The 1970s

Hugh Thomas – Alan Bates – Peter Eyre

Jonathan Miller staged his first production of *Hamlet* with Oxford student Hugh Thomas playing the Prince. It was for the recently formed Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Company, a union of the best talent from the two ancient universities. He later deemed this *Hamlet* the best of his then three productions of the play.

'It had an urgency and directness, with an austere Tudor setting,' he recalled. 'I had this eager young man, Hugh Thomas, who simply *was* Hamlet. He was a university student. Everyone who plays it older than that is doomed to failure.' He saw Hamlet as being constantly assaulted with the idea of the corruption of the flesh. 'I portrayed him as a neurotic puritan, a clerkly figure appalled by the body, not just by the pain that flesh is heir to, but also the pleasure.' The *Oxford Mail* critic described Thomas as 'exuding intelligence', but J.C.Trewin wrote: 'Hugh Thomas was a bitterly baffled student, a brooding adolescent, incalculable, neurotic, and not at all likeable.'

Always keen to break with tradition, Miller cut the opening scene: 'It was a youthful *jeu d'esprit*,' he said. 'I wanted to cut straight to the brilliance of the court.' This prompted John Mortimer to accuse him of theatrical vandalism. He was also keen to look afresh at Claudius' character: 'Claudius has always seemed to me a slightly cliché figure, a wet-lipped lecher paddling in Gertrude's *décolletage*, and peeling grapes, always a sign of a villain. He was actually a cold, calculating politician, who married Gertrude simply to secure power and prevent opposition. His lechery is in Hamlet's mind; there is nothing in the text to suggest it.'

Designer Bernard Culshaw stated: 'Jonathan always seemed to have some kind of visual reference up his sleeve....He referred to Frances Yates' book on the theatre of memory, a study of Elizabethan theatre imagery based on ideas about the brain and the nature of memory. The set was inspired by Elizabethan etchings that illustrated this thesis.' Miller also drew on a biography of Proust, on the effect of maternal deprivation in his childhood; Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and his ideas about patricide; and James George Frazer's study of comparative religion *The Golden Bough*, concerning the slaying of priest-kings.

The play was staged at the Cambridge Arts, the Oxford Playhouse and the Fortune in London, before touring campuses in the United States. The cast included three students who later became directors: Charles Sturridge was Rosencrantz, Osric was played by John Madden, while Andrew Hilton played the Ghost, the Player King and Fortinbras. Sturridge remembered Miller's directing style: 'He perhaps preaches in a way, but it's with a fervour that is very exciting.' The critic Michael Coveney, one of the company's student directors, recalled: 'It was like the most stimulating tutorial company you've ever had...and he was superb at finding things these young students could relate to in their roles.'

++++

Alan Bates had been nurtured in the Royal Court stable, where he had been in the original cast of *Look Back in Anger*. He had had little experience of Shakespeare when he came to play Hamlet in 1971, although he had appeared as Richard III at Stratford, Ontario.

Declaring that 'Hamlet is the inner person of all time', Bates identified strongly with him: 'I think I am rather like Hamlet. He is caught in a situation and does not really trust himself to deal with it. He is completely subject to his emotions and he has this fantastic awareness of the motives of other people and of his own. But this has a stifling effect on him. He believes himself capable of doing something, but he does not trust himself to do it. That's true of me.' His view of Hamlet was echoed by Michael Billington: 'Mr Bates reminds us that Hamlet's tragic flaw was not an inability to make up his mind, but an impulsiveness and intemperateness that rendered his actions ineffectual. He has exactly that racing mind without which any Hamlet is a non-starter...he handles the soliloquies excellently, as if trying to release the tensions within himself.'

The production opened at the Nottingham Playhouse, run by Stuart Burge, before moving to the Cambridge in London. It was directed by Anthony Page, who also had a Royal Court background. He talked of stripping the play of naturalistic illusion, and so William Dudley's design consisted of a stainless-steel box, an aluminium cell with tunnels and sliding panels. This science-fiction-style set, felt by some critics to jar with the Elizabethan dress, was variously described as 'a biscuit tin' and 'a remote-controlled mousetrap'.

Bates' virile and handsome Hamlet divided the critics. Eric Shorter felt he was the only Hamlet to look as if he could 'drink hot blood and do unnameable bitter deeds', while Benedict Nightingale described him as 'sharp-witted and sly, the barrow boy of Elsinore'. This manner was not to the taste of another critic, who asked: 'I suppose it would be thought anti-egalitarian to expect a *princely* manner?' Philip Hope-Wallace thought his performance 'masterly...keenly intelligent and deeply moving'. But other critics had mixed opinions. 'Nothing he does is false or unharmonious,' John Barber wrote. 'Throughout he has the dignity of a sensitive, deeply wounded boy.' And yet: 'The actor's equipment, technically accurate, does not yet encompass a wide enough range of expression for Hamlet's spiritual outrage.'

Celia Johnson, much loved for her wartime film roles and for *Brief Encounter*, was an unexpected choice for Gertrude. Yet she had considerable stage experience, though fewer roles in Shakespeare than she would have liked. When she played Ophelia to Raymond Massey's Hamlet on Broadway in 1931 the *New York Times* critic called her performance 'one of the loveliest and most poignant descriptions of the part'. She had also played the role to John Gielgud's Hamlet in a wartime radio version. Her Gertrude, according to Billington, 'was not the usual wilting voluptuary, but a distraught, untidy, maternal figure caught up in events beyond her comprehension'.

++++

In 1974 Jonathan Miller directed a trio of plays in repertoire at Greenwich under the heading 'Family Romances', designed to identify the Freudian links between *Hamlet*, *Ghosts* and *The*

Seagull. In all three plays the son suffers from an absent father, possibly harbours an Oedipal attachment to his mother, and therefore resents her new companion. Miller, congratulated for restoring the idea of a directorial concept, was compared to directors such as Peter Brook and Tyrone Guthrie, while Irving Wardle called it the theatrical event of the year.

Played on an almost bare stage with just a few tables and chairs, *Hamlet* proved the least successful of the three plays artistically, and divided the critics. The *Sunday Times* gave it a rave review, stating that *Hamlet* 'moved with the lightness of a gazelle', while Irving Wardle announced that 'Miller opened up areas of the play which I have never previously seen explored'. But other reviewers saw a gabbled, confused blur. Kenneth Hurren was critical of Miller's textual changes, suggesting: 'Belting through the piece in less than three hours, trimming out characters and scenes with larkish abandon, he has unfleshed a masterpiece to reveal a skeletal melodrama with no intellectual sinew and little dramatic muscle.'

Hamlet was played by Peter Eyre, who was later Polonius in Ralph Fiennes' 1995 *Hamlet*. According to Wardle: 'His performance has plenty of rhythmic variety and attack, but it remains arbitrary and uninteresting. You are struck by the oddness rather than the justice of the emphases, and by the insistently vague falling inflections.' B.A.Young disliked 'the breakneck speed of Eyre's speech', arguing that his Hamlet 'seems very unlikely, had he been put on, to have proved at all royal. He is the pathetic victim – scholar no doubt, but courtier or soldier never, in his rusty black clothes, his mouth hanging open, his eyes gazing into vacancy.'

Miller described how casting can determine and alter the way a director sees a character: 'By giving the part to this or that actor, one automatically begins to invest the lines with meanings previously inaudible. It is impossible not to use a certain fleshly quality in Robert Stephens, and I found myself going back to aspects of Claudius' character I had previously repudiated. Since Irene Worth was playing Gertrude it was not feasible to make her a timid creature; instead she was a forceful, rather violent woman, whose lust was central to the action.'

There were, as always with Miller, some unexpected directorial touches. The play's opening words were spoken offstage, and Hamlet was similarly unseen for a time while starting his advice to the Players. But a similar move at one performance was not down to Miller. According to his biographer Kate Bassett: 'Robert Stephens, who suffered from manic psychosis and drank heavily, chose to remain offstage and yell Claudius' first speech from the dressing-room. The whole court, having already assembled in front of the audience, stood frozen with horror. Eventually he wandered in, and started merrily paraphrasing: "Well, I've written to Norway and told him this sort of thing simply won't do."'

++++

Other Hamlets during the decade included Peter McEnery (1970), directed by Robin Midgley, Phoenix, Leicester; Alec McCowen (1970), directed by Peter Dews, Birmingham Rep; Martin Potter (1971), directed by Brian Howard, Harrogate; Keith Michell (1972), directed by Peter Coe, Bankside Globe Playhouse; Martin Jarvis (1973), directed by Martin Jenkins, Theatre Royal, Windsor; Ian Charleson (1974), directed by Richard Cottrell for the

Cambridge Theatre Company; Robert O'Mahoney (1977), directed by Richard Cottrell, Bristol Old Vic; Alan Dobie (1977), St George's Theatre, Tufnell Park; Philip Bowen (1977), directed by Michael Bogdanov, Young Vic.