one clear reflection but more like a mosaic: a composition of many mirrored fragments which reflect back different eras, different ideas, different tropes.

The setting is a curious amalgamation of time periods and styles: upon first glance it has the look of a period piece (early 20th century, perhaps), but then modern technology intervenes: a video of Fortinbras, the conquering young Norwegian, projects up onto the stage.



Josh McConville, Doris Younane. Daniel Boud

Later, an airport departures board and voiceover announcements set the scene for Laertes' departure back to France. A strong sense of militarism and nationalism pervades also: repetition of flags abound (held by the soldiers; visible on uniforms; even planted in a birthday cake) – reminiscent perhaps of the Abbott government's flag-heavy approach.

Costuming is deliberately chaotic: Hamlet's modern casual dress contrasts starkly to Laertes' and the guards conservative military attire, which contrasts again with Horatio's more hipster look, and to the formal modern dress of the female characters. The play is also occasionally peppered by Danish, Norwegian, and even Italian.

The central interests of this production are also unclear, as if refracted through many fragmented mirror shards. At first, director Damien Ryan seems to pursue an interest in surveillance – the trope of watching and being watched is a clear preoccupation in the play.

We quickly realise that the Danish court is bugged: when Horatio tells Hamlet that he has seen old Hamlet's ghost, the actors quickly "de-bug" the room before elaborating. We also watch as Danish court spies listen back to taped recordings. But by the second half the production's interest in surveillance has waned rather than developing as the play progresses.

The production design (by designer Alicia Clements) effectively splits the stage in two – again offering a fragmentation of the production. A wrought-iron style façade with clear windows provides an interior space upstage and at times acts again as a kind of distorted mirror.



Catherine Terracini, Matilda Ridgway, Ivan Donato, Julia Ohannessian, Doris Younane. Daniel Boud

This is an interesting choice as it creates some distance between the audience and the action which occurs behind the façade. This additional framing device reminds us that we are viewers looking from the outside in. The play makes substantial use of this stage space, opening not with the first scene's cry of "Who's there?", but instead with Gertrude and Claudius' marriage taking place behind the façade. Ryan simultaneously shows the audience and distances us from this catalytic event.

The pacing and energy of this production was sometimes lacking, particularly in the first half of the first act. At times certain sections were cut that I think would have been usefully included.

This pacing was, it seemed, partly due to what felt like some kind of disconnection between the cast. The energy needed for the sparring between Hamlet and Polonius (Ophelia's father) was lacking; and this left the play feeling imbalanced.

This was also due to editing: the fantastic dialogue between Hamlet and Polonius, where Hamlet puts on his "antic disposition" and feigns madness (although, of course, the line between authenticity and acting is an infamously blurry one when it comes to Hamlet's madness) was omitted:

HAMLET: Do you see that cloud? That's almost in shape like a camel.

POLONIUS: By th'mass and it's like a camel indeed.

HAMLET: Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS: It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET: Or like a whale?

POLONIUS: Very like a whale.

(3.2.365-371)

The depiction of the Ghost also felt somewhat lacking in energy and eeriness. Despite the flickering lighting and the anticipation of the waiting guard, there was something disappointingly mundane in the Ghost's presence. His flesh was clearly flesh; it was simply "too, too solid". The clearly non-spooky reality of the ghost jarred with the characters' attempts to show their fear.

Great emphasis was placed on the players-within-the-play and their performance of *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet's play-within-a-play in which Hamlet aims to "catch the conscience of the king".

Yet the production's decision to perform the play-within-a-play in Italian, with English stage directions projected above the actors, diluted the effectiveness of watching actors on stage watching a performance. We as spectators had to pay attention to three visual focal points: the onstage actors performing *The Mousetrap* (in Italian – rather than as dumbshow), the text projected above them, and – most critically – the reactions of the onstage audience: in particular, the king.

The power of the moment when "the King rises" – as he realises that his own story is being mirrored back to him – felt dissipated.



Robin Goldsworthy, Philip Dodd. Daniel Boud

However, despite this, Ryan's production featured an incredibly strong performance from Josh McConville in the title role. He offers a rich and satisfying Hamlet, balancing his key moods of

humour, despair, and distrust. He very much owns this role, pushing away the ghosts of Hamlet's past.

Interestingly, this production chose not to play with the line between Hamlet's real or feigned madness: there is never really a question here – Hamlet never seems to go mad.

McConville offers several interesting moments during this production.

At one point, Hamlet descends into the audience to discuss the passion of the players we have just seen perform scenes for both the onstage and offstage audience. This heightens the play's metatheatricality, and is a clever decision which I felt could have been taken even further. Sitting in the stalls, and talking to the audience almost as one of us, he asks: "Am I a coward?"

At another point, during Polonius' addresses to the audience, Hamlet mouths, "Who is he talking to?" and paws at the invisible fourth wall.

Matilda Ridgway offered a strong Ophelia, and the pacing of the production truly picked up during her one-on-one exchange with Hamlet (the "get thee to a nunnery" scene). Her speedy descent into madness was traditionally performed but beautifully executed.



Josh McConville and Matilda Ridgway. Daniel Boud

Other actors felt under-utilised: Robin Goldsworthy was a memorable Malvolio for Sport for Jove's 2014 Twelfth Night, and could have explored more of his role as Rosencrantz.

I also was not convinced of the choice to double Claudius and the Ghost (Sean O'Shea). This is another instance where "mirroring" comes to the fore; but it felt like a choice that went unexplored. When Hamlet presents his mother with the pictures of her dead husband and her current one, the

production doesn't seem to do anything with the irony that they are one and the same actor.

It is also worth noting the high ratio of female roles provided in this production: the male players became "Yorick's daughters", the guards are female, as are the ambassadors Voltemand and Cornelia. Importantly, the triumphant Fortinbras is a female military leader.

In a play in which masculinity and misogyny interplay in fascinating ways in Hamlet's relationship with his mother Gertrude and his lover Ophelia, these casting decisions are intriguing and certainly highlighted the play's gender dynamics, but again, this felt underexplored.

It is important to note that Hamlet gives his dying voice to a female leader in this production; although the ramifications of this were not fully extrapolated.

Bell Shakespeare's Hamlet is at the Playhouse, Sydney, until December 6. Details [here](#).

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