

A time "out of joint": Peter Zadek's Hamlet at the Berlin Schaubühne

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One of Germany's leading theatre directors, Peter Zadek, has brought together many members of the *Hamlet* cast from his famous 1977 Bochum production and restaged Shakespeare's play at the Berlin Schaubühne. Ulrich Wildgruber, Zadek's Hamlet 22 years ago, now plays Polonius; Eva Mattes once again performs the role of Hamlet's mother Queen Gertrude. Knut Koch is Reynaldo and Herman Lause the ghost of Hamlet's father. In addition to his original cast, Zadek has cast Germany's actor of the year, Otto Sander, as Claudius. Finally Zadek has chosen one of Germany's outstanding actresses, Angela Winkler (*The Lost Honour of Katarina Blum, The Tin Drum, Danton*), to play Hamlet.

For many serious actors playing Hamlet is the crowning moment in one's career. The role has also attracted, however, a number of outstanding actresses, including French actress Sarah Bernhardt, the Danish star of the silent screen, Asta Nielsen, and more recently in a British production, Frances de la Tour.

Hamlet describes Denmark as "a prison". Zadek's decor communicates the real sense of a prison. The stage is dominated by a large metal container of the sort to be found on building sites where it serves as an office or temporary accommodation for casual workers. All entrances and exits in the play are effected through the various doors and gullies of the container. The only theatrical props in the piece are plain chairs set on the stage. The cast are garbed in modern dress—mainly bad suits—and in the opening scene Claudius appears in a dazzling white military costume, which appears to be a cross between the uniforms of the west and former east German army. The visual contrast to Hamlet in this scene could not be more pronounced. Hamlet is dressed in traditional doublet and hose—sombre black from head to toe.

A member of the Danish guard declares: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." Zadek places considerable emphasis on this rotteness. Later in the play, in the graveyard scene, the two gravediggers wear the types of plastic suits and face masks which we are accustomed to seeing in television pictures at the exhumation of mass

graves. At the burial of Ophelia, piles of rubbish are shovelled aside to reveal the skull of Yorick—this world is not just an "unweeded garden," it is a world choking on its own garbage.

King Claudius, who has murdered his own brother and Hamlet's father, is a "political realist"—scheming, double dealing and capable of anything. Planning his activities of the next day with a glass of malt whisky in hand, he is always ready with a flashing smile for public appearances.

*That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark.*

One drama critic, writing of Sander's Claudius, commented that one could not help being reminded of modern politicians such as Blair, Schröder and Clinton. In fact, in a newspaper interview Zadek preferred to draw a parallel between his Claudius and the current German Defence Minister, Rudolph Scharping.

Polonius is a large, pompous duck flapping his wings inconsequentially, darting his beady eyes left and right to emphasise his regurgitation of chewed-over nostrums and commonplaces. Zadek has taken considerable liberties with the role of Gertrude, reducing the queen and Hamlet's mother to the role of a sex-obsessed, red-lipped plaything of King Claudius.

Confronted with the impassivity, formality and hypocrisy, *the play-acting* of the official Danish court, Angela Winkler's Hamlet is fiery, consumed, passionate and physical. Often on the brink of tears, Winkler's Hamlet continually summons hidden resources to confront the villainy of Danish public life. During the scene in which Hamlet confronts his mother Gertrude for her over hasty marriage to Claudius, Hamlet literally seeks to shake sense into her, pinning the queen to the double bed she shares with the intruder king, and then dragging her across the floor of the stage in rage. In the scene with his beloved Ophelia, Hamlet flies out of control as Ophelia, on the orders of her father, spurns his love and returns his letters and trinkets.

Female representations of Hamlet have tended to tilt the interpretation of the play towards the psychological. Edward

Jones, the most famous pupil of Sigmund Freud, maintained: “Hamlet was a woman.” Both Freud and Jones referred to Hamlet’s “hysteria”. Zadek and Winkler make no discernible effort to emphasise the so-called “feminine” characteristics of Hamlet. Winkler’s Hamlet is the most sensitive, the most vulnerable character at the Danish Court, but this Hamlet is neither weak, nor indecisive. Confronted with overwhelming odds in the struggle to revenge his father’s death, Winkler’s Hamlet is driven to question the very validity of life itself. Here, in contrast to the passion showed in relations with the members of the court, Winkler’s handling of the set-piece monologues—perhaps the most famous speeches in drama—is restrained, soft spoken, almost a monotone.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet, probably first performed in 1600, superficially fell into the mould of “revenge tragedy”, a popular form of Elizabethan theatre. According to the muster, the hero of the piece (often a figure of minor nobility) is confronted with incontrovertible evidence of a great crime committed against him. The rest of the drama generally deals with the way in which the hero overcomes obstacles to claim his revenge.

Prince Hamlet, however, is not the typical hero of revenge tragedy. Hamlet is a student at the German town of Wittenberg, where in 1517 Martin Luther pinned his 95 theses to the door of the town church, a turning point in the development of the Protestant Revolution. Hamlet’s standpoint, therefore, is that of the enlightened Christian trained to question and probe every vested interest and supposed absolute source of knowledge.

A number of classical German writers wrestled with the significance of the new dramatic form which was, above all, linked to the name of Shakespeare and the new type of man epitomised by Hamlet. In his *On the Art of Tragedy* (1792) Friedrich Schiller identified the weakness, the “Achilles heel” of classical tragedy, as: “the blind subordination to fate” which is “always demoralising and offensive for free, self-determining beings”.

Schiller’s friend, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Germany’s most celebrated author and lyricist, the 250th anniversary of whose birth is being celebrated this year, wrote extensively on Shakespeare and especially on Hamlet, making clear the debt he owed the English dramatist in the elaboration of his own artistic work. For Goethe the essence of *Hamlet* rested in the conflict between freedom and necessity played out in an individual soul. In his essay “Poetry and Truth,” Goethe wrote:

“Our life, like everything around us, is comprised, in an incomprehensible way, of freedom and necessity. Our own desire is an anticipation of what we would do under all given circumstances. These given circumstances, however, apprehend us in their own particular manner.”

Goethe writes of Hamlet: “He [Hamlet] is called upon to do the impossible, not something which is impossible in and for itself . But something which is impossible for him.... A desire which exceeds the powers of an individual, is modern.” In his piece *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahren*, Goethe quotes Hamlet, Act 1, scene 5:

*The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!*

For Goethe, it was above all Shakespeare’s exploration of the conflict of a human conscience confronted with enormous tasks under particular historical, social conditions which was revelatory in Hamlet. In his struggle against indubitable wrong Hamlet cannot, and will not, rely on gods or absolute authorities. On the contrary, he is forced to summon, display and articulate an array of qualities which, while not in every case noble, are certainly human. At the same time Hamlet’s violent turns of temperaments and his subtle intelligence are communicated in a poetic speech that is empty of show, and appeals and speaks to us directly. These elements are surely the key to the perennial relevance and fascination of Hamlet.

Zadek’s Hamlet invites comparison/contrast with Kenneth Branagh’s recent film presentation of Hamlet. Branagh’s presentation, while ambitious and worthy, communicates little of what Hamlet refers to as the “rotteness” of Denmark. One has a sense that for Branagh the forces of Enlightenment are prevalent and on the march. Zadek has tilted his production of Hamlet in the other direction. Patently coloured by his disillusionment with current politics and politicians, Zadek has nevertheless given us a thought-provoking presentation of a time “out of joint”—memorable above all for a cast of fine performances, in particular Angela Winkler’s Hamlet.



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