



CULTURE, REVIEW, SHAKESPEARE, THEATRE

## INTENSE THEATRE WITH UNEXPECTED HILARITY – HAMLET AT THE BARBICAN THEATRE, LONDON

AUGUST 11, 2015 CONNY KAUFMANN 9 COMMENTS

The challenge every production of **Shakespeare's *Hamlet*** faces is to make the tragedy about the titular Danish prince exciting for new audiences. Director Lyndsey Turner manages this with aplomb, not least thanks to this summer's top leading man, **Benedict Cumberbatch**.

Cumberbatch (*Sherlock*, *The Imitation Game*) has to hit the ground running as soon as the curtain goes up. The first words he mutters on stage are the "to be, or not to be" soliloquy, possibly the most famous lines Shakespeare ever wrote. Reminiscing about his dead father, while Nat King Cole's *Nature Boy* plays on a record player, this Hamlet shows his vulnerable and depressed side from the start, the music enhancing the sentiment Cumberbatch pours into his lines.



*Benedict Cumberbatch as Hamlet.  
Copyright by Johan Persson.*

Moving the play's most famous soliloquy to the beginning might seem like a controversial move, but in this case it works as it establishes Hamlet's state of mind which spurs his further actions.

And Cumberbatch's version of Hamlet's descent into madness is a thing to behold. Instead of portraying Hamlet as a young man avenging his father, Cumberbatch takes the role in the opposite direction, and back to child-like innocence. His portrayal is over-the-top, like an adult-sized toddler having a tantrum, as Hamlet pretends to be a toy soldier complete

with a play-pen castle to defend. It's in this contrast, going from thoughtful to hilarious and back again, that Cumberbatch's talents really shine.



*Hamlet's (Benedict Cumberbatch) madness. Credit: Johan Persson!*

However, Hamlet is not the only one to lose his mind. Siân Brooke is an excellent Ophelia, and watching her go insane due to the loss she has suffered is fascinating. She mutters, and sings off-key, and it's meant to be this disharmonious to show the extent to which she suffers. Next to Hamlet's madness and Ophelia's gradual despair, Karl Johnson's dry humour as the gravedigger fits perfectly with the role.



While the acting is superb, and the design of the blue-hued royal palace set by Es Devlin looks divine with its big staircase and filigree balustrade, the costumes by Katrina Lindsay never make it clear what time the play is meant to be set in.

Hamlet wears jeans and t-shirts, and later a zipped hoodie. Guildenstern (Rudi Dharmalingam) wears turquoise chucks. Hamlet is listening to records. Clearly this is meant to be a modern setting. Yet the palace interior, combined with Gertrude's (Anastasia Hille) wedding dress that looks like it was the height of fashion at the beginning of the 20th century, Claudius (Ciarán Hinds) and Polonius (Jim Norton) wearing uniforms that would not have looked out of place at a state dinner with Queen Victoria, and Voltemand's (Morag Siller) outfit which looks like she has been on duty in Churchill's Cabinet War Rooms, there are too many clashes happening at once to feel entirely natural. Laertes (Kobna Holdbrook-Smith) is dressed in modern clothes, while Fortinbras (Sergo Vares) could have been an extra in a WW1 film with his long grey coat.

And while the set design is gorgeous, the back of the stage is dominated by a corridor, which can swallow the sound of the actors' voices when they are turned away from the audience.

During the production on August 7, Jim Norton, who plays Polonius, was taken ill and was unable to continue after the first 30 minutes. The decision was made to have understudy Nigel Carrington (who was already on stage as Cornelius), take over the part of Polonius. However, he had to rely on the script for some of his scenes. While he did an excellent job of incorporating the script into his play whenever possible – a task only Benedict Cumberbatch actively helped him with by improvising the way the scenes were played and showing he is able to pick up on the cues his fellow actors give him – he nonetheless had to use the script. An understudy should know their parts, whether he's needed on opening night or in the penultimate performance. While Carrington couldn't have anticipated that he'd be called upon, (based on the fact that Jim Norton completed his first scene), he still should have known his part by heart, as reading the script took away from the magic of theatre and gave the production more the feel of a dress rehearsal.

Benedict Cumberbatch's *Hamlet* creates a balance between depression, despair, hilarity and dry humour. It is possibly the funniest version of Shakespeare's great tragedy the London stage has seen in a while. The acting is brilliant all around, but for such a sought-after, record-breaking production (tickets sold out within eight hours in August 2014), the costume designs seem lackluster at best.

Rating: ♥♥♥♥



*Gertrude (Anastasia Hille) and Hamlet (Benedict Cumberbatch). Credit: Johan Persson/*

*Hamlet* at the Barbican Centre will have a limited run until October 31. There are 100 tickets per performance left for purchase on the day.

NTlive will show a live screening of *Hamlet* on October 15 in cinemas around the world.