

The 1990s

Timothy Walker – Alan Rickman – Russell Boulter – Damian Lewis – Richard McCabe

Declan Donnellan had tried to stage *Hamlet* before, but without success. With his company Cheek by Jowl he had spent time in Turkey on a version set in the Ottoman Empire, but it was eventually considered too politically dangerous to stage. In Chile the same problem arose, when the authorities realised the play had explosive political qualities, and the production was scrapped. In 1989 Donnellan's concern was that the company could not afford the rehearsal time to stage a play of the length of *Hamlet*. But the following year he put together a touring production starring Timothy Walker, who had played Prospero for the company; Donnellan described him as 'a wonderful actor with piercing intelligence and an ever-growing range'.

This was Cheek by Jowl's seventh Shakespeare play. The company was founded in 1981 by director Donnellan and designer Nick Ormerod, who had by now established a strong reputation for inventive, innovative and entertaining productions; it was one of the first companies to introduce colour-blind casting.

As Donnellan put it: 'In order to entertain people we use classical texts, but I don't acknowledge any commitment to the tradition of Shakespearean production. My only commitment is to entertain the audience in the best way possible.' The productions were played on a bare set with a minimum of props, as Ormerod explained: 'Nothing more is needed really than the actor and, say, something to sit on – not even that sometimes....The essence of theatre is paring down to the essentials of what you actually need.'

In *Hamlet* the pair made use of two typical devices. The first was 'headlining', or overlapping scenes: before the final line of a scene, the first line of the next one is spoken, to keep the momentum going, and avoid a loss of tension while scene changes are made. The second was to have the full company on stage at the start. They stood on a raised platform watching the opening scene on the battlements, making it clear that they were actors staging a play.

'It is important that theatre is both sacred and vulgar' is one of Donnellan's maxims, and the latter quality was in evidence in *Hamlet*. Walker, who adopted the triple-peaked hairstyle of an old variety performer, dropped his trousers in front of Cathryn Bradshaw's Ophelia, made farting noises at Peter Needham's Polonius, and when Scott Cherry's Claudius asked him where Polonius' body was, he lifted his nightgown, squatted, and pretended to defecate as he said: 'Seek him in the other place.'

Cheek by Jowl productions often divided the critics, and *Hamlet* was no exception. 'Awe-inspiring and unforgettable' said the *Daily Mail*, while the *Guardian* stated: 'Raw pain comes like hammer blows. This is great acting.' But Walker's performance prompted Charles Spencer to label him 'one of the most tiresome Hamlets I have ever endured'.

After touring the UK the production visited Tokyo, Kyoto, Athens and Hong Kong.

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In 1992 Alan Rickman played Hamlet at the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith, directed by the Georgian director Robert Sturua, who was working with an English cast. The designer Giorgi Meskhishvili put together a set depicting a police-state wasteland, with harsh white lights and metallic walkways, including a metal balcony across the rear of the stage which provided Hamlet with a useful observation area. But unlike other Eastern European directors, Sturua made no overt comment on the abuse of power in his own country, clothing the actors with a mixture of Edwardian, modern-dress and futuristic-looking costumes.

Famed for giving off an air of superiority and seductive menace, Rickman, now 46, was a threatening Prince as an avenger for his father's murder. But Paul Taylor later suggested that 'actors such as Alan Rickman have been incapable of transmitting Hamlet's lonely, mercurial genius'. At the time he argued he was 'much more at home with the playful, sardonic side of Hamlet than he is with the confused, raw passions. There is little sense of inner conflict in his performance, because it never properly convinces you that one part of Hamlet envies simpler natures and genuinely thirsts for his uncle's blood....And on his return from England his new mood of resignation seems indistinguishable from acute lethargy.'

Michael Billington felt Rickman was confined by the production: 'Sturua's heavy stress on spiritual malaise virtually deprives this Hamlet of any capacity for action. But he captured all of Hamlet's pensive sadness and capacity for self-mockery: proclaiming "Now could I drink hot blood", he clamped a sword between his teeth, as if sending up his own rhetoric.' Charles Spencer, however, was appalled: 'Rickman's Hamlet, played like a heavily tranquillised psychiatric patient, clutching his head like an advert for painkillers, and delivering the verse in a voice drained of expression, was in the same league of awfulness as Peter O'Toole's Macbeth....There is hardly a trace of Hamlet's wit and vitality, and though his sexual disgust in the harrowing, physically violent scenes with Ophelia and Gertrude is strongly presented, these are virtually the only moments when the actor rouses himself from his torpor.'

There were several startling touches. Michael Byrne played an unsettling, shaven-headed, sinister Polonius, who displayed a paranoid distrust of Hamlet's love for his daughter. Geraldine McEwan's Gertrude descended into a state of madness seemingly more extreme than that displayed by Julia Forbes' Ophelia. And Daniel York's thuggish Fortinbras took the crown up at the end, then negligently threw it away, prompting John Peter to conclude that 'Denmark seems not a prison, but an unsuccessful rehabilitation centre'. Billington too was disappointed, observing that 'a specifically Georgian concept of *Hamlet* has been draped over a British cast like a cloak that does not fit its wearer'.

The production later toured the UK, and visited the Georgian capital Tbilisi.

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Although the Hollywood film actor Richard Dreyfuss had played Iago and Cassius in the theatre in America, he had never before directed, either on stage or screen. So when he was invited to stage *Hamlet* at the Birmingham Old Rep theatre in 1994, with a Birmingham

Repertory Company a mere two years old, and with just ten days to cast and rehearse the play, expectations were understandably not great.

Dreyfuss wanted to emphasise the Danish element in the story. 'I wanted to bring the blood back to the play,' he explained. His solution, as Peter Holland observed, was a *Hamlet* set in 'a barbaric society straight out of the sagas', with a design 'full of wassailing, drinking horns and serving wenches, rough-woven tunics and Anglo-Saxon necklaces. The resulting performance style seemed to be strenuously eschewing anything that might remotely suggest poetry, imagination or complication.'

For Charles Spencer it was nothing more than 'a dire, cod-medieval vanity production', while Paul Taylor labelled it 'stupefyingly dull' and criticised Dreyfuss' 'inept staging'. He thought thirty-year-old Russell Boulter 'the most stolid, level-headed Hamlet I've yet seen; of the Prince's lonely speculative intellect you get no inkling', while Spencer likened him to 'a blokeish member of the Wittenberg University rugby team'.

Taylor was also sharply critical of the Ghost's behaviour: 'Encased in armour from top to toe, the poor actor impersonating the deceased king has to mime to the pre-recorded voice of Steven Berkoff – and Kenneth Williams himself could not have elongated more elastically his "Oh, horrible" lines. Matching the action to the strangulated word, the actor essays some pelvic thrusts during the "luxury and damned incest" bit, so that far from hailing from the afterlife, this apparition seems to have been summoned from some Dial-A-Pervert agency.'

Dreyfuss controversially cut the ending of the play, in which Fortinbras takes charge. Instead, Taylor wrote, 'the lights die, in corny cinematic close-up style, after Horatio's speech "Good night, sweet Prince/ And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest"'. This and other elements led Holland to observe: 'The production was a historical curiosity which registered the huge gulf between film and theatre.'

Looking back, Dreyfuss was severely critical of his directing. 'I was the director I always hated. I did everything wrong. I moved people around physically, I gave them line readings, and I insisted they play a certain style.' Susan Hampshire, cast as Gertrude, walked out during rehearsals, while another actor said on opening night: 'I've never had such a distinct disagreement between me and the director about a character that I was playing.'

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Plays in London's Regent's Park Open Air Theatre are scheduled to run for two and a quarter hours maximum. So when Tim Pigott-Smith staged *Hamlet* there in 1994, his first task was to cut the text. 'The play is long and sometimes garrulous, so some of that task was easy,' he explained, 'but the final pruning was agonising.' He felt 'the park would favour the romantic side of the play, so the politics went'. He also 'tried to recapture some of the thriller element that the revenge play held for Elizabethan audiences'. Despite his best intentions, the play ran half an hour longer than the time-limit.

This was only the second time the play had been performed in the theatre's sixty-year history; the first had been Robert Atkins' 1958 production, with Bernard Brown playing the Prince. The new Hamlet was 23-year-old Damian Lewis: just a year out of drama school, he had already played Romeo at the Birmingham Rep. For the auditions actors had to prove they had the vocal power to reach the back of the open-air auditorium. According to Pigott-Smith, Lewis was the only one to pass the test.

Pigott-Smith suggested that 'there is currently no theatre in London which reproduces so closely as Regent's Park the conditions in which the play was originally performed'. Tanya McCallin's sheet-metal, steel-wall set had the Danish court imagined as a place of harsh curves. Predictably, there were difficulties with the fact that the early scenes, especially those with the Ghost, had to be played in daylight.

Paul Taylor commended Lewis' precocious bravura and intensely alive stage presence: 'To Hamlet's antic disposition he brings a splendidly intimidating levity which can shade into the potent expression of spiritual disgust....It's a performance that encompasses not only broad comedy, but also excellent signalling of Hamlet's inner plight.' Ian Shuttleworth singled out the family relationship of Polonius, Ophelia and Laertes as 'one of the production's major strengths. Guy Burgess and Rebecca Egan create an easy and intimate brother-sister bond, while David Collings (although still on the young side) is a well-meaning but uncomprehending father.'

In a programme note Pigott-Smith wrote: 'All of us have striven to ensure that although some of the "limbs and outward flourishes" of the play have had to go, there is enough left to convey "the heart of its mystery"'.

In 1995 Damian Lewis played Laertes to Ralph Fiennes' Hamlet at the Hackney Empire.

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Unlike opera singers, Shakespearean actors rarely get a chance to appear twice in the same production. Yet when a run is finished they may continue to ponder on certain scenes or lines, trying to resolve problems they were unable to solve. One who relished such an opportunity was Richard McCabe, who played Hamlet in Bill Alexander's 1998 staging at the Birmingham Rep, and two years later repeated the role in the same production in the same theatre, before setting out on a UK tour.

Talking of his second attempt, he observed: 'Generally when you finish a show you'll be sitting there in the bath, and thinking, "Ah, that's how I should have done it!" Last time we were not entirely satisfied with the nunnery scene, which is a notoriously difficult scene to do. Now it's so much better. And I'm playing the whole "To be or not to be" speech differently this time.'

McCabe has become known especially for comic Shakespearean roles such as Puck, Autolycus, Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida*, and Apemantus in *Timon of Athens*, although

he has also played King John and Iago. Some critics of his first Hamlet accused him of being too humorous with the part, a criticism that irritated him. 'That's all in Shakespeare, it's there, that's what he wrote. Shakespeare puts the humour in. It really annoys me that, because it's a tragedy, people think it's going to be three and a half hours of unremitting gloom.

Shakespeare's plays encompass the whole world. It's a very Victorian idea to think of Hamlet as misery. It's a stonking good revenge tragedy, with some great poetry.'

Aged 40 when he tackled the role for the second time, he made the case for having a Hamlet of a relatively advanced age, unusual in the modern era, to make the journey from confused adolescent to a man of resolution. 'It's technically a very challenging role,' he argued. 'It's about observing all the rules of verse-speaking, but not letting them show. These are not things you can get in your early twenties. And you also need emotional experience of life to make the character's journey.'

His disturbing but engaging Hamlet was widely praised. Charles Spencer stated: 'This excellent, undervalued actor with the face of a dissolute cherub played a Hamlet who at times burst into tears of sheer exhaustion and despair, before finally battling through to a kind of peace.' James Hopkin also admired his playing: 'Richard McCabe as Hamlet worries his way from distemper to despair with a boyish petulance, dancing his diseased wit around the others' incredulity. It's a strong performance, full of wicked smiles and tremulous gestures, and one that rejuvenates the linguistic felicity of all the familiar lines.'

Alexander cut Fortinbras and the Norwegian politics, which with additional small cuts – and the omission of the 'How all occasions' soliloquy – brought the play in at three and a half hours. One original touch came with 'To be or not to be', which McCabe spoke directly to the audience from the top of a library step-ladder, with Ophelia listening below him; she then climbed up the steps to give him back his 'remembrances'. The critics praised the production: Hopkin deemed it 'one that approaches the play and its formidable heritage with a laudable, fresh-faced simplicity', while Paul Taylor called it a 'gripping and unsettling production... a sweeping, urgent account of the tragedy'.

Like many actors before him, McCabe admitted to finding the part exhausting: 'Hamlet plumbs the depths of your emotional life,' he said. 'Going into this place is not always very comfortable. I found that both I and Rakie Ayola, who plays Ophelia, would come off stage completely drained, and just be left staring at one another with nothing to say. The play does leave a residue that you have to shake off.'

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Other Hamlets during the decade included Ian Glen (1990), directed by Paul Unwin, Bristol Old Vic; Ruth Mitchell (1992), for the all-female company Roaring Girls, directed by Sue Parrish, Croydon Warehouse; Jason Riddington (1994), directed by Rob Swinton, Stafford Festival; Ian Pepperell (1996), directed by John Retallack and Karl James, Oxford Stage Company tour; Stephen Mapes (1996), directed by Chris Honer, Library, Manchester; Michael Maloney (1996), directed by Philip Franks, Greenwich; Jamie Glover (1996), a

family affair directed by his father Julian Glover, who played the Ghost, with his mother Isla Blair as Gertrude, Norwich Playhouse; Colin Tierney (1999), directed by Gemma Bodinetz, Bristol Old Vic.