

## Benedict Cumberbatch at the Barbican in London

**“Foul deeds will rise...”: *Hamlet*, in a world on the brink**

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The recent production of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* at the Barbican in London, featuring Benedict Cumberbatch, was the fastest-selling event in that city’s theater history. It was also broadcast by the National Theatre to more than 550 cinemas in the UK and globally. Tens of thousands of people have seen the production.

This new version of *Hamlet*, directed by Lyndsey Turner, with its darkly atmospheric elements, has many striking and compelling moments. Cumberbatch and his fellow performers have taken considerable pains to make the language and the events of the drama intelligible to a contemporary audience.

The overall results are contradictory, however, and not entirely satisfying. Unquestionably, one senses that this is a *Hamlet* being performed in a period of immense social and political crisis. The weight of our time is felt, even if unevenly, in the overall mood of the piece. (As well, there is the fact of Cumberbatch’s blunt criticisms of the British government’s cruel immigration policy.) However, the production lacks dramatic and intellectual unity. It has a certain eclecticism (in style, in costume, in acting approach) and does not seem propelled by a central artistic idea.

The play written by Shakespeare at the height of his artistic powers around 1600 is his longest. It strikes an incredible range of artistic and philosophical notes, from the most earthy, bawdy and sensual to the noblest and most elevated. It sets the greatest store on human reason, its infinite faculties and sensibilities, at the same time as it depicts an official world of immense corruption and decadence. The tragedy and driving impulse of the play lie in the fact that the “time is out of joint” and it is Hamlet’s unfortunate fate to “set things right,” to reveal the truth under the surface of things. Of course, to do so has deadly consequences.

This version opens with Hamlet on stage mourning the death of his father—the former king of Denmark. Hamlet’s father, as he and the audience come to find out, has been

murdered by Hamlet’s uncle, Claudius (Ciarán Hinds), the new king, who has hastily married his brother’s widow, the queen and Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude (Anastasia Hille). The ghost of Hamlet’s father (Karl Johnson, who also plays the Gravedigger in the final scenes) haunts the play from its early moments and demands his son avenge him.

Thus the play unfolds, with Hamlet seeking to find objective proof of Claudius’ fratricide—about which he has a strong intuition—and to bring out the “conscience of the king” by holding, as it were, “the mirror up to nature.”

The early scene of gaudy celebration hosted by Claudius and Gertrude, during which they glorify the present state of things, is countered by Hamlet’s grief and deep “disgust at all the affairs of life” (Hegel). Amidst the lavish and colorful goings-on, Hamlet is distinguished by his customary “inky cloak.”

Step-father and mother clearly hope Prince Hamlet will integrate himself into the political and court apparatus. They play down his father’s recent demise. Asked by his mother why his grief for his father “seems” so particular, Hamlet bitterly replies: “Seems, madam? Nay *it is* ... I have within which passes show; / These but the trappings and suits of woe.” Claudius, in garb befitting a dictator, chastises Hamlet for his “unmanly grief.”

Hamlet, however, breaks away from the pleasure-seeking crowd. In a soliloquy, as the rest of the stage goes black and a spotlight picks him out, he proclaims: “How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world! ... But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.” Cumberbatch movingly delivers the famous lines.

Hamlet knows full well as the drama proceeds that “foul deeds will rise / Though all the earth o’erwhelm them, to men’s eyes.” There is indeed something rotten and sinister in the state of Denmark (and Shakespeare’s England).

Hamlet puts on an “antic disposition,” feigns madness and attempts to confirm the king’s guilt. Cumberbatch’s Hamlet dons the ludicrous costume of a toy soldier as he mocks the

long-winded Polonius, the king's master of spies, a "rash, intruding fool" sent to watch Hamlet and discover the source of his apparent lunacy, which veers dangerously close to the real thing. (The pervasive spying is a theme of the play, less pursued in this production than in others.)

Claudius, the scheming Machiavellian king, cannot abide Hamlet's "wild and whirling words," which threaten to unravel his conspiracy. He admits in a monologue:

*Oh, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven ...  
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens  
To wash it white as snow? ...*

Claudius schemes to send the turbulent Hamlet to his death in England, with the help of his former schoolmates. The new king's fear of Hamlet is not unwarranted. The latter's very existence becomes a threat to the established order. In a rage, Hamlet accidentally kills Polonius (thinking him the king) as the old man eavesdrops on Hamlet's confrontation with Gertrude, in which he reminds her she is implicated in the general baseness. Hille as Gertrude movingly cries out, "Oh, Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain."

Ophelia, heartbroken by her father's fate and the course of her relations with Hamlet, descends into madness and dies tragically. Death also follows for Hamlet's two former schoolmates and lapdogs of the king, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as well as for Claudius and his mother. The play culminates in a duel to the death between Polonius' son Laertes and Hamlet.

The Barbican production has a certain gravitas on the whole, perhaps inevitably informed by the events of the last decade in world politics. This is a Hamlet set in a time of war (between Norway and Poland, between Denmark and Norway), as a scene rarely enacted shows. "The imminent death of twenty thousand men / That for a fantasy and a trick of fame / Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot."

To a certain and creditable extent the anguish of youth in the face of the immense weight of historical circumstances is on display here. Cumberbatch for his part performs with definite skill and intelligence—he is in turn witty, playful, self-critical, melancholy and profoundly angry. He handles the various soliloquies, among the most renowned in the history of drama, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Some of the other characters and scenes were less successful, including a rather weak Ophelia, Horatio and Laertes.

The look and feel of this *Hamlet*—while dazzling and atmospheric—threaten to overwhelm the play at various times with bombast and pyrotechnics. The production could have used more restraint, allowing the characters and interrelationships to come more to the fore. More could have been made of Hamlet's own instructions to the traveling players that "in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, / the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget / a

temperance that may give it smoothness."

Nonetheless, despite the production's limitations, Hamlet's enduring appeal is his evolving and "radicalized" consciousness, which reveals the heights of human potential (and all its frailties, fragilities and weaknesses), swallowed up by the putrid state of the social organism. Hamlet laments "I could be bounded in a nutshell and could count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams." Where, after all, do his "bad dreams" come from, except from the society's wrongdoings that haunt him? Hamlet is not speaking merely for himself, but for those who have suffered the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," the "whips and scorns of time," the "oppressor's wrong," the "law's delay" and the "insolence of office." Denmark, and the state of the world, is to him a prison.

As English critic William Hazlitt wrote of Hamlet, he is a figure that "has had his hopes blighted and his youth staggered by the apparitions of strange things; who cannot be well at ease, while he sees evil hovering him like a specter ... His habitual principles of action are unhinged and out of joint with the time."

Hegel argued that Hamlet is "a beautiful inner soul which cannot make itself actual or engage in the relationships of his present world." Along the same lines, the Soviet critic Aleksandr Smirnov suggested that Hamlet views the murder of his father "only as an indication of the general corruption of the age, of universal and irreparable evil. Under such circumstances, personal revenge is futile." He despises the "old world of feudal morality," but "like the best minds of his time, he shudders at the sight; shudders because he does not see a new world that will satisfy him."

When experiencing Hamlet today, one inevitably thinks of the type of fierce opposition to the existing state of affairs that is emerging within the younger generation, among those who can neither accommodate themselves to a time out of joint nor flow along the "corrupted currents of the world." In Claudius, and the rest of the court, on the other hand, one is reminded of the machinations of the political-financial elite today, its toadies and bootlickers, and the foul deeds they commit to maintain their rule. War, spying, state murder, endemic corruption and official lies—have we escaped these circumstances today?



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