

## The 2000s

### *Toby Stephens – Ed Stoppard*

When Toby Stephens opened as Hamlet in Michael Boyd's 2004 production at Stratford, his performance was greeted with a tepid critical response, and by Charles Spencer with an extremely negative one: 'Stephens is excellent at sardonic sarcasm, and conveying Hamlet's sexual disgust, but there is little sense of the character's wit, probing intelligence or troubled soul.' On the soliloquies he wrote: 'His delivery is rhetorical, even orotund. There is no feeling that the words are being fresh-minted, just a hollowly impressive, actorish rumble that often obscures rather than illuminates the meaning.... This is, in short, a dismayingly superficial reading.'

Yet several months later, when the production moved to the Albery in London, Spencer observed a 'thrilling transformation', stating: 'Stephens' performance has grown magnificently in both depth and stature.... There is now an extraordinary rawness about his sweet Prince.... He plumbs new emotional depths.... In the soliloquies, presented with less orotund rhetoric and far greater clarity and depth, you encounter a truly noble, searching mind, and in the great last act there is a moving sense of acceptance as he stares mortality in the face.'

Significantly, since the Stratford opening Boyd had never stopped rehearsing the company. As he explained, he saw the play 'being driven by the possible actions of an usurped Prince in a dangerous court, rather than by a "given" of Hamlet's state of mind. We chose to celebrate Hamlet's brilliant control of language under extreme pressure rather than relax into a state of introspection. This felt more active, true and exciting. Toby was able to give more space to the lyrical wonder in Hamlet's thought, without losing the prevailing sense of danger.'

Boyd wanted to create a dark political thriller, and gave it an Elizabethan/Jacobean setting, an Elsinore marked by a repressive new regime and a very visible surveillance network. His production emphasised the political, social and religious contexts within which Shakespeare wrote his play. These included the religious conflicts dividing the nation. He had been influenced by Stephen Greenblatt's recent book *Hamlet in Purgatory*, which had the premiss: 'A young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost.' Boyd focussed on this dilemma, arguing: 'There has been a political and intellectual revolution, and then Hamlet re-encounters the past in the shape of his father's spirit, and has to negotiate with it.'

The purgatorial element was vividly expressed through the appearance and behaviour of the Ghost, played by Greg Hicks. Instead of the usual stern fatherly figure, he was spectral, painted deathly white, near-naked, with hollow red sockets for eyes. Entering along a gangway through the middle of the auditorium, he moved very slowly, half bent, scraping a giant sword along the metal floor in a frightening manner. When he left the stage a trapdoor opened to reveal an intense red light, and he fell face forward into the pit.

Hicks, who also played the Player King and the First Gravedigger, suggested it was ‘a great treble, because there are resonances of Hamlet’s father in each of these roles, especially the Gravedigger’. Boyd also asked his Ophelia, Meg Fraser, to double as the Second Gravedigger: ‘I thought there was something very moving in the fact that, in that benign scene, Hamlet was with people who loved him: his father and Ophelia.’ It also meant Ophelia dug her own grave, which prompted the actress to wear the same make-up for both parts, ‘because it’s about making connections rather than being naturalistic’. So Hamlet was continually haunted throughout the action.

Boyd set up a long rehearsal period, to enable his actors to concentrate on Shakespeare's verse, and try out different ways of interpreting speeches which some audiences could recite *verbatim*. One bold idea that emerged was to move ‘To be or not to be’ to immediately before ‘Lights, lights, lights’ as Claudius reacts to the play-within-the-play. ‘I flirted with transposing it as a “suicide bomber” speech,’ Boyd explained, ‘with the whole court frozen as Hamlet advanced slowly on Claudius, surrounded by his guards. It worked as a thrilling dramatisation of the difficulty of direct action, but it pushed the speech’s vulnerability out the door, so we restored it to the moment when Hamlet meets Ophelia.’

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Having given sixty performances of Hamlet in 2005, directed by Stephen Unwin for a UK tour by the English Touring Theatre (ETT), Ed Stoppard spoke candidly about the prospect of bringing his interpretation to the New Ambassador's in the West End. 'I'm terrified,' he admitted. 'It's a bit like being a soldier in the first world war. I've just survived three months at Ypres, which was going on tour, but now I don't really want to go to the Somme.' Initially he turned down the transfer, but his agent persuaded him to think again. Now he was pleased to be returning to the role, 'but not without a healthy dose of fear'.

Four years earlier he had said he would rather play Rosencrantz or Guildenstern than Hamlet. ‘At the time I thought I probably couldn’t play Hamlet,’ he said. ‘I was wet behind the ears, and didn’t have the life experience or the self-belief – not that I’m flooded with the stuff now, but I’ve got a bit more than I had four years ago.’ Aged 31, he was unable to resist a role that, he suggested, ‘almost requires two Hamlets: the vulnerable, febrile boy and the mature man’.

Stephen Unwin, who was also running the ETT, and had previously directed Alan Cumming in the role in 1993, reflected on Stoppard’s suitability for the part. ‘He brings great intelligence to it, which is a hard thing to act. He has sheer intellectual brain-power, which is agile, nimble, light-footed; and he has a great facility for language. During the tour I felt he gained a new depth in the last quarter of the play, which had a kind of spirituality.’

The critics admired his performance. Charles Spencer thought it superb: ‘There have been madder Hamlets, more anguished Hamlets, but Stoppard brings a winning intelligence, wit and sympathetic sensibility to the role. During the soliloquies he seems genuinely to take the audience into his confidence, and he illuminates the knotty language with revealing clarity, so

that you often seem to be hearing even the most familiar lines afresh. More than on tour, he beautifully captures the character's capacity for friendship and his growing spirituality.' Lyn Gardner considered his performance 'unpretentious and intelligent. It has integrity. Some of his soliloquies are beautifully handled, giving the sense of a man in argument with himself, staring deep into his very soul.' Michael Billington was generally positive, but decided 'Stoppard's chief drawback is his irredeemable sanity: he is hardly the figure whom Ophelia claims to be "blasted with ecstasy".'

Spencer's praise extended to Unwin's staging: 'What a relief it is to find a production unashamedly traditional, in which both director and cast seem intent on putting the play first rather than drawing flashy attention to their own contributions. The staging is simple to the point of austerity, with shafts of light breaking through the darkness of an Elsinore in which all the characters wear Jacobean dress, and the set design is minimal. You feel you have seen Shakespeare's play, rather than someone else's opinion of Shakespeare's play. For the most part the verse-speaking is exemplary, and you have the satisfying feeling that you are seeing the play steadily, and seeing it whole. I have no doubt some commentators will find the show dull. What they will really be saying is they find Shakespeare dull unless he is pepped up with modern tricks.'

Spencer was correct: there was considerable negative criticism along those lines. According to Alastair Macaulay, 'the whole thing is juiceless and fatally contained'; for Nicholas de Jongh it was an 'anaemic, surprisingly vacuous production'. Billington described it as 'set-text Shakespeare shrouded in decent dullness' and 'a middle-of-the-road, Jacobean-costumed version that has nothing fresh to say about the play'.

Unwin defended the straightforwardness and clarity of his staging, seeing it as fundamental to the ETT's aim 'to bring quality theatre to as many people as possible throughout the country'. It was one of the main reasons why he made cuts, particularly to the more obscure passages: 'If there were things I didn't understand on a third reading, why should I expect the audience to get them on a first hearing?' In preparing a version for the actors he cut the stage directions and most of the punctuation. 'I believe we should discover Shakespeare's dramatic demands from his words, not from what modern editors think.'

He believed much of the appeal of the play comes from the fact that it is philosophically open-ended. 'Its issues are discussed but never resolved, which is one reason for its endless popularity with thinking readers and spectators. The action brings us face to face with what we feel to be true in our deepest hearts, but it never points morals, or pre-empts our further, private thoughts. This, coupled with Hamlet's apparent honesty about the workings of his mind and soul, make him seem a person of almost infinite complexity and possibility.'

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Other Hamlets during the decade included Christopher Eccleston (2002), directed by Ian Brown, West Yorkshire Playhouse; Tobias Menzies (2005), directed by Rupert Goold, Royal

and Derngate, Northampton; Joseph Millson (2008), directed by Bill Buckhurst, Stafford Castle.