

The 1980s

Frank Grimes – Philip Franks

In a letter to Christopher Isherwood in 1981, the director Lindsay Anderson wrote: ‘Frank Grimes and I did our *Hamlet* down at Stratford East – Hamlet on a rubbish-tip, as Frank called it, not inappropriately. Since the palmy days of Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop, the place has fallen into ill-organised and poverty-stricken mediocrity, still clinging to an absurd idea of “popular” theatre.’

Anderson’s production that year was the first Shakespeare play to be staged at Stratford East’s Theatre Royal since Littlewood’s production of *Macbeth* in 1957. He had assembled a little-known company – Rachel Roberts, his chosen Gertrude, had committed suicide before rehearsals began – and risked casting as the Prince his good friend Frank Grimes, an Irish actor who had gained early success as the young Behan in *Borstal Boy*. Previously directed by Anderson at the Royal Court, he had little experience of Shakespeare.

In the *Spectator* the critic Mark Amory welcomed the absence of a director’s concept. ‘The play’s the thing and it is not placed in Vietnam or 1914 or in front of sets in the style of Salvador Dali; nor is Ophelia pregnant or Osric a dominating manipulator or the Ghost played by a laser beam.’ He also noted: ‘The verse here is spoken simply and with impressive clarity rather than held up and examined for new subtleties.’ On the other hand: ‘There is little conspicuous invention, and it seems likely that much of that had necessity as one of its parents.’ He cited Jocelyn Herbert’s set, consisting of three off-white columns and little else, and suggested the costumes ‘have a slight suggestion of the dressing-up trunk in the attic’.

Of Grimes’ Hamlet he wrote: ‘The quicksilver mind that makes Hamlet so charming was not much in evidence....While he becomes formidable he remains curiously simple, the celebrated complexities are more ignored than motivated, and do indeed seem to a large extent to melt away.’

In 1985 Frank Grimes played Hamlet at the Folger Theatre in Washington, again directed by Lindsay Anderson.

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Philip Franks had already played several Shakespearean roles for the Royal Shakespeare Company before he came to play Hamlet. His familiarity with the play extended back to his childhood. After seeing the Warner/Hall version at the age of nine, he made a silent film of the play with his friends, as a vehicle for he himself to play the Prince. Ten years later he played the part in a modern-dress studio production: his Hamlet, he recalled, was ‘intense, self-absorbed, emotional and entirely unpoetic, short on humour and theatricality, and high on anguish’. His third attempt was in this Royal Shakespeare Company UK touring version, directed by Roger Michell in 1987.

Franks found the mountains of criticism, stage history and descriptions of past productions hard to handle. ‘Every so often, in rehearsals, in the middle of the night or, most

inconveniently of all, waiting to go on for my first entrance, the clouds methought would open and show all this accumulated garbage ready to drop upon me.' He reminded himself that 'no one can say everything about Hamlet, so don't try. Everyone identifies with him, and so should you – don't try to comment. There are as many Hamlets as there are people – what is unique about yours is that you are you.'

When he first met Michell they avoided questions of interpretation or definition. 'We skirted around the usual ones – What is the play saying? Who is Hamlet? Is his madness real or feigned? – and discarded them, in favour of a detailed and organic approach, a mining of the text, and a discussion of particular relationships.' Michell's aim was to create a fast, witty playing style, with a lot of direct address to the audience. It was to be played on a carpet with a minimal set, Jacobean costumes, and modern props.

In rehearsal the company initially sat on the flat roof of Sadler's Wells theatre, discussing textual variants and punctuation problems, then moved to the rehearsal room for group work and improvisation. The actors filled in their own picture of their characters' past history or inner life. It was an exercise Franks found especially fruitful for Hamlet's relationship with the Ghost, played by Bob Goody, a tall, thin actor. 'He was creating a crippled, agonised, asthmatic Ghost, doubled up with pain and begging for revenge with, as it were, his last gasp. I had never thought of the part like this, yet suddenly it seemed to make perfect sense....To see a strong, authoritative father brought so low and desperate provoked a far deeper unease and guilty responsibility than a mighty armed *commendatore* figure would have done.'

In parallel with work on individual speeches and long solo calls with Michell, it was decided to run the play in chunks earlier than usual, to give Franks an opportunity to chart Hamlet's development, and get an idea of the energy required. 'Quite apart from giving me a great deal of exercise and much to lose sleep over,' Franks recalled, 'these early runs gave me two major objectives: speed of thought and delivery, and finding and holding on to Hamlet's wit.'

Michell told him he wanted *Hamlet* to have more laughs than *The Comedy of Errors*, which the company was then touring. 'While we never quite achieved that, the remark was not lightly meant,' Franks said. 'Hamlet is the only one of Shakespeare's tragic heroes who possesses a sense of humour. Exploring his wit, its quality and seriousness, yielded huge rewards....His wit is never comfortable, and seldom gentle....In his obsessive questioning of motive and morality Hamlet is cruel to everyone, and we tried not to shirk this....The cruelty he metes out to Ophelia is, and should be, disgusting. What saves him from alienating the audience's sympathy entirely should be their appreciation of his inner pain, and their realisation that the person who comes in for the fiercest criticism is Hamlet himself.'

Looking back, Franks mused on the effect of playing this most complex yet rewarding role. 'Sometimes it is as if you are haunted, sometimes you feel that you are in possession of something so precious that you are the luckiest person in the world, and sometimes it is like having a tumour. The experience of *not* playing it is just the same: something has been cut away, perhaps something dangerous and ugly. But something of ineffable value has been lost as well, and after a while you begin to doubt whether you ever had it at all.'

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Other Hamlets during the decade included Steven Berkoff (1980), who directed himself, the Roundhouse, Camden; Edward Fox (1983), directed by Terry Palmer, Young Vic; Matthew Marsh (1985), directed by David Thacker, Young Vic; David Threlfall (1986), directed by Richard Williams, Oxford Playhouse; Hilton McRae (1983), directed by Christopher Fettes, Ashcroft, Croydon; Simon Cadell (1984), directed by Peter Farago, Birmingham Rep; Robert Lindsay (1983), directed by Braham Murray, Royal Exchange, Manchester; Tim McInnerny (1985), directed by Cicely Berry, Cottesloe, and UK tour of schools and colleges; Madeline Bellamy (1986), directed by Ian Thompson, Young Vic; Douglas Hodge (1986), directed by John Adams, Octagon, Bolton.