The 1960s

Ian Bannen – Richard Pasco – Tom Courtenay – Richard Chamberlain

Ian Bannen, thought to be the first Scot to play Hamlet, had come to Stratford ten years previously as a walk-on. In Peter Wood's 1961 production, staged at the re-named Royal Shakespeare Theatre, he was the first actor to play the Prince under Peter Hall's regime as Director.

In his startling and controversial performance the noble mind was gone, as was all trace of Ophelia's portrait of 'the glass of fashion and the mould of form'. Several critics were appalled at his lunatic neuroticism, and spelt out the symptoms: 'His eyes are sometimes wild, staring, and seemingly on fire, his body shakes, and his hands and head tremble feverishly,' wrote one. Another, who judged him 'unconditionally mad as a hatter', explained: 'This man is mad when we first find him, and the full horror of madness, the almost delicious danger, comes once the revenge motif has been sounded by the Ghost, when a paroxysm of rage and physical excitement sweeps the body, and the psychopathic obsession for vengeance becomes a great and sinister game.'

Bannen explained: 'I see Hamlet as being in a high state of tension the whole time....He needs something to help him relax the tension. That is why he loves codding Polonius, jazzing it up with the Players, and playing around with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.' Later he admitted to having over-played the madness. He also confessed he found the part exhausting, because Shakespeare's mind moved at such enormous speed. His verse-speaking came under fire from many critics. Typical was W.A.Darlington's view, of his 'delivering Hamlet's more impassioned speeches in a melancholy and monotonous nasal, while long-drawn-out cadences suggested the actor's words and thoughts were running in imperfect coordination'.

Bamber Gascoigne decided Wood's production was 'an extreme case of interpretative fever, and it falls prey to its own ingenuity. Nothing is allowed to be as expected....None of these touches would matter if they remained genuinely incidental, but they constantly detract from the scenes which they embellish. In the end the play seems just to tag along in the wake of the director's eccentric course.' The most widely derided touch was to have Bannen jump into the Players' property basket for the 'Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I' soliloquy. *The Times* complained: 'Such a Hamlet can have nothing of the courtly grace or easy social authority which is part of his fascination as a stage character.' The *Oxford Times* suggested Wood should be 'ducked thrice in the Avon and then consigned to the Stratford pillory'.

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It was his three years at the Bristol Old Vic from 1964 which first established Richard Pasco as a leading classical actor. In 1965 he played Hamlet in Val May's Regency-set production, and repeated it the following year. His authoritative Hamlet was widely admired, notably for his beautiful speaking. Michael Billington was bowled over by his performance, and 'his sublime music'. J.C.Trewin also approved: 'Pasco, naturally an intellectual and as affecting a speaker as any on our stage, offered what until then must have been the performance of his

career....Like many people's, my Hamlet had been and is composite, and on his Bristol showing Pasco would be prominent in any mosaic.'

In the spring of 1967 Pasco led the company on tour – to America, which included a run at the City Centre in New York; to Europe, where they visited Berlin; and to Israel. Re-visiting the production, Trewin was again impressed: 'Never an extrovert, Pasco phrased from the heart of the speeches with a music controlled and varied, and obeyed his own advice to the Players....He was not a man for back-room mumbling or for jagged, saw-tooth Shakespeare: scorning to force or wrench a line, he acted with a unity that defied the pedantically exigent.'

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Tom Courtenay's 1968 Hamlet, directed by Caspar Wrede, was staged at the Assembly Hall during that year's Edinburgh Festival, to mark the launch of the 69 Theatre Company. Founded by Wrede, Michael Elliott and James Maxwell, this was the successor to the 59 Theatre Company, which had played successfully at the Lyric, Hammersmith during the 1950s.

Courtenay, aged 31, was not a naturally compelling speaker, and his swift, colloquial Hamlet was subdued. For Trewin this had advantages: 'We soon ceased to listen to him phrase by phrase; rather we took the sense of a passage, the mood of a sequence, and became closely involved once more in the narrative of *Hamlet*.' But he would have welcomed 'more vocal virtuosity, more evidence of interpretation, a princelier demeanour'. Benedict Nightingale was more dismissive, dubbing his Hamlet 'a prim swot just back from the Wittenberg tripos'.

According to Trevor Peacock, playing Horatio, the Finnish-born Wrede 'could somehow make you "find" your performance without "pushing" you'. His production, according to Trewin, was faithful to the text and, like Courtenay's performance, 'logical, honest, touching'. It later played at the University Theatre in Manchester.

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Richard Chamberlain had become world famous after playing the name part in the American television series *Doctor Kildare*. When he accepted the offer from Peter Dews, the artistic director of the Birmingham Rep, to play Hamlet at his theatre in 1969, there was considerable surprise: no American had played Hamlet on an English stage since John Barrymore at the Haymarket in 1925.

The 31-year-old American actor announced: 'My Hamlet will be totally different. It is a strange part in that you have to use yourself as much as you possibly can, finding whatever of Hamlet you can within you, and magnifying it ten thousand times.' Dews expressed his confidence in him: 'There is, I think, in every actor worth his salt, a performance of Hamlet which could, because of the staggering variety of mood in the writing, be everyone's best performance.'

David Weston, cast as Laertes, recalls Chamberlain's attitude during rehearsals: 'He was a very shy, nervous young man, all too aware of what he was letting himself in for. Throughout rehearsals Peter continually lost patience with him, and rebuked him as if he were an errant schoolboy. But Chamberlain took it all without a sign of resentment.' During the dress rehearsal he was in a terrible state of nerves, and did everything wrong. At the end, as the soldiers bore Hamlet's body from the stage, instead of the usual stirring Tchaikovsky music, there came the title-music from *Doctor Kildare*. 'Chamberlain's eyes opened in horror: he thought he was having a nightmare.' But Dews' joke lightened the actor's mood and steadied his nerves. Weston recalled: 'He spoke with passion, sense and clarity. He was considered old-fashioned by some, following David Warner's recent gangly sixties student, but to others he epitomised "the glass of fashion and the mould of form".'

J.C.Trewin welcomed his interpretation: 'This personable Hamlet was essentially generous and free from all contriving: no fresh light on the man, but scarcely anything except an over-calculated death scene that sounded false. If the sorrow did not strike deeply, it was there.' *Plays and Players* noted: 'If the citizens of Birmingham flocked to admire the doe-like, carved-alabaster countenance of the erstwhile Doctor Kildare, assuredly they stayed to applaud a performance which came nearer to the core of the part than many of recent memory.'

Dews provided a romantic, Russian-style production, set at the end of the Romanov dynasty. In the programme magazine he explained: 'I have always responded more to a version of a Shakespeare play that didn't look like the last one. This production has come out late Tsarist for a number of reasons...a collapsing, decadent northern dynasty seemed a suitable ambience. And in a courtly play one must take account of courtly dress, and this period has always seemed to me to be beautiful for men as to women.'

The following year Chamberlain played Hamlet in a two-hour version on television, his fine, resonant voice betraying no trace of an American accent.

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Another Hamlet in the decade was Michael York (1969), directed by Joseph O'Conor, Thorndike, Leatherhead.