

Question 7 – Hamlet

- 7 Evaluate a live performance you have seen, explaining how closely the production reflected the conventions of that performance style of drama. At the start of your answer state the name, venue and date (month and year) of the live performance you have seen. [40]

Hamlet, XXXX Theatre, DD.MM.YY

A star actor, reputable production company and leading theatre venue should have been the perfect mix for a modern adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet. Unfortunately, this was not the case. The first scene, Act 1, Scene 1, began with a misappropriation when Hamlet, played by the well-known actor Benedict Cumberbatch, is shown hidden away in his room, dressed in black, reflecting upon his father's death. He is shown sitting on the floor surrounded by suitcases as 'Nature Boy' by David Bowie played on the vinyl beside him. Jon Hopkins produced all the music for the play which was both live as Ophelia sang about death and unrequited love in scene 5 and also pre-recorded throughout.

Cumberbatch's first words imitate those usually spoken by Bernardo on the ramparts of the castle; "Who's there?". Yet the startled nature of the original was missing; his vocals were stilted and face inanimate, the pace of his speech was slow yet the pitch was high almost emulating the likes of Olivier and Gielgud, unfortunately without the weight of their characterisation. This continued in regard to the different character soliloquies and was obviously a directorial choice but was ineffective. For example, when Sian Brooke performed Ophelia's 'Oh what a noble mind' soliloquy, she used direct address to communicate with the audience but rather than reflecting sadly on Hamlet's 'madness', she was almost asking the audience for help. This did not fit with the style of acting in the rest of the play as throughout the first half, the acting was realistic. I believe this style of acting was chosen to create an illusion of reality throughout the play and alternative versions of neurosis were then shown later. Brooke used subtle idiosyncrasies such as twitches, shuffling and a darting eye line which allowed her acting to be increasingly more manic and overstated, rather than Cumberbatch's use of exaggerated moments of clowning around. I believe this was intentional for as a company they were also required to use expressive movement during their soliloquies by slowing their speech down, showing glitches between lines physically whilst then performing a series of twists and spirals. Again, the creative idea was there but was not successfully communicated.

In regard to the design elements, money had clearly been no object as the opening black wall lifted to reveal Es Delvin's closed set stage, of an opulent public room of a galleried Danish royal palace. Again, realism reigned with set props; the oversized table, underneath a large glittering chandelier and grand portraits along the balcony.

The lighting by Jane Cox, was designed to emphasise the grandness and at times crassness of the character's behaviour and the plot. Bright golden and rose washes flooded the interior of the grand palace yet great swathes of dim, cold, harsh bluish light were used for outdoor scenes, emphasising the horror, throwing suspense and apprehension into the audience. Again a strange directorial choice was to have all scenes contained within the interior set. The streets of Elsinore, Polonius' quarters, Claudius' office, and the churchyard all used the same set which was an effective way of maintaining the narrative flow but a strange choice.

Costume Designer Katrina Lindsey created Hamlet's casual-modern day look which stood out in particular from the other characters in the production. I believe this was a symbolic choice that was used to put across to the audience that 'Hamlet' was different, an outsider, and this gave the audience a chance to unlock key clues throughout the play. On the other hand Sian Brooke as Ophelia was often costumed in flowing gowns, but in a similar way to Hamlet she was also dressed in a V-neck sweater and baggy trousers at times. This created conflict when Gertrude delivered her speech about Ophelia's suicide as the images were completely mismatched.

Humour was used as Hamlet marched on madly in a Napoleonic-era British Army uniform with a scornful salute to Ciarán Hinds' upright and uptight Claudius. The toy castle and soldiers were used to aid Hamlet in his regression and feigned insanity, and created a much appreciated burst of energy from Cumberbatch which reignited the audience's enthusiasm.

The talents of acclaimed choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkoui were wasted as the movement content consisted of some slow-motion background physical theatre and a few 'dramatic' moments of 'rewind' motifs accompanied by stained wall lighting effects.

In conclusion, the draw of Cumberbatch and Hinds as two of Britain and Ireland's most talented actors was not enough to make this production a success. What some consider to be Shakespeare's finest and most poetic reflection of human life was ruined by mismatched directorial choices and a misspent budget that relied on recouping money from star struck audience members rather than true lovers of theatre.



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