The Old Vic Company in HAMLET with John Gielgud as Hamlet
Production by John Gielgud and John Richmond
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in
HAMLET
by
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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CAST in order of speaking

Narrator .............................................. John Rye
Bernardo, an officer ................................. Derek Francis
Francisco, a soldier ................................. Edward Harvey
Horatio, friend to Hamlet .......................... Jack Gwillim
Marcellus, an officer ............................... Denis Holmes
Claudius, King of Denmark ......................... Paul Rogers
Laertes, son to Polonius ......................... Peter Coke
Polonius, Lord Chamberlain ....................... Alan Webb
Hamlet .............................................. John Gielgud
Gertrude, Queen of Denmark, and mother to Hamlet .... Coral Browne
Ophelia, daughter to Polonius ..................... Yvonne Mitchell
Ghost of Hamlet’s Father ......................... Leon Quartermaine
Reynaldo, servant to Polonius .................... John Woodvine
Rosencrantz  ....................................... Derek New
Guildenstern  ..................................... John Wood
Voltimand  ....................................... John Richmond
First Player ....................................... Richard Wordsworth
Prologue .......................................... John Greenwood
Player Queen ..................................... Denise Bryer
Fortinbras, Prince of Norway ................... Charles Gray
A Captain ......................................... Ronald Allen
First Grave-digger ................................. Dudley Jones
Second Grave-digger ............................... Job Stewart
Osric, a courtier .................................. Aubrey Morris

English Ambassadors, a Priest, a Gentleman, Lords, Ladies, Officers, Soldiers, Sailors, Messengers and Attendants

Scene: Denmark
JOHN GIELGUD (Hamlet) one of the great classical actors of his generation, has long been associated with Hamlet, both as actor and director. He first played Hamlet at the Old Vic in 1930; New Yorkers saw him in the role in 1936 in Guthrie McClintic's production. In 1932 Gielgud turned producer and has continued in his dual capacity in a long line of stage successes including Romeo and Juliet, The Importance of Being Earnest, Love for Love, Medea and The Lady's Not for Burning. The films in which he has appeared include Richard III, Julius Caesar and The Barretts of Wimpole Street. He was knighted in 1953.

PAUL ROGERS (the King) began his association with the Old Vic when he joined the Bristol Old Vic Company in 1947. Two years later he joined the Old Vic in London. He was selected to play Malvolio in the production of Twelfth Night which re-opened the Old Vic Theatre in November of 1950. In the spring of 1952 he went as one of the principals in the Old Vic Company which toured South Africa, playing Iago in Othello and Bottom in A Midsummer Night's Dream. He has attained distinction in the title roles in Macbeth and Henry VIII, and as Shylock in The Merchant of Venice and Cassius in Julius Caesar.

CORAL BROWNE (the Queen) was born in Australia and made her first appearance on the London stage in 1935. Prior to joining the Old Vic in 1951, she played, among other parts, the leading role opposite Jack Buchanan in the phenomenally successful comedy, Castle in the Air. She was seen in New York in Tyrone Guthrie's Tamberlane as Zabina. She rejoined the Old Vic Company during the 1955-56 season to play Lady Macbeth.

YVONNE MITCHELL (Ophelia) has divided her time between the theater, films and television. She played Ophelia to Michael Redgrave's Hamlet for the Old Vic; she spent a season at Stratford-on-Avon playing Cordelia in King Lear and Katherina in The Taming of the Shrew. Her films include The Divided Heart, which won her the British Film Academy Award, the equivalent of the American Oscar.

(Recorded in England)
IN SEARCH OF PERFECTION
by WALTER KERR

Drama critic of the New York Herald Tribune and author of How Not to Write a Play

There are wise souls who contend that Hamlet is not a perfect play. Indeed I clearly remember one of my own teachers announcing, in a burst of academic generosity, that while the play was—in the strict structural sense—a failure, it was nevertheless “a magnificent failure.”

What have the wise found wrong with it? Well, all sorts of things. It is a bloody mishmash in which poisoned swords, watery suicides, and clownish grave-diggers bid blatantly for the lowest kind of audience response, thereby degrading—to a degree—the philosophical grandeur of the major soliloquies. It is an unwieldy combination of old-fashioned ‘revenge tragedy’ in the manner of Kyd with a newer psychological complexity that serves to blur and render ambiguous the moral character of the action (is Hamlet right or wrong in wanting to avenge his father, and if he is ‘right’ and thereby without tragic flaw, how can the play be called a tragedy?). It is a play so sluggish in its action, because of Hamlet’s own irresolution, that only a wandering and wildly padded fourth act can stretch it out to a full evening. And it has for its central character a man whose nature no one has ever been able to define satisfactorily: Hamlet is a man of action and of inaction, a fury of passion and “dull and muddy-mettled,” mad and not mad, loving and unloving, anything and everything you want to make him and nothing that can be intelligibly labeled in a word or phrase. The play fascinates us—in this view—because it is so unresolved.

The first difficulty in dealing with Hamlet as ‘a magnificent failure,’ of course, is that it has never been known to fail. That is to say, it is the tragedy of Shakespeare’s that leaps first to mind when we think of the plays we love, it is the tragedy that most often invites performance by ambitious major players, and it is the tragedy that—in performance, and in spite of the fact that no one performance ever captures all of the tantalizing grace notes we detect in a careful reading—most often succeeds. To put the matter crudely, Hamlet works. No amount of theoretical quibbling can obscure the fact that, on the stage, Hamlet seems clear to us; some happy and unfettered intuition puts us directly in touch with a figure, and a course of action, that cannot be grasped as a tidy mathematical formula in the study.

I think, perhaps, we pay too much attention to the wrong things. We worry about the violence and the bloodshed, as though we ought not to countenance such ‘theatrical’ intrusions upon an essentially literary work. And it is perfectly true, as Horatio tells us, that the movement of the play has been a sorry record “of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, of accidental judgments, casual slaughters; of deaths put on by cunning and forc’d cause, and, in this upshot, purposes mistook fall’n on the inventors’ heads....” Because we know that the Elizabethan audience was fond of such garish gestures, we tend to fear and distrust them as impositions upon the true scheme of the work. Why not let them alone until we can see—in practice—whether or not they fall simply and naturally, and even necessarily, into the path of a man who is plunging headlong toward a probable end?

If there is one other thorn that troubles us mightily it is no doubt the problem of Hamlet’s own vacillation, his impotence, his “pigeon-liver’d” reluctance to act. It is odd that this should be a serious bone of contention in a play as full of action as Horatio tells us Hamlet is; but then, Hamlet is a contrary sort of play. What might be borne in mind, I think, is the difference between what Hamlet thinks of himself and what other people think of him. If you’ll listen carefully, you’ll discover that the note of ‘inaction’ is struck only by Hamlet, and only by Hamlet when he is alone. It isn’t until the end of the second act—nearly midway through the play—that we hear of his being “unpregnant” of his
cause at all; and the news comes as rather a surprise. Hamlet seems to us to have been quite busy up to this point: ferreting out a ghost, challenging it, vowing vengeance, swearing his friends to silence, beginning to feign madness as a cloak for his pursuit of the truth, and so on; and within the same breast-beating speech he inaugurates a detective-story re-enactment of the crime that is going to have further and most savage consequences. The 'inaction' is in the soliloquies, and it is Hamlet's image of himself; since everyone else about the castle feels that he is much, much too busy, he need not be taken as the best judge of his own character.

Scholars have given us a clue to what is the likely truth here. They have pointed out that it was a convention of Latin 'revenge tragedy' to have the avenging figure not only meditate on suicide but berate himself for his dilatoriness (thus in a play of Seneca's we may come upon a fellow who has just slaughtered a whole family and baked the remains into a pie cursing himself out for his dawdling and irresolute behavior). Hamlet, it would seem, is a bit like this. Whatever he has done, it is not enough—not nearly enough. He is not so much an inactive man as a furiously impatient one.

Does the notion of 'impatience' help us to follow both the violent line and the self-accusing psychology of the play? I think it does. It seems to me that the play tells us, over and over again, three certain things. The first is that Hamlet is a young man, sensitive, highly intelligent, fresh-come from college, and fiercely in love with perfection—as idealistic young men are often wont to be. Witness his love and admiration for Horatio, and his "Give me that man that is not passion's slave, and I will wear him in my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart, as I do thee." Witness his image of his father: "So excellent a king; that was, to this, Hyperion to a satyr" and "See, what a grace was seated on this brow; Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, an eye like Mars, to threaten and command, a station like the herald Mercury new-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill, a combination and a form indeed, where every god did seem to set his seal, to give the world assurance of a man." Witness his vision of what man in general, and every man in particular, should be: "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!" Hamlet expects a great deal of the world he is about to enter; his standards are high.

It might be noted, in passing, that counsels of perfection—other than Hamlet's own—occupy a great portion of the first movement of the play, almost become its atmosphere. Laertes, on leaving, has many a cautionary word to say to his sister; she replies with like injunctions; immediately Polonius is on to read a whole catalogue of helpful hints toward positively heavenly conduct. There is a tacit understanding on the part of the audience that none of these counsels is likely to be taken seriously: Laertes is not necessarily going to avoid the "primrose path," Ophelia may be more vulnerable than she seems, and Polonius has probably never lived by a single one of the precepts he so glibly dispenses. This is the world now, paying lip service to perfection and waiting to see how things work out. Hamlet is of a different stripe, rich in an ardor that is undiluted by experience, incapable of easy cynicism (when he turns cynical, it will be with the tongue of a trod-upon adder); he believes in the possibility of virtue and expects that the world will live up to its promise.

The second clear sound that the play gives off—it is the dominant sound—is the shattering spiritual sickness that overtakes such a young man upon discovering that the world is not what he thought it. This happens to all of us; it is, I think, the key to the play's unfailing universality. The youthful experience does not, of course, tear all of us so violently asunder, probably because we do not all have Hamlet's hopes for the world in the first place; just as our minds may be less keen than his, our visions less exalted, so are our demands less severe. Hamlet's demands are very severe. Having granted perfection to Horatio and to his father, he must insist upon it in his mother, his uncle,
his love (Ophelia), his companions (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are rather more important to the play than is generally supposed) and, above all, himself. But perfection is not forthcoming, not even upon the simplest social level (Hamlet is upset that the court should drink so heavily). On the deeper levels of fidelity, justice, and personal honor, the truth is more disturbing still: the whole world is "an unweeded garden, that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature possess it merely."

Once the sensitive film of Hamlet's character has taken an accurate record of the grossness about him, the intense young mind passes from an excessive idealism to an excessive loathing. Nothing in this turncoat universe is any longer to be trusted: "to be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand." Perhaps not even one in ten thousand escapes taint: "Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?" Hamlet can no longer look upon the woman he loves without seeing a potential "breeder of sinners." "Are you honest?" he cries at Ophelia, seeing no fair answer in her face. "We are errant knaves, all; believe none of us." If "Get thee to a nunnery!" is the only prescription he can offer, it is because "virtue cannot... inoculate our old stock." We are all soiled, all lost. The dream of perfection has turned into a feverish denial of its possibility.

The third sure stage in just such a progression is the passionate determination to set things right or destroy them utterly in the process. There has never been a middle ground for Hamlet; there is none now. The perfectionist, the man who sees all things as absolutes, invariably turns fanatic. One of the most dazzling insights in all of Shakespeare—and Sir John Gielgud seizes upon it more brilliantly than any other player of our time—is the hysterical relief which sweeps over Hamlet each time one of his suspicions is confirmed; there is a chilling and terrible satisfaction for this man in the certain knowledge that his appalling vision is true. The perfectionist is convinced that he sees the truth more clearly than other people ("There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy"). With this conviction comes a powerful, egocentric need to assume personal responsibility for a wholesale correction of "the corrupted currents of this world." When Hamlet cries out "O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!" the double nature of his passion is forcefully outlined: the task of wiping wickedness from the face of the earth is his task, in part self-ordained; the task is, at the same time, an intolerable one because he has not the absurd rashness of a Laertes but the reasoning, careful, righteous intelligence of Hamlet. Both the impatient soul-searching—the apparent hesitation—and the actual violence follow naturally from the given character of the man.

It is at this juncture that the genuinely tragic nature of the work makes itself plain. In his particular judgments, if not in his general vision, Hamlet is quite right: his mother has lusted, his uncle has killed. The goal toward which he is restlessly surging—the restoration of moral health to Denmark—is a good one. (The motive of the tragic hero is always in itself worthy; the hero becomes tragic only because of excesses committed in the working out of that motive.) But Hamlet is driven—by his vision of total corruption and by his assumption of total responsibility—beyond the restraining limits of his acute intelligence. He comes to want Claudius not simply dead, but burning in Hell—and this is no longer strict justice but the savage grasping of a power that is not Hamlet's to exercise. Until late in the fourth act Hamlet has believed that "rightly to be great is not to stir without great argument." He has paid heed to the "god-like reason" that resides in man, even to "craven scruple." Now all of that is over. "O! from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" Balance, always precarious, is utterly abandoned; passion is henceforth in complete and despairing command; and the end is death everywhere. Perfection violently sought has not so much cleansed the world as nearly emptied it. Fortinbras, hopeful fellow that he is, is a stranger.

There may be a small, pleasant irony in the demands of a few graceless souls that Hamlet be a better, more perfect play. It is as perfect as it dare be in this imperfect world. Those who ask for more are—what else?—Hamlets.
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HAMLET
ACT III (concluded)
Old Vic Company
(Recorded in England)