

The 1950s

John Neville – Peter O’Toole – Ian Richardson

John Neville’s 1957 Hamlet at the Old Vic was part of the last year of artistic director Michael Benthall’s five-year plan to stage the entire Shakespeare canon. The quietly spoken, no-nonsense Benthall had a gift for handling crowd scenes, inherited from his mentor Tyrone Guthrie.

Neville’s notices were mixed. His Hamlet was seen as sensitive, elegiac, a Hamlet of extraordinary innocence. W.A.Darlington wrote: ‘Last night’s Hamlet gave me a deeper and more continuous pleasure than I have had in the theatre for a long time past.’ Kenneth Tynan too was enthused: ‘Textually and conceptually it is as near a definitive *Hamlet* as anything I have ever seen....The production has the clean, physical dexterity I associate with Mr Benthall at his best.’ But he added: ‘There is little in the way of a Hamlet.’ Other critics regretted the absence of Hamlet’s darker side, of his irony and ferocity. *The Times* made reference to ‘this clockwork Hamlet’, while the *New Statesman* stated: ‘Neville’s is a plain, unvarious Hamlet, with no knobs on. But it is the very knobs that have made Hamlet the most acted, discussed, argued-over, written-about role in all dramatic literature.’

Judi Dench, fresh out of drama school, was a surprise choice for Ophelia. The critics mostly damned her with faint praise, or ignored her, but Richard Findlater described her performance as a *débâcle*: ‘Judi Dench, in time, may well be a prime asset of our theatre. A few years’ hard labour, in proper obscurity, will do wonders.’ But Neville thought her ‘a very fine Ophelia.... My Hamlet interpretation was based on the disillusionment of youth; Judi’s Ophelia matched this in vulnerability. She was very ready for it.’

The production visited Paris, the first time the play had been staged there for around half a century. The critic of *Le Monde* described Neville as the definitive Hamlet, admiring his madness and courage, while observing that the production was one of lucid revelation. Dench was praised for playing Ophelia ‘without trying to look like something out of Botticelli’.

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Twenty-seven-year-old Peter O’Toole’s first Hamlet, directed in 1959 by John Moody at the Bristol Old Vic, was linked to the recent arrival of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*: the headline for *The Times* review ran ‘Now an Angry Young Hamlet in Bristol Production’.

This was Hamlet the man in the street more than the Prince; O’Toole felt Shakespeare’s characters should be presented as real people: ‘You can smell their breath,’ he declared. ‘They piss against the wall. That’s the way I play Shakespeare.’ But he suffered stage fright as he was about to go on stage on opening night, and felt he had missed his opportunity.

The critics saw virtues and flaws in his performance. Laurence Kitchin suggested: ‘A beard and tall, squeaky boots, along with harsh diction at headlong speed, removed all traces of aristocracy from the part; but the instantaneous neurotic fusion of thought and feeling often

worked aptly.' *The Times* felt O'Toole offered 'a restless interpretation, crudely staccato in diction and gesture, yet blessed with uncommon energy and staying power'.

His Hamlet had a powerful effect on two later directors of the National Theatre. Peter Hall recalled: 'His performance was rough and crude; but it had an animal magnetism and danger which proclaimed the real thing. He made Hamlet unendurably exciting, one of the best I've seen.' Richard Eyre, visiting the theatre at 16, remembered him 'in his unreconstructed state – dark-haired, wild, violent, mercurial and thrilling'. Peter Eyre, a later Hamlet, was also approving: 'He was very sensitive, very alive; he had a lot of humour. He seemed to cover all the different aspects of Hamlet.' The playwright Tom Stoppard, then a journalist in Bristol, had no interest in Shakespeare until he saw his friend O'Toole's Hamlet, which he watched several times. 'It was everything it was supposed to be,' he said. 'It was exciting and mysterious and eloquent.' The performance inspired him to write *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

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Barry Jackson, the founder of the Birmingham Rep, believed no actor over thirty should appear as Hamlet; and if he had to be over thirty, he should look younger, and certainly be young at heart. At twenty-four Ian Richardson, tackling the role at Jackson's famous theatre, fitted the bill. His director was Bernard Hepton, who as an actor had gained extensive stage experience at the Rep under Jackson. He cast Richardson immediately after watching him perform at the Glasgow College of Dramatic Art, where he had won the Gold Medal.

With his fine, resonant voice, Richardson would later become one of the first members of and leading classical actors in Peter Hall's Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford. In 1959 he was still feeling his way, but achieved some success. J.C.Trewin, who reviewed for the *Birmingham Post*, reflected later: 'Hamlet entered as a slight, sad-eyed figure of settled melancholy, a young man's single-minded sorrow, who could suggest heartbreak in an inflection, a twist of the lip. At that hour Richardson's personality had yet to develop. What would become a magnificent voice needed range, the larger theatrical passion; but the actor's earnestness and sweetness achieved much....From the end of the Ghost scene it grasped the imagination.... Richardson had the words and the questing mind.'

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Other Hamlets in the decade included Alan Badel (1956), directed by Michael Langham, Theatre Royal, Stratford; Richard Briers (1956), RADA student production, Duthy Hall, Southwark.