

The 2010s

John Simm – Joshua McGuire – Ladi Emeruwa/Naeem Hayat

A week before opening at the Sheffield Crucible in 2010, John Simm expressed his fears about tackling Hamlet: 'I get terrified doing theatre. And right now it's like being at the base camp of Mount Everest thinking, Oh hell, here we go.' Better known for his television work, most notably *Life on Mars*, and with only two stage roles in the last 14 years, his anxiety was understandable, especially as at the age of 40 this was his Shakespearean debut.

Although he had a year to prepare, he kept a copy of the play with him all the time, and never stopped reading it, so that it seeped into him. He underlined the challenge he faced: 'The thing most often said about Hamlet is that you don't play him, he plays you. I didn't really understand what that meant until I started to do it. You have to try not to approach him as a "character". You get to play the greatest role ever written, but you've also got to be yourself while you're doing it. That, to me, is what makes it so terrifying and so perfect.'

Director Paul Miller described the setting for his production as 'timeless but vaguely nineteenth-century Eastern European', with swords and winter coats; Tom Scutt's split-level minimalist design for the Crucible's large thrust stage featured silver-birch trunks, at times sprinkled with snow, and Winter-Palace-style windows, evoking a Russian feel. The production gained a mostly lukewarm response, with review comments such as 'tidy and workmanlike', 'blandly efficient', 'robustly traditional' and 'slow-moving'.

Opinions about Simm's surprisingly youthful-looking and un-regal Prince were mostly positive. Michael Billington thought it 'a fine, intelligent, incisively spoken performance....He makes a tense, wiry, permanently troubled figure, with a capacity for swift thought and a voice that cuts through rhetoric like a razor through stubble.' Lynne Walker was also approving: 'Simm knows how to convey an awkward interior life with ease, to play the tormented loner with a quietly biting, ironic wit.' And for Velda Harris: 'His edgy, mercurial performance runs a gamut of emotions, from outrage and anger (directed at himself, as well as at Claudius and Gertrude) to deep melancholy in his musings on life, death, love and betrayal.'

Others were more critical. Libby Purves argued that 'like many before him Simm wrestles with the difficulty of conveying that this is indeed a noble mind overthrown', while Ron Simpson wrote: 'His is a clear reading, but he lacks magnetism and, like all the characters in this production, has no hinterland.' Charles Spencer was more severe, stating: 'There is remarkably little inwardness, and throughout the show no impression at all of the spiritual growth that has always struck me as the play's most moving feature. All Simm exudes at the end is a resigned fatalism. The great Hamlets find much more than that.'

Simm's handling of the soliloquies also provoked mixed views. Walker admired his delivery: 'What a relief to hear such clear, unforced verse-speaking – to be able to appreciate the words as well as the rhythm – and to hear the soliloquies delivered, as the essential pillars to the

structure that they are, without self-conscious artfulness.’ Purves noted that ‘he travels through the great soliloquies with intelligence and emotional truth’, while Harris suggested: ‘He takes the whole sweep of the audience into his confidence, restlessly turning his head from one side to the other, making eye contact with individuals, drawing us into his thoughts and emotions.’

Some critics were less than impressed. In Kate Bassett’s view: ‘His philosophical soliloquies – delivered to the audience, holding a book – hover between heartfelt confession and mini-lecture.’ Ian Shuttleworth complained of ‘his use of an artificial, over-articulated Actorly Voice. Clarity is one thing, but an antique over-crispness is distracting in its unnaturalness.’ Charles Spencer was once again highly critical: ‘The soliloquies, in which we ought to feel that we are eavesdropping on the private thoughts of a turbulent troubled mind, are delivered as though Simm were addressing a public meeting.’

After the run ended Simm reflected: ‘It was physically and mentally exhausting. I lost about a stone doing it. Yet I wanted to take a month off and do it again afterwards. It’s undoubtedly the greatest role an actor can play.’

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Dominic Dromgoole’s speeded-up, pared-down 2011 production of *Hamlet* for a Globe touring company was tailored to fit a variety of indoor and outdoor spaces in the UK and Europe during its four-month tour. Using a combination of the two Quartos and the Folio, Dromgoole, the Globe’s artistic director, created a heavily cut and re-ordered version, which he suggested had ‘a robust energy and a winning ability to get on with it’.

Lasting well under three hours, it made use of a simple stage with minimal scenery. Its eight actor-musicians became travelling players, who entered singing a folk-song and changed from street clothes into simple costumes, then sat visibly on the stage when not performing. Almost all of them played multiple roles: Simon Armstrong, for instance, played the Ghost, Claudius and the Player King.

Hamlet was 24-year-old Joshua McGuire, welcomed by many for his comparative youth in contrast to certain starrer but older recent Hamlets. ‘It is intensely touching to have a Hamlet as young, unjaded and open-hearted,’ stated Paul Taylor. Playing him as an emotionally damaged teenager, McGuire was strong on Hamlet’s wild humour, rather than his melancholy. ‘What some people forget,’ he said, ‘is that the Hamlet we see in the play is almost a different person to how everyone else knows him. He doesn’t skulk around the castle, for years he’s been the life and soul of the party, and he has had great times at Wittenberg.’

The critics mostly warmed to his performance. ‘McGuire may not be the subtlest of Hamlets, but he’s one who young audiences can embrace,’ Lyn Gardner wrote. ‘This Hamlet is direct and frank. He’s not a great thinker, he lacks introspection, but he has a teenage impetuosity.’ Charles Spencer held a similar view: ‘Joshua McGuire is a young, touchingly vulnerable

Hamlet, and delivers the soliloquies with freshness and spontaneity. But he flashes too many ingratiating grins at the audience, and needs to find more pain and anguish in the role.’ Taylor admired his ‘great chutzpah and elan in a thrilling performance...his verse-speaking is often deeply thoughtful, and can more than flirt with a filigree delicacy’.

Discussing the production’s speed and humour, McGuire stressed the need to keep audiences entertained. ‘They bring a preconceived idea of the play. They come to see *Hamlet*, they expect to be bored for four hours, and then they leave and say it’s the best thing they’ve seen in the theatre, ever. But actually they were there out of duty, because it’s *Hamlet* and you say *Hamlet* was good. So our job in the first act is to smash those preconceived ideas.’

During the European leg of the tour the company had many challenges. From a palace in Austria near the border of Slovakia, McGuire wrote home: ‘The sound in the venue isn’t too great, so we have to try and be precise in everything we say, partly because of the acoustic, but also the language barrier. You can’t mumble, you have to be precise, not clipped, and have real intention.’ But from Neuss in Germany he praised the audience reaction: ‘All the European audiences have been really lovely, attentive, appreciative. It puts us to shame, because they are so multilingual; English is either their second or third language. Obviously Shakespeare is even more knotted than normal everyday speech, so it’s very impressive.’

The production ended the tour at Elsinore, and was revived the following year, co-directed by Bill Buckhurst and Dominic Dromgoole, this time also visiting America and Mexico.

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‘Globe to Globe Hamlet was created with the aim of performing *Hamlet* to as many people as possible, in as diverse a range of places as possible. The central principle of the tour is that Shakespeare can entertain and speak to anyone, no matter where they are on earth; and that no country or people are not better off for the lively presence of *Hamlet*.’

Thus Dominic Dromgoole, on his Thameside theatre’s extraordinary adventure. All the world was literally their stage when a company of twelve actors spent two years touring *Hamlet*. Starting on Shakespeare’s birthday in 2014, they travelled 186,000 miles, playing on their simple, fit-up stage in 197 countries, and giving 293 performances in 202 venues. It was an astonishing achievement.

The impressively diverse venues included ancient amphitheatres, beaches, refugee camps – including the Calais ‘Jungle’ – and church halls. They performed at the United Nations in New York, and were the first mixed-sex company to play in Saudi Arabia. Their largest audience was in Sudan, with 3,500 people watching and another 1,500 trying to get in. Ironically, the audience at Wittenberg was disappointingly small.

Despite sandstorms, bus breakdowns, lost props and costumes, and other obstacles, the company never had to cancel a performance. They often needed to improvise: when their props and costumes failed to make it to the Pacific Islands they used billiard cues as swords; when their bus broke down in Guinea-Bissau they hitched a ride in a hearse; when the lights

failed during a performance in Ruanda, they moved the set outside and continued there. There were other problems, such as the insistence by a traffic policeman in a Cameroon village that he sit at a desk on stage throughout the performance.

The production was jointly directed by Dominic Dromgoole and Bill Buckhurst. They used the first Quarto, which is half the length of the Folio, and so more congenial for touring. The company was suitably diverse: the role of Hamlet was shared between Ladi Emeruwa and Naeem Hayat. Each performance was played by eight actors, which meant lots of doubling, with some actors having to learn and play as many as twelve supporting roles. Sometimes Horatio had to be female, while in Djibouti one actor played both Polonius and Claudius.

According to producer Tom Bird, who visited several of the locations, ‘there was sometimes pressure to change the show for political or cultural reasons. It was important that we resisted that where possible, while remaining sensitive to such concerns. Sometimes the situation turned out not to be true: in Saudi Arabia we were told that girls shouldn’t go on stage, but they did so when we played at a university, and no one objected.’ Many of the performances were free. ‘The richer countries paid for the poorer ones: Brazil paid for Bolivia, and so on.’

While they chose for security or health reasons not to enter a few countries – including Yemen, Libya, South Sudan, Jordan and the Central African Republic – only North Korea and Syria actually refused them entry. In the case of Syria, they performed in the Zaatari refugee camp on the Jordanian border to an entirely Syrian audience of two hundred refugees. Staging the play in the Calais ‘Jungle’ came about because charity workers there told them that as well as lacking food and shelter, the refugees had to fight great boredom, and two hours watching a show would help them to alleviate it.

The penultimate location was Elsinore, where they played to an audience which included the Queen of Denmark. Back at the Globe they put on a special performance for Barack Obama before their final show, which marked Shakespeare’s birthday and the four-hundredth anniversary of his death. Dominic Dromgoole summed up the experience: ‘Every date has revealed and extended the astonishing reach of Shakespeare’s very human genius. Long may *Hamlet* wander the earth.’

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Other Hamlets during the decade included Dharmesh Patel (2010), a RSC schools’ production directed by Tarrell Alvin McCraney; Jonny McPherson (2014), directed for The Faction Ensemble by Mark Leipacher, New Diarama, London; Alan Mahon (2016), directed by Andrew Hilton, Tobacco Factory, Bristol; Chris Clynes (2016), directed by Diane Vucane, Rose Playhouse, London; Raphael Sowole (2016), UK tour directed by Jeffery Kissoon for Tara Arts; Nicholas Limm (2016), a First Quarto production directed by Chris Bennion, Cockpit, London; Tom Hiddleston (2017), directed by Kenneth Branagh, Jerwood Vanbrugh; Benet Brandreth (2017), a three-actor production featuring Brandreth’s wife Kosha Engler and his father Gyles Brandreth, directed by Simon Evans and David Aula, Park, London;

David Ricardo-Pearce (2018), directed by David Thacker, Octagon, Bolton; Michelle Terry (2018), directed by Federay Holmes and Elle While, Shakespeare's Globe, Southwark.