Almeida Theatre's Hamlet

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Robert Icke's production of Hamlet, starring the Irish actor Andrew Scott in the leading role, debuted at the Almeida Theatre in north London in February 2017. The production then transferred to the Harold Pinter Theatre for an extended West End run throughout that subsequent summer; this review talks about the production during that latter run. This was Scott's first major Shakespearean role: after all, Hamlet is usually a role for actors who have firmly established themselves, and who have a firmly established fanbase. Two years prior, Scott's Sherlock co-star Benedict Cumberbatch played the role in Lyndsay Turner's Barbican Centre production. While Scott treaded the London boards, Oscar Isaac treaded the Broadway boards in the same role in Sam Gold's production that summer. Just as Scott finished in the role in September 2017, Tom Hiddleston debuted as Hamlet in Kenneth Branagh's fundraiser for RADA. As ever, if a male actor seeks to establish himself as a "male Shakespearean": then, in Tony Howard's words, "Hamlet is Everest, the part male actors traditionally must play." Scott, it appears, is no different.

Icke set this Hamlet in modern-day Denmark: this is established when, at regular intervals during the production, a massive video screen shows the audience mocked-up versions of news items depicting events in the play and the ticker-tape and news headlines are all in the Danish language. We can vaguely gesture at what they mean, of course – the death of Hamlet's father, the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius, the demise of the royal family and the succession of Fortinbras at the end – but this use of Danish-language media establishes that this is a very modern Elsinore. This screen also acts as a surveillance camera (indeed, the Ghost is first glimpsed onscreen), and the use of cameras as motif was deployed to striking effect: the words PAUSE and STOP on the screen indicated intervals and the show's end to the audience. But this camera motif was most inventive during the Mousetrap scene, as Hamlet and his family are filmed sitting in the front row of the auditorium, with the screen capturing Claudius' (Angus Wright) increasing anger and unease: Hamlet is seated right beside him, looking up at him and relishing every moment. It's largely due to Scott's impish performance here, as well as the slight mockumentary feel courtesy of the camera shoved in the actors' faces, that this is possibly one of the funniest renditions of the Mousetrap that I have ever seen. This Hamlet's loud, energetic enthusiasm and excitement for the show (and for catching his stepfather out) is all too clear to see, and is in stark contrast to the visible displeasure and discomfort of Ophelia and his family. Further lending a sense of modernity, Bob Dylan's songs are heard throughout. Indeed, the use of "Not Dark Yet" renders the final duel between
Hamlet and Laertes (Luke Thompson) to a poignant silence before the chaos of the play’s final moments.

However, none of the actors in Icke’s Hamlet performed their roles in Danish accents, but instead used their own accents. The majority of the cast was English with the exception of Scott, who uses his own Dublin accent, and the Irish actress Derbhle Crotty, succeeding Juliet Stevenson who had initially played Gertrude at the Almeida and who had played the role for the first few performances at the Harold Pinter. The casting of Crotty as Gertrude for the majority of the West End run had major implications for the structuring of Hamlet’s family, and particularly for the construction of the presence of Irishness, within this production. Stevenson’s Gertrude spoke with an English accent, as did Claudius and the Ghost; their son, however, spoke with an Irish accent. Crotty speaking Gertrude’s lines in an Irish accent reformats the dynamic of Hamlet’s family: through accent, perhaps undeliberately, the line of succession appears more defined, simply because Gertrude’s son speaks in the same accent as she does. But given Icke’s decision to re-edit the text of the play closer to that of the First Quarto, in which Gertrude aligns with Hamlet and Horatio to bring about her husband’s downfall in the latter stages of the play, the similarity in accent cast the relationship between Gertrude and Hamlet in a different light and reinforced Claudius as an imposing presence, unwelcome in the family. The closet scene became a scene with the only two Irish people on stage: here, there was the sense that Hamlet’s feeling of betrayal by his mother was considerably personal on his part.

Returning to Scott’s performance as Hamlet, the actor adopted a distinct style of verse-speaking. Indeed, on the night that I saw the show, Scott spoke in a soft, languid, slow Irish lilt throughout the production, which served as a sharp contrast to the other cast members’ speech, even Crotty’s Gertrude. This Hamlet appeared to be teasing out his thoughts and his emotions with the audience present, languidly pausing as the thoughts occurred to him – to put it plainly, thinking out loud. When performing the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, the silences and pauses between “to die…to sleep: to sleep…perchance to dream” were slowly drawn. When he asked “Am I a coward?”, he genuinely seemed as if he sought an answer from the audience, pausing for a response—and then, towards the soliloquy’s conclusion, slowly realising that “if [Claudius] . . . but blench…I know my course.” It is important to note that punctuation in early modern texts can be left open to suggestion for the modern theatre practitioner. For example, “in the early modern period question marks could be indicative of either a question or an exclamation,” Abigail Rokison-Woodall writes, “and thus it is not always possible to distinguish between interrogation and exclamation.” However, Scott’s patterns of speech were in marked contrast to the majority of the cast members, who spoke in their native English accents in the regulated iambic rhythms and speech patterns as one would come to expect from what W. B. Worthen calls “institutionalized Shakespeare.” Perhaps this is symptomatic of what Rokison-Woodall suggests is “the tendency within the theatre to view Shakespearean verse speaking as a set of rules to which the actor must adhere,” by which she specifically means English Shakespearean theatrical institutions. In any case, Scott’s Hamlet was very much present, to put it plainly – this Hamlet relied on the audience as a confidante, and drew on them as a source of energy. The result was riveting to watch.
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Scott was ably supported by the remainder of the cast, particularly Crotty, Wright, and Jessica Brown Findlay as Ophelia. It is a testament to this production that whereas it may have run for four hours (audience members did not leave until eleven at night), it did not result in a dull, sluggish experience. This *Hamlet*, just like its titular character’s languid, slow pauses, took its time: by inviting its audience to take their time, too, it rewarded them with one of the most involving, moving *Hamlets* in recent years.

Notes

2. The ellipses here are added by me, to indicate to the reader where Scott took the pauses in performance.
3. See previous footnote.

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