

SECTION X:

SEVENTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT *HAMLET*

[NOTE: On December 4, 1992, the Languages of Performance Institute attended the Michael Kahn's production of *Hamlet* at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. Here are reproduced seventeen reviews of the performance, which should give readers some idea of the varieties of response the play generated. A synthesized version of these reviews, compiled and edited by Ann Cook, is forthcoming in *Cahiers Elizabethains*.]

Sally Banes:

Michael Kahn's *Hamlet* at the Shakespeare Theatre is an intimate, personalized one. Although the opening sets the scene for large-scale political mayhem, and the requisite bodies are strewn across the stage at the end, there's no Fortinbras. Hamlet sits twice on the throne that should be his (just on the lines about his advancement and ambition), but his struggle with Claudius for the kingship is nearly indiscernible. Through both cuts in the text and the staging itself, this production is more a family affair than a tragedy of state.

The play opens with ominous music--a percussive clash of metal and distant bells. Searchlights slash the pitch-dark fog at odd angles. On the upper left, a platform is "discovered." Here the soldiers man their post, and the ghost repeatedly appears. (And here, later, Hamlet will soliloquize and Claudius will pray.) This first scene is urgent, gloomy, even terrifying. Horatio, with his lantern, supplies the only ray of light and reason, but even he is drawn into this world of unsettled spirits. With a clap of thunder and a bolt of lightning, nature itself seems to ratify his conclusion that the ghost signals "some strange eruption in our state." It's not just the ghost, but preparations for war that make men whisper and tremble here. But this theme soon practically disappears.

The lights brighten to reveal a silver column, green marble floor, and a red ramp; a swag of purple fabric and a chandelier descend, and we are instantly at court. The nobles are dressed in vaguely Elizabethan costumes and comport themselves ceremoniously (though Claudius is already tipping). But Hamlet, dressed in a black 19th-century riding habit, striding across the stage, up the spiral staircase, and onto the upper level, almost seems like a character from another play. He drops a satchel and some books down below, frightening his mother and her ladies, and suggesting that his madness has already begun. Yet Tom Hulce's Hamlet is a very robust madman and a surprisingly energetic, comic vacillator.

Overall, not only Hamlet's character, but the play as a whole suffers from some of the textual cuts and unclear directing choices. Motivations are set up, only to be lost. Gertrude and Claudius, for instance, repeatedly embrace and kiss in public. So when Hamlet mentions his mother's lust, he only seems a little more shocked by these breaches of etiquette than the courtiers. The set, too, is ambiguous. Its flimsiness, instability (the thrones change for every court scene), and lack of stylistic coherence may have been intended to say something about the state of Denmark, but if so, the message comes through rather weakly.

To be sure, there are memorable images. In one, Hamlet clings desperately to the ghost, as substantial as his own "too solid flesh," which drags him upstage into obscurity and, literally, prostration. Later, Hamlet does achieve a frenzy of violent revenge, but he can only vent it on the already dismembered body of the actors' puppets, strewn prophetically across stage. Francesca Buller, well-cast as the fragile, diminutive Ophelia, plays a convincingly raw mad scene that seems to erupt from her state of constant abuse--she is, perhaps, incestuously involved with Laertes; Hamlet throws her around; and her father spies on her and confiscates her love letters.

References to her lost virginity are echoed in the red lipstick she smears on the lap of her white petticoat. The players are spectacularly revealed, posing as if for a group portrait as the back walls of the castle roll apart; this suggests their role in disclosing the truth of the murder. At the end of the play, the same walls separate to swallow up Hamlet's body borne aloft, contrasting nicely with Hamlet's prone but floorhugging body in several previous scenes.

Steve Buhler:

Michael Kahn's Shakespeare Theatre production of *Hamlet* at the Lansburgh highlights both relation and struggle across generations and between genders. Tom Hulce offers us a nervy, nervous undergraduate Hamlet, while Ted van Griethuysen's Polonius is by turns stern and sentimental: these characters become the major antagonists in the first part of the play. In fact, this Polonius refuses to die before he tries to return Hamlet's fatal blow.

But these actors and adversaries don't have the strongest impact -- in part because the production's swift pacing and sure (even uncanny) sense of the play's humor convey a kind of lightness to this and other conflicts. The emotional weight is provided by a different surrogate parent-child relationship and its participants, Franchelle Stewart Dorn's Gertrude and Francesca Buller's Ophelia.

These are not, though, overly "emotional" portrayals. Stewart Dorn could be taking Carolyn Heilbrun's celebrated essay on "The Character of Hamlet's Mother" as her point of departure: her Gertrude is both clear-headed and strong-willed (in perhaps all the term's Shakespearean senses). She is Claudius' political partner, equally exulting at the success of their diplomatic scheme for dealing with young Fortinbras. She also loves Claudius passionately, knowing their marriage was "o'erhasty" but not in the least apologetic for it. Her calm self-acceptance and pragmatic, matter-of-fact view of the world are devastated first by her son's murder of Polonius, then by his accusations against her, and finally by Ophelia's death.

Buller as Ophelia is doomed from the outset -- she catches Gertrude's wedding bouquet and plays with flowers throughout her first scene with Laertes and Polonius, so her flower-strewn madness, death, and burial are immediately brought to mind. But she is not pathetic from the outset. While highly-strung, like her princely admirer, she is also high-spirited. Hints of incestuous attraction with Laertes are seen as reactions against their father's coldness. She offers Hamlet's letters to Polonius not in filial obedience, but as evidence against her father's cynical dismissal of the prince's sincerity. Buller was Cassandra-like in her prophetic authority throughout the mad scenes, again, much like her princely admirer. Prophecy, we should recall, is not just seeing the future, but facing the present and describing it accurately: to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature. Ophelia joins Gertrude here in the prophetic, and the playing, function.

No wonder, then, that Hulce's Hamlet has to look at Ophelia, as well as at his mother, before agreeing to remain at Elsinore. No wonder, then, that this Hamlet feels sharp betrayal at discovering Ophelia is a participant in her father's -- and his step-father's -- schemes. No wonder he returns, calling for her, after the "Nunnery scene" (moved, as is often done, to the middle of Act 2, scene 2), and retrieves the letters she has tried to return and he has hurled back at her. (He hands them to Polonius at the end of the scene, equating them with the "life" he would willingly part withal.) And no wonder that his philosophy-major high jinks -- with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and later (albeit condescendingly) with the Gravedigger -- are utterly dispelled by his realization that Ophelia is dead. "I loved Ophelia!"

becomes Hamlet's most resonant line in Hulce's portrayal, and Buller's performance and Kahn's direction go far toward justifying that emphasis.

Ann Christensen:

"I have borne and borne and borne"

"Just give me one thing/I can hold onto/To believe in this livin' is a hard way to go" --John Prine, "Angel from Montgomery."

David Kahn's production of *Hamlet* for The Shakespeare Theatre's 1992 season rounded up the usual arrases, rapiers, letters, and mousetraps to create a smooth & seamless piece of tragedy which left some theater-goers tugging for a snag. If the eternal question of this play is its hero's inaction -- his 5 Acts' worth of fobbing off the revenge of his father's murder -- Tom Hulce's Hamlet answers it in his (literally) touching response to his father's ghost. Whereas the swords of the night watchmen cannot touch it, Hamlet kneels and, at first, tentatively fingers the gloved hand; then, surprised that the figure returns the grasp, Hamlet fully embraces it/him, clinging desperately like the frightened child he is -- not frightened of ghosts, but of the life in the rotten state of Denmark. The ghost warns his son: "If thou hast nature in thee/Bear it not," and this could be the "snag" that made the show smooth rather than tragically textured: Hamlet has nature in him and is more manic than melancholy, more physical than philosophical. Besides, he snivels a lot.

Still, Hulce and the entire supporting cast bodied forth a varied image of a medieval kingdom. Claudius, played by Jack Ryland -- memorable for his role as Agamemnon in *Troilus and Cressida* -- was a strong presence on stage, while Ted van Griethuysen, another Greek warrior in *Troilus*, appeared here as the less oily, and more respectable royal advisor and father to Ophelia and Laertes. The young Turks of the show -- Laertes, Horatio, Hamlet himself, and even Roz. and Guild. -- in being young, they seem so. That is, the casting of old and young actors (only Gertrude significantly in between -- desired by both husband and son) highlighted the hope of a new world order in *Hamlet*. The blonde and bespectacled Horatio. -- as ill-dressed for, as he is ill-disposed to "ghostbusting" in 1.1 -- is ably played by Hank Stratton who makes of him a believable Ben Franklinesque student and trusted friend of the prince. Forced to speak a soldier's lines -- as he is in the last speech of the play, usually ascribed to Laertes -- of the invading (and avenging) army who is absent from this production, Horatio loses his charm (and ground). Ophelia and Gertrude visually and actorly combined to form Hamlet's "woman": Ophelia as scrawny and kid-like as Gertrude was ample and motherly.

The most effective and colorful facet of Kahn's production was the use of properties; objects stood out more richly for their traffic on Derek MacLane's streamlined and efficient set. The stage held a red warehouse ramp (right), a lone and battered silver pillar, a dark raised steel rampart (left), where character displaced character to carry the plot. For ex., the ghost first appeared aloft; then, his bratty son tossed down his satchel from there in a thwarted desire to leave court; next the honeymooning King and Queen used it as their love nest; finally the cell-like space housed Claud's fruitless prayer and Hamlet's Lady Macbethian hand-washing. The light-designer had both the natural and supernatural touch: The stage dimmed in foggy dawns as effectively as it crashed in color and light for the opening court scene (purple gauzey curtains, a chandelier) and the final, chaotic clash of weapons, goblets, confessions, and eulogies.

Within this world objects signified the recyclable quality of even human life at Elsinore, as they circulated and recirculated around court. Take Ophelia's flowers: they begin as Gertrude's wedding bouquet, folksily tossed to the younger female; they are reconstituted in her next scene as a toy: O. bedecks the head of Laertes with them, and teasingly swipes at him with them as Pol. shares w/him some "few precepts"; the flowers are then the victim of her game of "he loves me . . .," her mad tokens of remembrance, etc., and

finally reconstituted (the opposite of "funeral baked meats") at her own funeral. Similarly her love letters from Hamlet: much contested and contextualized, deconstructed, pocketed, locked, hurled, and regathered. Thrones, crowns, and actors, too, circulate in this tragic recyclable world, where objects demand more attention than does pathos.

Ann Jennalie Cook:

"The Play's the Thing"

For forty years now, I have faced productions of *Hamlet* with hope and suspicion, always longing for a performance that fulfilled the tragedy's potential yet fearing the play would (as usual) fail. As a high school student I saw Laurence Olivier's then-new film version, understanding scarcely a word and giggling at Jean Simmons' absurd flaxen braids. Since then, I have seen versions ranging from Richard Burton's self-indulgent vehicle on Broadway to amateur efforts to video presentations to the Royal Shakespeare Company's best attempts to master *Hamlet*'s complexities. With some trepidation, then, I made my way to the Lansburgh on Friday night for the Shakespeare Theatre's interpretation of this fiendishly difficult play. I came away pleased, impressed, excited, an impression shared by all in the sold-out house except for the gentleman two seats on my left, who promptly went to sleep.

Director Michael Kahn thoroughly understands the murky nature of Shakespeare's tragedy. The cloudy mists and dim lights in the opening scene serve not just as gimmicks but genuinely set the tone for a realm where doubt and uncertainty prevail. The reappearance of the mist in the second act at the point where Laertes' return, Ophelia's madness, and Claudius' growing ruthlessness threaten to overwhelm Denmark signals the final chaos which will sweep the stage. The costumes of Catherine Zuber and the set of Derek McLane also provide visual equivalents for a powerful yet rotten kingdom. Lush brocades, velvets, silks, satins, furs, iridescent taffetas, contrast starkly with the grim simplicity of a gray and black industrial catwalk on the left, a weathering gilt column on the right. Lavish gold embroiders robes, while massive ruffs, hoop-hipped skirts, and rich jewels emphasize the court's false veneer of stately decorum.

Such an appropriate setting would count for little were it not accompanied by first-rate ensemble playing. Happily, it is. During rehearsals chief attention focused on Tom Hulce, who said in interviews that after tackling Hamlet he might give up acting altogether. I hope he reconsiders. He gives us a compelling, lucid, energetic prince. Lacking the height or physical beauty of others who have attempted this role, he gives us an anti-hero, who sets himself against all the falsity surrounding him. His plain "inky suits" sport no adornment, his socks sag into utilitarian workboots, his shirt or undershirt or sweater show complete resistance to the dress of the court. Occasionally, especially when he first appears in his antic disposition, we expect to hear an Amadeus giggle, but otherwise Hulce completely submerges that unforgettable performance into the complexities of a beleaguered Hamlet.

Others in the cast measure up to the hero's high standard of acting. Ted van Griethuysen turns in a splendid Polonius, by turns authoritarian, scheming, insensitive. Wisely, the director has not cut the scene in which this ever suspicious father sends Reynaldo to Paris to spy on his son. The elaborate instructions echo the more famous "precepts" he offers Laertes at their parting, while the uncomfortably long silence when he forgets what he is saying suggests encroaching senility or Alzheimer's as a cause for his tedious, testy behavior. In the role of Gertrude, Franchelle Stewart Dorn provides a ripe, sensual Gertrude. Though her performance lacks subtlety, it does offer clarity. After the closet scene, in which Hamlet bids her to forsake Claudius' bed, she immediately seeks comfort in her husband's arms,

believing the prince to be mad indeed. Not until Ophelia dies do we see her pointedly separate herself from the king. To emphasize her choice, she wears no crown in the play's second half, and in her final appearance the ample display of bosom disappears beneath a stiff bodice rising all the way to the throat.

Dorn as Gertrude and Jack Ryland as Claudius, while effective, do not match the bravura performance of Francesca Buller. Her Ophelia moves persuasively from thwarted love to appalling madness. By placing her onstage during the second scene, when Hamlet is forbidden to return to Wittenberg, the director permits us a glimpse of the letter, hastily passed in secret, which figures so prominently later in the play, as well as her nervous preoccupation with the prince's proposed departure and its denial. Ophelia's presence when her father outlines the scheme to "loose" her to Hamlet also gives more scope for the character's development. However, as with virtually all actresses in this role, Buller's attempted embraces during the nunnery scene do not square with her awareness -- never mind Hamlet's -- that they are being observed by her father and the king. The old device of the arras moving which alerts her lover seemed especially disappointing in the production with so many fresh touches. For instance, Ophelia's flowers, in her hands throughout the action, have become conventional, but two innovations in the first mad scene riveted the audience. First, she removes both the skirt and the rigid bodice of her black mourning dress to reveal not only the flesh everyone tries vainly to recover but also an equally rigid undercorset which still traps her in its confines -- as she has been trapped in this masculine world all along. Second, she smears red paint from Gertrude's rouge pot across her mouth and down her dress, imaging the whore's face Hamlet has seen on her, the blood symbolically on the king's hands and literally on Hulce's hands and arms after he kills Polonius, and the deflowering her bawdy tune describes.

Still other notable features of the Shakespeare Company's *Hamlet* include a staging of "The Mousetrap" which focuses full attention on Claudius and Gertrude. Even the crowns and garments of the Player King and Queen echo the appearance of their watching counterparts, right down to the red wig on both queens. Pointedly, Rosencrantz (Paul Mullins) and Guildenstern (J.C. Carther) as Shakespeare look-alikes, as well as their clown act and their gossip of the theater (usually cut) call attention to self-conscious awareness of performance which pervades *Hamlet*. In a nice touch, the clown in motley who draws the prince's censure during the speech to the players reappears as the gravedigger clown. While a Ghost (Daniel Southern) so corporeal that his son could embrace him crossed over the line of convincing illusion, the physicality of Ophelia with Laertes, Gertrude with Claudius, and Hamlet with Gertrude effectively conveyed the tragedy's sub-text of sexuality perverted into incest. Michael Kahn's decision, too, that the nunnery scene should come before the arrival of the players made more sense than placing the indecisive "To be or not to be" soliloquy after Hamlet has decided to trap Claudius once and for all. However, since Fortinbras never appears in this production, there seems little point in the long explanation of his threat during the first two scenes nor of the ambassadors' return later on. In any case, the directive that Hamlet be buried as a soldier -- sensible enough from a Fortinbras -- rings hollow in the mouth of the scholarly Horatio.

On the whole, however, this *Hamlet*, which runs through January 10, thoroughly deserves the generous applause and the sold-out houses at the Lansburgh. Washingtonians fortunate enough to get tickets will see a classic tragedy take on fresh life.

Mary Corrigan:

"Energy's the Thing Will Catch the Conscience of the King"

Director Michael Kahn's lucid and fast paced production of *Hamlet* at the Lansburg is a distinct success. While some may quarrel with Tom Hulse's (sic) Hamlet, few will contest the energetic and seeming spontaneity of his line readings. Director Kahn and vocal coach Liz Smith are to be complimented because of the clear intelligence that guides this production. The actor's crisp diction is reinforced by a sense that all seem to understand what they are saying.

This clarity extends to the choice of music, set and props. This is an uncluttered production, as expressed in the choices of music, lighting and set. The simplicity of the set allows costume designer Catherine Zuber freedom to adorn the stage with cut velvets, embroidered bodices and sumptuous brocades of the Jacobean, while forsaking the sombre blacks of the traditional Dane. This choice, while initially unsettling, ultimately suits the style of this production. This Hamlet, as is Mel Gibson's, is a product of the 1990's. There is no wild sweep of language here. These Hamlets are energetic, physical and not particularly eloquent. They are less wedded to poetic flow of language and are decidedly more visual in their acting choices.

Five minutes before the play opens, mist emanates from the stage and seeps insinuatingly into the auditorium. Startling bolts of sound and eerily unsettling electronic music signal the play has begun. The sound and lighting are sparingly and skillfully employed by respectively, Adam Wernick and Howell Binkley, who introduce a mist cloaked stage that reveals an upper level playing area dimly suggestive of a rampart. The mist eventually clears to reveal an iron spiral staircase which is both a metaphor for the convolutions of Hamlet's tortured mind/spirit and is also functionally employed for Claudius's death.

The clear intelligence that guides this production can rarely be faulted. While actor Hulse had the burden of overcoming his Mozart, a feat which he only partially accomplished, his Hamlet is nonetheless, refreshingly and engagingly spoken. His mind and body are agile. He is ingenuous, charming, boyish and always interesting to watch. His energetic Hamlet has little introspection. He tends to slough off and throw away all of Hamlet's classic "set" pieces "To be or not to be", "That this too too solid flesh," et al.

Hulse's Hamlet achieves some refreshing new takes on some of the lines because of his lightning pitch changes and/or swift changes of direction in thought or bodily movement. These sudden juxtapositions produced a net effect of energy and create an interesting character to watch. However, Hulse has portrayed a curiously asexual Hamlet whose goodnight kiss to his mother was boyishly chaste and innocent. While this Hamlet is not lumbered with the burden of an Oedipal fixation, he is also strangely passionless. His energy seems fueled more by the erratic life of his mind rather than by his soul or libido. His is an essentially self conscious and willful Hamlet.

Ted Van Griethuysen, who was recently excellent in *Troilus and Cressida* was again superb as a slightly fatuous but nonetheless touching and thoroughly memorable Polonius. Eric Hoffman's gravedigger was excellent. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were sumptuously costumed and vividly portrayed.

Laertes and Ophelia were lumbered with the burden of Freudian interpretations. The provocative ambiguity of their relationship was reflected in their actor choice to portray a tenuous balance between an Electra Complex and the state of familial childhood innocence.

The actress playing Ophelia made some fascinating actor choices. I was less happy with her work in the mad scene.

Franchelle Stewart Dorn is seriously miscast. While her Gertrude was warm, earthy, highly sensuous, she was also conspicuous for the qualities that she lacked. She conveyed a sense of unqueenly coarseness, crudeness and physical awkwardness. Her throaty and non-poetic line readings seriously affected those scenes in which she had many lines. Her voice is forced. She seems to lack the technical skills of the other actors in the production. The chamber scene was disconcerting because in addition to not speaking the

language well, she lacked maternal and/or erotic warmth. She appeared totally unloving. However, she did make an interesting actor's choice when she seemed to forsake life by choosing to knowingly drink of the poisoned goblet.

Claudius was convincing, but this actor has almost too much technical virtuosity which contrasted too strongly with Gertrude's apparent lack of skill. Their intense physicality was clearly and convincingly portrayed.

This production is worth seeing. It is refreshing to see a Hamlet that is so energetically well spoken.

Kurt Daw:

"Hamlet, Particle Physics, and Me"

Reviewing, I have asserted, is an evil activity. What currently troubles me even more is that it may also be a futile one.

The paradox with which I now find myself facing is perfectly embodied in *Hamlet*, in production at the Shakespeare Theater. In its visuals this production is quite traditional. In concept it is as gimmickless as any Shakespearean production I have seen in a decade. It is the production so often yearned for by the conservatives who decry directional interference. It is the schoolmarm's dream, a simple straight-forward "interpretationless" presentation of the (heavily cut) text.

The problem is that the kind of judgement-free description of events for which I yearn would in the end make this sound like a much better production than it, in fact, was. Despite an overall competence, indeed, occasional flashes of brilliance, ultimately the sum of this *Hamlet*'s parts do not make up a whole. How can I convey that if I only deal with the parts?

I think the central difficulty lies in the fact that the production lacks consistency and cohesion, but here's the rub: Am I overlooking the unity the production did have because it didn't have one I could see? Like the particle physicist I feel trapped by the uncertainty principle. I can describe the show objectively and say nothing of consequence, or I can dive in subjectively to say what I think is important, fully aware that when I read such criticism by others I am more often struck by its shortsightedness and self-absorption than its insight. On short deadline, I'm incapable of sorting out the problem and so am forced to the tack I deplore -- arrogantly judgmental.

Hamlet, though very good for most of the night, fails to please.

Repeatedly throughout the night an exciting and defensible choice is made in one scene which seems to have no effect substantial enough to linger into the next. Each moment is played for its own value, but the lack of interrelationship of moments was enough to make one doubt not just Hamlet's sanity, but one's own.

For example, Claudius seemed stricken to the core by the play-within-a-play, resulting in a melodramatic delivery of his great monologue, "O, my defense is rank," but was fully recovered by the next scene, with no recognizable consequences for the rest of the play.

Laertes and Ophelia had a decidedly incestuous relationship in their first scene, with alarmingly graphic sex play, but it seemed never again to color the production. (By the way, why is it that everyone is obsessed with showing incestuous relationships in *Hamlet* other than the one specified by the text? This production's emphasis on the great gulf between youth and age spared us the now fashionable groping of his mother by Hamlet, but a Laertes-Ophelia liaison is little better, and every bit as extratextual.)

The inconsistency which plagued the night was most pronounced in the final scene of the play when Gertrude took the poisoned goblet in a grand Romantic self-sacrificing manner, riveting us with what amounted to a suicide, but then seemed as surprised as anyone when she found herself dying less than a minute later.

The net result of such disjointedness was a kind of moment-by-moment pleasure with an eventual disappointment when it came to nothing. Perhaps this all could have been perceived differently had the center role of the play had a stronger through line, but here is where the play most fell apart. Tom Hulce played Hamlet with a great intelligence, and flashes of anger, but his deliberate underplaying of the soliloquies ("To be or not to be" was not performed as much as recited) and curiously asexual persona eventually created a black hole at the center of the story from which the rest of the play could not escape.

A strong directorial hand was needed, and it is surprising that Michael Kahn (who is not known for directorial restraint) did not supply it. Both he and Hulce seemed in awe of the material, simply underreading or cutting the troublesome bits. Only Hamlet's relationship to Horatio emerged clearly from the mire. With the added contribution of reassigning the final lines of the play to Horatio the performance ultimately became the story of a tragically interrupted friendship, but nothing more.

The show is not without pleasures. The set, a surround of acid-etched metal walls designed by Derek McLane, was simple and functional. It worked well throughout the play, especially in the very early scenes when the ghost appeared and disappeared uncannily with no more technical assistance than rising and fading shafts of light and an always accompanying low rumble like rolling thunder.

The costumes by Catherine Zuber were Elizabethan, or in Hamlet's case, "Elizabethan non-specific." The usual pattern by which Hamlet throws off his benighted look to become more and more a gleaming hero was here reversed, with the court eventually all putting on mourning as the deaths accumulate.

David Leong's fight choreography was especially effective, using only a few simple tricks to paint the picture of a formal duel disintegrating into an uncontrolled brawl.

Composer Adam Wernick's percussive and startling incidental music is powerful and furnishes what continuity the play has.

Despite these good features, generally competent acting, and much effort and energy, however, the show is not *Hamlet*. There is no there there, as they say. Unless, of course, I just missed it.

Eva Hooker:

Michael Kahn's production of *Hamlet* at Washington's Shakespeare Theatre hangs on the not inconsiderable talents of Tom Hulce. The audience walks into a theater filled with cloudy, cold air. The set, dark, empty, and almost threadbare, even in the King's chambers, is too rickety and poor even for a poisoned and sick Denmark. Hulce's Hamlet -- or rather Kahn's -- is variously old and young, sometimes too old and too young, and almost needy in his black street-punkish outfits. Hulce is energetic and gives his role a haunting power in the play's closing scenes. The Hamlet we see in this play is too unfocussed to be completely credible; even Hulce's skill cannot rescue the director's timorous interpretation.

Ophelia, played by Francesca Butler, is the play's strongest and most interesting character. Miss Butler's physical fragility and golden beauty highlight the psychological humiliation which Ophelia undergoes in scene after scene. The playful, incestuous sexuality between Laertes and Ophelia is one of the earliest signs we see of Ophelia as the gifted, abused child in this sick household. (Perhaps Hamlet is supposed to be her equal in this role.) Miss Butler's gift for shaping her role by means of small gestures such as a gradually drooping head or the drumming of her fingers remind one of Fiona Shaw. In her mad scene, Miss Butler effectively takes up the stage with mad energy, terrifying in its vulnerable beauty.

Catherine Zuba's costumes, like many other features in the play, float

between periods; they are sometimes Elizabethan, sometimes Jacobean, sometimes nineteenth century Bronte, and sometimes twentieth century "street" or "dress up". Hamlet never resembles a prince, even in shadow. Gertrude and Claudius seem to live in their nightclothes. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern prance about in Jacobean splendor. Only Ophelia is costumed to perfection. Her dresses are simple and in their straightforward amplitude emphasize her fragility.

Hamlet, a long play, moves with speed. It is well worth seeing for its Ophelia alone. However, the play and its players deserve a firmer interpretive hand, precise historical placement, and a setting worthy of a Dane.

Geri Jacobs:

"Babes in the Woods: Lost"

Michael Kahn has joined the long list of those who have produced *Hamlet*. His production at the Shakespeare Theatre gives a more or less "modern" reading of the play: a young generation trapped and alone in its world and the older painfully aware of its inability to understand or to help.

In this obviously edited performance, the young people flounder without friend or mentor. Hamlet, played by Tom Hulce of *Amadeus* fame, receives little emotional support from Horatio (played by Hank Stratton). Stratton's Horatio, although bespectacled, is himself young and does not or can not provide for Hamlet that center or focus that we sometimes see in other productions. Although loved by their father, Laertes and Ophelia (played by Jay Goede and Francesca Butler, respectively) do not see him as guide. They simply tolerate his musings and meanderings as they exchange amused glances. It is to each other that they cling and both are naive and vulnerable. Claudius and Gertrude (played by Jack Ryland and Franchelle Stewart Dorn respectively) are ill-equipped to meet the needs of their kingdom's youth; when in the first scene of the play Hamlet rudely throws his books and valise off the balcony Claudius's court, neither Claudius nor Gertrude knows how to cope. They are equally nonplussed when faced with Ophelia's madness. Claudius helplessly stands by as he watches Ophelia undress. Then, without a word he picks up the discarded garment and hands it to his wife. Later in the play during the Mousetrap scene, Claudius and his court are held captive by Hamlet as he sits atop a ladder and mocks the court or as he carefully arranges lights around the "stage" in his attempt to "catch the conscience of the King."

The children of this performance are asked to do the heroic: Hamlet and Laertes are asked to revenge their fathers' deaths; Ophelia is asked to stifle emotions she is yet to understand; Horatio is asked to provide a center to a world described as being "out of joint." But they are not given the tools for the task.

This performance ends before the arrival of Fortinbras. Kahn's message seems clear. The young will not be able to do what the old have failed to accomplish: the Kingdom of Denmark can not be saved. This is a production well-worth seeing. If nothing else, it asks us to examine the tools we provide for our young leaders.

David Kranz:

Hamlet Without Hamlet: Kahn's Well Made Play"

The Shakespeare Theatre's production of Hamlet at the Lansburgh directed by Michael Kahn is an intelligent, sometimes even brilliant piece of theatrical craft, but it lacks the emotional depth and mystery devoutly to be wished in performance. The production is only a good show, not a great one, largely because the principal players, especially Tom Hulce as the eponymous hero, are for various reasons unconvincing tragedians. They perform at least

passably and sometimes wonderfully in uncharged and comic moments, but their anguish has no angst. They simply aren't believable as the most famous son, mother, and uncle in English drama. But we can enjoy the well choreographed movement, the smart symbolic and synecdochic set, the liminal lighting, the appropriate sound effects and musical interludes, the colorful and coherently contrastive costumes, and the profusion of polysemous props. Kahn conducts creatively, but without violins.

The set is literally in the dark as the audience enters, and before **Hamlet** begins, white smoke or fog enshrouds half of the audience. In a play which raises constant questions and in which seeing clearly is difficult if not impossible, this is a good start. When finally visible, the set presents us with a high greyish column and red diagonal gangplank to a large opening on the right (sexual symbolism perhaps) and a metal structure on the left consisting of a ten-foot high, angled platform with handrails and a circular staircase down to the stage (political machinations in the Danish prison maybe). The general background colors are dark green, grey, and black, and for outdoor scenes a screen opens up on the back wall, unveiling an obscure charcoal drawing of stormy sea and sky. Welcome to Elsinore at any point in the latest period of geological time. What goes on here is universal, and that's why you're in the dark and the fog too.

As the play proceeds, we see other functional and significant elements in the set. There are secret doors in the walls, some of which allow diagonal shafts of light to penetrate the dark "prison," suggesting unsettling tensions. In court scenes and scenes at Polonius' rooms or Gertrude's bedroom, however, the light is more uniform and brighter. Here, purple silks fall from various heights to the floor to suggest royal pomp and Machiavellian possibilities for spying while hiding. Large objects like a gold chandelier, a large bed, Polonius' desk, and throne-like chairs add to the synecdochic trappings.

The costumes of the courtiers and principals, save Hamlet and perhaps also Horatio (Hank Stratton) and Laertes (Jay Goede), are high Jacobean and thus fill in where the set leaves off. Hamlet's plain black and then disheveled black and white with relatively low-cut brown boots constantly contrasts him to this court finery and its symbolic connection to false appearances. Later on, Ophelia will switch from deep blue dresses to mourning black and then white underclothes as she goes mad, thus relating her in this state to Hamlet and his closer proximity to underlying truths. Meanwhile, we see Claudius (Jack Ryland) and Gertrude (Franchelle Stewart Dorn) in ornate purples, casual unbuttoned houserobes, and, in the queen's case, bright red bedclothes **avec une grande decolletage**, the better for paddling fingers and reetchy kisses. When the king and queen mourn for Ophelia, they are in ornate black velvet. In this finery, they contrast not only with Hamlet, but also with the humorously truth-bearing gravediggers, of course.

Other theatrical details help us follow the plot and get in the appropriate state of mind. The opening music is minimalist but clearly intended to create anxieties in the audience and suggest supernatural disturbance. Similar kinds of staccato treble notes and bass counterpoints return during most of the interludes between scenes. Moreover, during the opening scene and others on Elsinore's ramparts, what dim lights there are cut diagonally across each other through the fog. The ghost first appears projected on the back screen too. Then the ghost (several stand-ins) is spotted in various places by Horatio and the guards at the end of the scene. The **son et lumiere** works well. So do the props. Some simply provide stage business and buttress lines (Hamlet washes with a sponge while he tells Rosenkrantz, or is it Guildenstern, that the king uses him like a sponge), some set up contrasts (Ophelia playfully puts flowers in Laertes' hair before he leaves for France), some help us follow the plot (Hamlet gives his letters to Ophelia in 1.2, she gives them to Polonius in 1.3, and so on), and others have symbolic value (Hamlet beats with a player's sword the fake legs Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern used lewdly when they greeted him--attacking his

uncle's sexual activity?--and then picks up the player's crown with the same sword as he decides to plot the Mousetrap--the play's a better strategem?). Finally, the play's movement uses the whole stage and adds appropriately to the play's tensions, ambiguities, and exciting pace.

Thus it's too bad that Hulse can only play a manic superannuated teenager who has a quick but not a thoughtful wit. He is simply miscast; his diminutive size and squirrely smile alone make him an unlikely candidate for Ophelia's courtier of the year. While Hulse does manage to establish some emotional rapport with Ophelia (Francesca Buller), together they look like the grandchildren, not the children, of old Hamlet/Claudius and Polonius. Indeed, it's hard to believe that such a runt could have been the fruit of the much taller Ghost and Gertrude. But Hulse does do well in some of the comic scenes. Ryland and Dorn do passably with Polonius (Ted van Griethuysen) in comedy too, but their performances otherwise have no vitality in the early acts. They get better after intermission, but not enough. Van Griethuysen takes a while to warm up too, but he is the best of the lot early on. Buller's Ophelia seems to come to life after Polonius dies and she goes mad; her scenes were some of the most effective in the play. The rest of the cast, with perhaps one exception, performed well.

Finally, despite the smoke and darkness, the unsettling diagonals of light, the reinforced multiple explanations for Hamlet's delay and action, and other theatrical ambiguities, I felt no mystery in this production. Hulse's lack of range (he gets angry but never shows the edge of madness) is partly responsible, but the production's theatrical virtues also inhibit the reception of this quality. The clear and crisp craft of Kahn's production, however enjoyable, leaves no room for anxious uncertainties in its audience.

W. T. MacCary:

There are two *Hamlets* at the Lansburgh Theatre, or rather a *Hamlet* and a Hamlet: the gloomy set by Derek McLane and the static direction by Michael Kahn lead us to expect a melancholy Dane, but then Tom Hulce gives us a madcap undergraduate. Only Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Paul Mullins and J.C. Carter) line up behind the star on the manic side. The other leading players are all conventional in their interpretations and stolid in their movement. Horatio is played by Hank Stratton as a visiting angel, never really integrated into either camp.

The conventional staging of the first court scene puts Hamlet downstage in black brooding, against the colorful tableau of the courtiers grouped in sycophancy about Claudius. But Hulce announces his intention to leave for Wittenberg by throwing his satchel and books off a second-story landing and stomping off in a childish huff. He delivers the soliloquies with precision rather than conviction, so the horrors of incest and unbridled lust are never realized. The aspect of the play which Hulce most thoroughly explores is the metaphorical: we see him building steam as he approaches the play-within-a-play and we face the paradox of this man who so hates hypocrisy in others but loves play-acting himself: as long as one announces oneself as an actor one can be honest about pretending; it is only when one lies and cheats and steals in subterfuge that villainy arises. In this Hulce seems to be following the lead of Kevin Klein and Mel Gibson in playing Hamlet as a man of the theatre energetic and physical, rather than the brooding philosopher we associate mainly with Olivier's performance.

On balance one must ask what is gained and what is lost. Clearly it makes for a lively diverting theatre to have an attractive young man careening off the pillars of the set and propelling himself through speeches of treacherous diction at high rates of speed. But does it all make sense finally? With all this physicality, why can he not take the action required? Indeed in this production Fortinbras is completely eclipsed, and there is no real room for him, since he, as a man of action out about his father's business, could mark no strong contrast with this Hamlet. Can a modern

audience simply not be expected to follow Hamlet's tortured reasoning, his association of his mother with Eve in the Garden and his uncle with the serpent? And what of his religious scruples? Can an athletic Hamlet convince us as he moves from fear of damnation to acceptance of death as absolute end, and thus from inertia to revenge? Hyperkinesis might be involving in the star's portrayal, but Hamlet is not an entertainment but rather a serious deliberation on what is worth doing in this life. We come away from the Hulce-Kahn production without even asking the profound questions the text raises, let alone answering them. This Hamlet is not concerned with Being and not-Being but with the dynamics of movement. All that uncathected energy is exciting and distracting, but we do not understand the conjunction of sex and violence that lies at the heart of the play.

Deborah Montuori:

"Give me that man that IS passion's slave," or, "Where's Fortinbras?"

Michael Kahn obviously intended the company of The Shakespeare Theatre to wear their Hamlet with a difference. Cuts to the script, costuming, props, and a considerable amount of stage business bolstered the roles of the play's younger characters, resulting in an Elsinore motivated more by adolescent energy than passion, power, or political intrigue. While the result complemented Tom Hulce's portrayal of the Prince (leaving one to wonder, however, if his Hamlet's self-consciousness, tentativeness, reliance on physicality to indicate inward change, and rather flat delivery of soliloquies were intentional choices or evidence of his insecurity in the role), it reduced the stakes for those in the audience as well as those onstage.

Despite the initial impression created by Derek McLane's dark, multilevel set, there seemed little to fear in the Danish court. Claudius not only seemed pompous, but his histrionics -- the character's or the actor's? -- detracted from any projection of real power or evil and in fact rendered him more senile than Polonius generally appears. (His delivery of the couplet ending the "prayer scene" was notably dreadful.) The Ghost was not a spirit but a corporeal presence, one that Hamlet at one point clung to; as a result, the latter's sanity was less questionable. In the opening court scene, Hamlet's protestation that he has "that within which passeth show" was undercut by his note-passing to a giddy Ophelia. Kahn initially posed what could have been an interesting item in the relationship between Ophelia and Laertes (incestuous desires that mirror the Gertrude/Claudius pairing) but dropped it, again, in a pool of excessive giddiness. Hamlet's first scene with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern -- all those arms and legs mimicking Williams' nightmarish vision in Henry V -- enhanced the rowdy schoolboy atmosphere, but I found his gathering up of limbs and frantic hacking a bit overextended and, again, more laughable than threatening. By delivering his soliloquies into the audience, Hulce avoided dealing with any semblance of internal transformation. His relationship with the players seemed more genuine and intense than that with Gertrude; the two seemed distant, and her line that her son was likely disturbed by "his father's death and our o'erhasty marriage" was tossed off with a near-snort that signified her disdain and lack of concern; this made her decision to sacrifice herself in the final scene unconvincing and contrived.

Where, I asked myself in the final scene, are Hamlet's foils? By cutting the second half of Laertes' speech in response to Hamlet's apology, the contrast between the two is utterly destroyed. And Fortinbras, who takes the stage in full military regalia, was absorbed into a Horatio who would have been more comfortable delivering the 800 number for Encyclopedia Britannica. His conclusion that Hamlet would have proved "most royal" sounds like wishful thinking (or puppy love) rather than reality; and the Denmark left in his hands rather than Fortinbras' seems no less secure than an England doomed to be headed by Edgar and Albany from the beginning.

Kate Pogue:

It would be a pity if students in the Washington area miss the current production of Hamlet at the Shakespeare Theatre, for the strengths of this production -- a cutting of the script and energetic pacing by the director that propel the action forward; exciting spectacle; and dynamic, moving personal relationships -- are those that might make any novice thrill to Shakespeare.

Set designer Derek McLane has constructed a strongly angled iron rampart stage-right that connects to the stage level with a spiral staircase. Movable black panels at the rear, a tall column and ramp stage-left give the actors a 20th century counterpart to the fixed background of the Globe. Against this are set the beautiful Jacobean-style costumes of Catherine Zuber, and thus the past plays in constant counterpoint to the present.

The violence of the sound and light cues heighten mystery and emotion and create constant contrast.

Performances, however, are uneven. One is grateful for the stunning smoke and side-lighting effects at the opening as these compensate for the weak vocal technique of Francisco, Marcellus, and Bernardo (a reason, perhaps, for cutting Marcellus's "bird of dawning" speech). Claudius and Polonius fill the stage with life, vigor and skilled speaking, while Gertrude remains a 20th century matron and the ghost never quite attains majesty or mystery. Ophelia, very affecting in her mad scene, also lacks the voice for a full and expressive realization of her text. Tom Hulce's Hamlet is intelligent, energetic and engaging -- a rewarding performance to watch on many levels, though one audience member said he could not always be heard in the back of the house.

Surely one day, as Shakespeare theaters continue to proliferate, American actors will one day come around to Salvini's view of great acting as "Voice, voice and more voice." By which I am sure he did not mean just size and strength, but also naturalism and nuance.

However, this criticism pales in comparison to Michael Kahn's brilliant work in creating profound and imaginatively developed relationships in his production -- which is the reason we come to care about these people and feel for them as the action of the play spirals like its only staircase downward.

Hamlet stalking through the middle of the opening scene; Hamlet dropping his suitcase from the balcony; Hamlet greeting Horatio; Ophelia, Laertes and Polonius creating a real sense of family in the horsing around and teasing of the farewell scene (with the flowers in Laertes' hair so affectingly reprised in the mad scene); Polonius locking up Ophelia's letters; Hamlet holding the ghost's hand and embracing him -- such a daring touch!; the arrival of Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern. On and on. These are the creations that make good story-telling. And Hamlet is a great story. This is what I hope students in Washington have seen, and what the audience at Friday night's performance so much enjoyed.

Lois Potter:

"*Hamlet* at the Shakespeare Theatre"

As I haven't time to write a proper review, I'm going to list the things that stood out for me (for whatever reason) and then see whether I can make them add up to anything.

The Visual: Set v. like the one for Measure for Measure last year: upper level, reached by spiral staircase at back, stage right; ramp further down, stage left; pillars, sometimes curtains to indicate an interior scene. A timeless stage world, both classical and modern. In fact, a set representing

a stage set. Other props: dressing table and bed for queen; grave trap, backdrop set up for play, which was done downstage, with King and Queen facing it and Hamlet and Horatio watching, finally, from above. Oddly, the king's prayer was located on the upper level and Hamlet entered below and stayed there for his soliloquy, never getting close enough to be a threat (any kind of parallel to "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below?").

The most striking thing about the costumes was the hideous wigs worn by the minor characters, v. similar to those worn by the Player King and Queen. Their costumes were also very awkward and stagey, whereas the main characters had clothes that looked like something one might actually wear. Hamlet, on his first appearance, almost seemed like a modern figure who had wandered into a historical drama.

Lighting: Mostly indoor lighting. We only rarely see the "outdoors", stylized as a sort of charcoal sketch of a stormy sky, at the back, through sliding doors. It's there at the back of the first scene, and reappears for graveyard and the end, but is used most strikingly for the arrival of the players, who are "discovered" against this background in a striking, and stagey, tableau. The dark is very dark (it enabled them to use multiple ghosts in I.i.), but some of the interior scenes are played in a glaringly bright light. It seemed extradramatic rather than intradramatic, but I'm not sure if I can trace a pattern in it.

Sounds: The rumbling noise that accompanied appearances of the ghost was very similar to the sounds associated with the casting of cannon and the various celebrations associated with Claudius' drinking. In other words, they were all "sound effects".

Cuts: Fortinbras (and hence IV.i); also the dumb show. F's final speech was given to Horatio. (And Denmark had no conceivable ruler left at the end, a fact which seemed to worry no one.) Otherwise, a pretty full text; we got Voltemand and Cornelius as well as Reynaldo.

Transpositions: To be or not to be and nunnery scene in First Quarto sequence; Hamlet's narrative to Horatio takes place in the graveyard; moreover, Horatio isn't present in the scenes with Ophelia and thus knows nothing about her death (he's given Hamlet's lines about the funeral obviously being that of a suicide). Thus, Osric appears almost immediately after the friends' re-entry. This rearrangement still doesn't explain why Hamlet doesn't answer Osric's "here is newly come to court Laertes" with "Yes, I know: He's just been trying to throttle me." The pace was very fast -- effectively so.

Other points:

1. I was surprised that the ghost was so substantial: Hamlet was able to hold his hand and throw himself on his breast: none of the usual pathos about not being able to touch him.

2. Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern announce their presence to Hamlet by doing a little game with fake arms and legs from behind a curtain (cf Polonius and his passion for getting behind the nearest arras); the limbs, vaguely related to the limbs that Pyrrhus is "mincing" in the Player's speech, provided something for Hamlet to attack in his soliloquy when he was comparing himself to the Player. More details on the players: during 1st Player's speech, the boy actor mimed Hecuba's grief very effectively. In the Advice scene, we saw "Lucianus" trying his lines several ways in response to Hamlet's suggestions, then a clown came in in time to motivate Hamlet's comments on clown behaviour -- rather extravagantly, since he didn't appear again. Was he there to offer yet another parallel to the stuffed-dummy extras of the court, whom

Hamlet calls mutes or audience? Maybe he was an equivalent to Osric, who arrives as unwanted comic relief near the end.

3. At the climax of *The Mousetrap* Claudius rose, but, after Hamlet's "false fire" line, recovered enough to applaud the play, then collapsed, and staggered off, calling for lights.

4. Polonius didn't die until after he had fallen through the curtain, looking at and reaching toward Hamlet. The staging made his death a counterpart of the one in the play.

5. The gravedigger, during the Yorick speech, registered his gradual realization of who he was talking to. I think I noticed this naturalistic touch precisely because it was one: like Polonius's performance, it suggested that a good deal of thought had gone into the psychology of the characters (who knows what when?), but at the same time nothing much could be made of the episode, since it leads nowhere.

6. When Claudius urged Gertrude not to drink, she glanced into the cup, apparently realized that it was poisoned, and calmly drank it.

7. The fight, once Hamlet had got hold of both swords, was a complete melee, with everyone genuinely trying to part the 2 men, and the poisoned sword waving all over in what looked like an out-of-control way.

I think somewhere behind these various signs is a master-sign, the idea of a prison house of theatre, where, ironically, only the real actors seem free. Everyone else is trapped in a fictive world, more obviously fictive in the case of characters who exist only to fill the scene (hence the discrepancies in the costumes) but never "real". As so often these days, Stoppard's *R* and *G* are Dead seemed to have left its imprint on *Hamlet*. I'm thinking especially of the conversations between the Player and Stoppard's protagonists, and the contrast between his ability to "come and go as I please" and their sense of being trapped in the determinism of the play. Hamlet himself seemed to feel that he was meant to be one of the attendant lords, not a tragic hero. Hence, Tom Hulce's performance (I'm finally getting to it) I.2. opens with Gertrude and Claudius entering straight from their wedding; Hamlet's entrance is deliberately provocative. He walks straight through and goes upstairs without noticing anyone; a moment later, he's tossing his suitcase over the bannister and coming down to collect it. When his mother finally persuades him not to leave, it's because he catches a quick glance from Ophelia. He also manages to slip her a note. This complicity between them sets up the sense of betrayal in the nunnery scene. Similarly, the fun between him and R and G, though it's only rather crass undergraduate humour, explains the reading of his farewell to them after the players go off: "So, goodbye t'ye. Now I am alone." That is, yet another relationship has gone forever. But is he alone? Perhaps yes. For some reason, I was struck, this time, by the way Horatio appeared just when Hamlet needed a confidant, like another Ariel ("thy thoughts I cleave to"). He seems a real enough character in Act I, but at this point his quiet and rather colourless personality made him look like a reflector for Hamlet.

Ted van Griethuysen's Polonius was an interesting counterpart of the same actor's Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, also a man whose cleverness fails to produce the results it once did. Underneath his mannerisms -- those of a man who is used to being triumphantly clever with other people -- he was clearly riddled with fear, partly about his own failing powers of judgement and concentration (in the scene with Reynaldo he reminded me of Alzheimers patients in the early stages, when they are still able to understand what is happening to them). It's not clear whether he fully understands what a mess he is making of his daughter's life (they cut his "You need not tell us what

Lord Hamlet said", which is usually a key to his attitude). Ophelia has proudly shown him her letters from Hamlet, as proof that there is nothing dishonorable about the relationship, and he betrays the trust, refusing to give them back to her; she is present in the scene where Polonius shows them to the King. The Ophelia of the first half was cool, intelligent and controlled, though clearly full of suppressed anger at the way she was treated; hence, her madness (violent, uninhibited, with no apparent moments of sanity) was really terrifying -- one really did get the sense (as with Polonius) of the horror of the loss of personal identity. In her madness, she tears off her clothes and smears her face with the make-up already used by the queen -- as if determined to agree that she is indeed the tart that Hamlet accused her of being.

I'm not sure whether the end, with its wild and whirling swords, was meant to suggest that death was the point of greatest freedom for these characters in search of a soul, or just that the last moments of a stage performance can afford to be the most apparently chaotic because no one is going to have to pick up the mess. Horatio primly gives orders to have the bodies taken up (the sight "here shows much amiss" -does he mean, on this stage?), but Hamlet's is the only one that we actually see lifted, very much in the standard Olivier pose; no one will have to deal with the rest until after the curtain closes.

Milla Riggio:

Michael Kahn, as both artistic director of the Shakespeare Theatre and director of the production of *Hamlet* currently running at the Lansburgh Theatre, deserves credit for an amazing success. Not seven years ago, the Folger Theatre at the Folger Library was an uneven company with little national visibility. Audiences came, partly because the shows were staged in the Library theatre space. But, though in itself charming, this space was deficient as a theatrical venue. Huge pillars meant lots of seats from which one couldn't see. The Folger actively considered discounting its connection with the company. Then Michael Kahn was brought in and moved toward better casting, building a first-rate repertoire company, augmented from time to time by major stars. Now, this year, we have a stunning new theatre and a major company with first-rate technical support. Best of all, we have an intelligent, moving *Hamlet*.

The stage picture in this production is consistently fascinating. Without building altars to historical authenticity or attempting, museum-like, to recreate an authentic Elizabethan production, the designing team of Derek McLane and Catherine Zuber achieves the essence of Elizabethan staging. On a virtually bare stage, with a single column, a winding metal staircase, a wrought iron upper platform, and, finally, a trap door leading to Ophelia's grave, we experience the three levels of the Shakespearean stage. Movable props and clusters of actors define various locations throughout the play: a desk and chair create Polonius' chamber, a pair of royal chairs create an audience with the king, a bed and dressing table signify the queen's chambers. Though for the most part Elizabethan, the elaborate, handsome, and varied costumes also have a hint of Shakespearean eclecticism. Some male attire, most prominently Hamlet's black mourning suit, is hard to place. Hamlet wears a black frock-coated suit, of which he slowly divests himself throughout the play. Horatio, too, as the other student, wears a long velvet-coated suit. In contrast, Gertrude and Claudius in particular seem modelled on portraits of Elizabethan royalty. Modern lighting and a Wagnerian spray of mist, which covers most of the night scenes, enhance rather than contradict the effects of the powerful staging.

Pacing and rhythm are excellent. So is placement of characters. Spaces between characters, spaces between speeches, even the pauses within speeches are well-calculated for effect. We hear everything the actors say, and yet

the play never lags. The choices made about each soliloquy reflect a powerful balance between the solipsistic world of the reflective actor and a communicative exchange with the audience. In "O, what a rogue and peasant slave," Hamlet (Tom Hulce), leaving his Amadeus laugh behind, bridges the gap between soliloquy as reverie and soliloquy as direct address to the audience. When he declares "I am alone," Hamlet is isolated upstage. But by the time he gets to "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba," he has moved downstage where he directs his questions to a listening audience.

The production is full of inventive ideas. Among the Elizabethan touches is the intelligent decision to bring in an all-male troupe for the play within the play, in contrast to the gender-specific casting of the main play. Although not strikingly original in the parodic playing of *The Mousetrap*, the stratagem adds brilliantly to Hamlet's original interrogation of the players. As the Player King (Emery Battis) delivers his lament, his speech is accompanied by a moving dumb show of Hecuba (Jason Novak), enacting "her" grief, taking off the crown and covering "her" head. This powerful mime visually reduplicates the player king's description. It also sets up the ending of the scene in which the crown and the sword remain with a cluster of dismembered limbs as emblems foreshadowing the dismemberment of the kingdom and destruction even of the crown itself at the end of the play.

Although Tom Hulce is an intelligent and at times convincing Hamlet, the evening in some ways belongs to Polonius (Ted van Griethuysen), who was also a triumphant success as Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*. Van Griethuysen makes Polonius a sententious rhetorician. His sententiousness comes from a pedantic interest in words and a delight in long sentences; he is tedious when he claims to be brief. He shows all this; his children laugh at him on stage; and yet at the same time he has a remarkable kind of dignity. His death scene is magnificent in its control, although, parenthetically, it's a pity that part of the audience could not see this crucial sequence because of inadequate sight lines. Van Griethuysen uses his hands a lot, gesturing on every occasion; these character-defining gestures are always integrated into his role, revealing both his genuine affection for his children and the sententiousness of his character. Van Griethuysen's gestures and his character are integrated into the full flow of the play. He is brilliant without dominating.

The other characters are generally good; there are no major weaknesses. Claudius (Jack Ryland), Gertrude (Franchelle Stewart Dorn), Ophelia (Francesca Buller), and the gravediggers (Eric Hoffman and J.C. Cutler) give especially strong performances. Claudius is intelligently presented. He is strong, smart, and, though incapable of genuine remorse, is deeply distressed by his crime and aware of the enormity of it. He plays off an equally intelligent Gertrude, who likewise makes consistent choices throughout the play. At first the royal couple are devotedly, even besottedly, in love. They touch each other again and again, forgetting that others are around them. This initial passion remains until the closet scene. There, with only a moderate hint of the de rigueur incest that in this production also replays the incestuous tangling of Laertes and Ophelia, Hamlet persuades his mother to see, as in a "glass" or mirror, the "inmost part" of herself. From that point on, Gertrude is consistently loyal to her son, obeying his insistence that she not betray his secret. Earlier, as Claudius and Gertrude hang constantly on each other, the audience comes to expect that they will always exit together. Thus, when Gertrude exits separately from her husband at the end of Act IV, she makes clear to us that she is following her son's request. In the final scene she calmly, resolutely, and intentionally swallows the poison, as her husband helplessly looks on. Earlier, it is clear that she knows nothing of King Hamlet's murder.

What makes Ophelia so good? Her rather ordinary interaction with her brother is not enhanced by his climbing on top of her at the end of their t_t_e-a-t_t_e. But the scene in which Buller madly reddens her face with rouge or lipstick and smears some on her dress shows emblematic staging at its best;

the message is visually coded. She has not literally lost her chastity, and yet her father's manipulative use of her and Hamlet's misogyny have in their way contaminated her. Ophelia is from the start a potential victim, and Buller convincingly portrays a lively girl trapped passively into a reluctant obedience that at first makes her a tool of the plot against Hamlet and ultimately drives her mad.

There are, to be true, a few darker spots. For part of the audience some spots were literally darkened by sight line problems. And the production, generally efficient in its relationship of action to word, grows unnecessarily busy in the final dueling scene. Under the direction of David Leong, this duel disintegrates into a brawl. The knocking over of chairs and Hamlet and Laertes' chase around the stage clutter the action at a time when the fine performances of all the principals could carry the play more directly to its powerful conclusion. The removal of Fortinbras in favor of Horatio as the character who speaks the eulogy over Hamlet's body signals a subtle change in the final hierarchy of the play. What is restored at the end of this production of *Hamlet* is not the political stability that comes with the crowning of a new king. The final voice in this play is that of Horatio, the storyteller, immortalizing for the audience the narrative of Hamlet. It is the story that remains, and this was a powerful retelling of that story.

David K. Sauer:

"Hamlet and the Cloud of Unknowing"

Before Hamlet begins, the stage and auditorium are engulfed in a fog -- appropriate to the view of John K. Andrews who quotes Harry Levin in the program: "When Hamlet points out a cloud to Polonius, he points the way that criticism has taken." This cloud is a visual metaphor for the whole production: except for a brief interval after the intermission, and the fifth act, stage and audience are literally engulfed in a cloud.

This seems to be intentional, for Jeannie Knapp, the Dramaturg, also notes in the program that "throughout the play, Hamlet searches for truth, certainty, and clarity in a deceptive world [symbolized by the fog?], finally reconciling himself to the mysteriousness of what his mind cannot grasp." What further complicates this "mysteriousness" in this production are some strange clarities which don't quite fit together to form any pattern.

For example, there is the clarity of Tom Hulce's Hamlet, who begins the play as a petulant child, walking out of the court in 1.2 as soon as Claudius alludes to his marriage to Gertrude. Then he returns on the balcony stage right to drop his bags and books LOUDLY to the floor. Claudius ignores the interruption, as one would a child, and calls on Laertes. Hamlet, in his travelling coat, then walks in as Laertes is allowed to return to Paris. When Gertrude asks her rebellious child to speak to Claudius, he refuses, gathers his things, and starts to exit. Claudius stops him declaring his return to Wittenburg is "retrograde to our interest." Gertrude then restates this as an appeal to stay, and Hamlet accedes. All of this is clear, but not really motivated by the text. Why make Hamlet a petulant child?

But further shocks are in store for the audience in this production. Hulce delivers all his lines as if in prose, rather than poetry. (For years I've read of curmudgeonly old critics who regret the loss of poetry -- and now I've become one myself. Is this aging or maturing?) The trade off is that Hulce delivers the lines with prosaic clarity and clear enunciation -- but without iambic, without poetry. So Hamlet comes off rather poorly as he curses his mother and women in his first soliloquy.

And the rest of the company can deliver both sound and sense. Ted van Griethuysen as Polonius especially steals the show. Furthermore, cutting out the Fortinbras plot puts much more emphasis on Polonius and family. Ophelia (Francesca Buller) is particularly highlighted in the first scene when Hamlet slips her a farewell note. And Laertes' farewell warning to Ophelia verges

towards the Tony Richardson incestuous, pulling up her dress as he climbs onto her prone body, then rolling over with her seated upon him when Polonius enters.

Something intriguing happened when Polonius was alone with Ophelia. She produced a packet of love letters which he read and chuckled over and confiscated -- against her will. This prop made the scene dynamic (used later by Hamlet for "words, words, words"). However, it revealed another Hamlet than the petulant one of the first act. This one had at least moved into adolescence.

When we next see Hamlet, however, he's back to being a child -- kneeling to the Ghost, and embracing him in consolation, then following his exit all the way up stage scuttling on his knees. There is no mature lover here. In this case, as in the others, the intention of the scene is clear, but it is hard to find any through line of interpretation.

When we finally see Hamlet and Ophelia together, after a poetry-free "To be or not to be", I did not see the usual signal for Hamlet's verbal abuse of Ophelia, the rustling of Polonius behind the curtain. As a result, his abuse of her seemed unmotivated, and all the worse as it turned physically brutal, throwing her about the stage and grabbing at her crotch.

This disorienting shock was multiplied in the next scene when Hamlet shows great warmth towards Rosencrantz (Paul Mullins) and Guildenstern (J.C. Carter). It is clear Hulce has the best time with them on stage. As an actor he seemed to relate to them best of all. And the blocking reflected this, moving them in unison from one kneeling, Hamlet sitting, the other standing behind him, to Hamlet standing on the chair, to all three lying down for "What a piece of work is man."

To mystify and clarify further, we are given one more piece of the greatest hits version of Hamlet's motivations, Olivier's closet scene playing up the incest motif. Gertrude wears a low cut red nightgown (not her usual maroon), and Hamlet is on top of her, kissing her in bed. Again, this was all very clear, but seemed unconnected to their previous scenes together.

However, the scene did have clarity for Gertrude. Afterwards, she walked out on Claudius, and later seemed to know that the cup she stopped Hamlet from drinking was poisoned. Apparently she realized after the closet scene (done without fog) that Claudius really was a satyr (though he wasn't played as one).

As for Hamlet, he loses out on the later third and fourth act soliloquies, and so when he appears in the fifth act he is again unmotivatedly transformed. His hair is slicked back rather than its third act Amadeus look, and he is in 20th century garb, no longer a child or adolescent, though his face is still unnaturally pale. If he had put more stress on "In my heart there WAS a kind of fighting," the transition would have made more sense. But he was now very calm throughout, until his shift to manic to out-Herod Laertes at the grave.

This scene returned to the earlier motive, love, that his abuse seemed to have invalidated. And his killing of the unarmed Laertes, by stabbing him in the stomach, similarly seemed to invalidate his apology before the duel, and forgiveness after it.

These unmotivated shifts of direction, together with Hulce's visual quotation from his Amadeus performance (the hair, and the white face, red eyes for mourning) made me think the director, Michael Kahn, must have been aiming for an adolescent version of Hamlet capitalizing on his star's fame in that kind of role. But Hulce never seemed really adolescent -- he's too old to play that, and he's too intelligent to attribute this muddle of motives to adolescent psychology. His skill in clear delivery, emotional intensity and variety, indicate that something really good might have come of his performance. But it would have needed a director with a better ear for verse, a stronger trusting of the text. Audrey Stanley is the director Hulce should have chosen. She might have removed the cloud of unknowing from the text, and found a clear shape to the cloud.

Michael Shea:

"A Thoroughly Inadequate Review of *Hamlet*"

Hamlet, directed by Michael Kahn, is currently running at Washington's Shakespeare Theater. With Tom Hulce turning in a more-than-credible performance in the title role, the production succeeds in countering the tragedy's inevitable despair with a playful tone that keeps the play entertaining the audience throughout the evening.

A somber tone is established by the dark color scheme of the set, though the visuals are often brightened by strong lighting and lighter colors in some of the costumes. The set uses relatively few movable stage props, and even those are designed with a slight rather than a heavy or bulky look. The architecture of the set is dominated by a circular stairs on the left, connecting an upper playing area with the main stage. Perhaps the most ingenious use of this upper playing area is during Claudius' prayer scene, because Hamlet comes onstage below and never gets near Claudius, which distance allows for the simultaneous yet independent speeches to carry their weight as dual soliloquies.

This production takes advantage of Francesca Buller's considerable acting skills by making her Ophelia a centerpiece of the play. The abuse she suffers at the hands of those around her -- dismissed by Polonius (Ted van Griethuysen), sexually teased by Laertes (Jay Goede), ignored by Claudius (Jack Ryland), patronized by Gertrude (Franchelle Stewart Dorn) -- is effectively metaphorized in her blue and black color scheme and sets up convincingly her powerful mad scenes, easily the most striking moments of the evening. Clothed all in black (reminiscent of the grief-stricken Hamlet and a refreshing change from the pure white nightgowns that most Ophelias are costumed in), she proceeds to disrobe while singing distractedly and erratically, then smears Gertrude's make-up all over her mouth. The effect is a very disturbing image of the reaction of some young girls to child abuse.

As a counterpoint to the darkness prevailing in the set and in Ophelia's plight, a somewhat light-hearted tone at times surrounds the character of Hamlet, the production eliciting several laughs from the audience with an emphasis on Hamlet's verbal wit. His quips help develop a contrary attitude that is also demonstrated in his actions, even when he is not speaking. For example, in preparation for his travel back to Wittenberg, Hamlet drops his valise and books from the upper playing area with a loud thud during Claudius' attempt to clear up state and personal matters during his first appearance in the play. (On the other hand, in a sort of proleptic black humor, one can appreciate the irony in the contrast of this thud with the quiet landing of Claudius' crown when it makes the same fall at the moment of his death.)

I found the production to be a success, for I was captivated by it most of the time; in fact, the only time my attention wandered was when the house got uncomfortably warm and I found myself preoccupied with trying to cool off. But remember that *Hamlet*'s bulk means that it is guaranteed to fail to please everybody. Not everyone will be happy with the production's cuts. For instance, in this election year, some may be disappointed in a production in the nation's capital that eliminates Fortinbras and the play's overtly political dimension. (Of course, others who are surfeited by all the campaign coverage will be delighted to escape politics for three hours and twenty minutes.) Overall, though, the production is an intelligent one, and stimulates thoughts and feelings enough for several good conversations. I think that is successful theater.

Lyn Tribble:

Hamlet persistently asks its audience to distinguish among fictive frames, to tell false from "true" acting, the "natural" or mimetic from the

conventional or the stylized, Hamlet's antic disposition before the court from his supposed authenticity before us. At a number of moments, the production of the Lansbury[sic] foregrounded these issues in very striking ways -- as for instance when the "play" crown and the wooden sword challenge us to distinguish them from the upgraded props used for the "main" play. A particularly nice moment occurred soon after, when the sumptuousness of the players' costumes rivalled those of Gertrude and Claudius. (I couldn't help but think of an added level of signification perhaps operating at the time of the original production: players' wearing the cast-off clothing of the very nobility they emulated).

Finally, however, it wasn't clear to me that Tom Hulce had the range to negotiate these admittedly blurry levels. The play of course constantly makes it difficult for the audience to tell true from feigned madness -- Hamlet tells Horatio that he may put on an antic disposition after acting "antic" for several minutes. But Ophelia's reporting of Hamlet's very stylized madness does indeed sound, as Stephen Booth has said, like a young man without much acting experience trying to "act" mad. The gestures she describes -- the hand to the brow, the stepping back and holding the arm outstretched, the retreat with head turned, all are the staple conventionalized gestures of madness. Yet shortly thereafter Hulce enters with his clothing awry and his hair on end, visually compatible with the young-man-as-poor-actor picture Ophelia described. The audience laughed, only to feel pretty silly as it turned out that it was laughing to the warmup to the "to be or not to be speech," still culturally if not theatrically considered to be the big moment of the play.

The scene for me emblemized Hulce's difficulties in getting the audience to take him seriously. He seemed most comfortable when portraying the flippant undergraduate side of Hamlet. In the more serious scenes, he seemed dwarfed by the role. I of course mean this somewhat unkindly as to refer to his size -- he's very small and seems to be about half head. But the costuming also had this dwarfing effect. Hamlet's visual counterpoint to the sumptuousness of the court's dress, so bulky, geometric, and rich in surface, constituted them, in contrast to Hamlet, who has that within that passeth show. But the high-water pants and the odd shoes made Hulce instead look like a child still insisting on wearing outgrown clothes.

This reading was emphasized from the start, when Hamlet, in an adolescent display, drops a suitcase in the middle of the court (Hulce was then stuck with it, awkwardly, for the rest of the scene). Hamlet is of course a young man, and the play makes much of generational conflicts. But in this production, with the exception of an excellent Ophelia (Francesca Buller), the older generation won out, largely through the terrific performances of Jack Ryland as Claudius and Ted van Griethuysen as Polonius.

Garry Walton:

David Bevington speaks of the oppressive weight of tradition that the Shakespeare editor feels, as he confronts a succession of familiar cruxes. Surely director M. Kahn felt that weight as he and his cast at Washington's Shakespeare Theatre prepared to recreate the central play in the English canon. For their Hamlet -- solid, often insightful, never distractingly idiosyncratic -- rather than seeking to pluck out the heart of Hamlet's mystery, seemed most revelatory of a modern company's effort to solve the succession of dramatic problems that the play has come to represent. The result is always interesting, but too rarely engaging.

Period costuming is colorful and effective from the first court scene. Brightly colored, richly trimmed doublets and elaborate ruffs mark all the court party; fittingly, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern sport the play's brightest hues until Osric. The plain collars of Laertes and Ophelia, together with their youth, mark them almost equally with Hamlet as not of this world.

The stage's space is exceedingly well used, thanks to a high platform upper left, reached by a central spiral staircase, and an assortment of backlit doorways that appear and disappear in the rear wall. A chandelier, purple hangings, and two thrust chairs or thrones mark the court on an otherwise bare stage. The arras appears under the balcony left as needed, and associatively it becomes a kind of hell mouth. It is used not only by Claudius and Polonius; Ophelia is loosed to Hamlet from behind it, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern first appear from behind it after a moment of bawdy dumbshow with brightly colored false limbs. The pit downstage right is large enough for Hamlet and Laertes to grapple in. And the rear wall of the theater opens, to reveal a cloudy but lighter world without, on two occasions: when the players enter, and when Hamlet's stiff body is carried out.

Characterization visually is easy to read, besides the Cavalier-style Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet is more young than antic, as his small stature and costume and narrow vocal range announce. Ophelia and Laertes are mightily affectionate siblings, but their youth and playfulness mute any incestuous hints. Mad Ophelia leaves flowers in Laertes' hair as she exits to find her watery grave, reminding us that earlier she had tucked daisies behind his ears before he bid their father farewell forever and left for Paris. Polonius is a well-intentioned, indulgent (and not just self-indulgent) father-mother to his two children; Hamlet is shocked and moved to have cost the life of another father. This *Hamlet* is clearly a play about two families destroyed. Claudius is never seen onstage without a goblet in hand; he and Gertrude spend the first two acts kissing and fondling each other even when attended. Gertrude is tainted only with lust -- though after the closet scene she rushes back to Claudius' embrace, after Ophelia's death she never touches Claudius again, and at the end of the play she deliberately and knowingly drinks the poison meant for her son. The ghost gently touches her hair when he appears to Hamlet in her bedchamber. And the ghost is touched in turn -- clung to, in fact -- when he first appears to his much-moved son's kneeling, clutching embrace -- a motif oft repeated in this production. In the first court scene, Hamlet stiffens and steps out from under Claudius's arm on his shoulder. A moment later Claudius pulls Gertrude away from her son, leaving Hamlet's hand outstretched plaintively. Hamlet pulls out of Ophelia's embrace once he sees the arras rustle behind her and realizes she is not honest. As much as this production offers us any single angle of vision, it invites us to look at the play in terms of characters who touch without connecting.

Unfortunately, it can have something of that lack of connecting with the audience as well. Though Hamlet plays his first 3 soliloquies downstage to the audience, and rushes down center stage to demand of us, "Who calls me, villain?" these still seem rhetorical questions of an actor, not a character -- as do Polonius' asides to the audience whenever he finds the slightest clue that Hamlet is still harping on his daughter. What lingers in the mind from this production are memorable moments, and patterns of business with props. Some seem derived from previous productions -- John Barton and Michael Pennington (RSC 1980) visualized the ghost's pouring the poison of his words into his slumping son's ear, and made the first player pause in his speech of Priam's slaughter and look at Hamlet when he speaks the line "did nothing." Kahn and his Hamlet (Tom Hulce) use both of these moments, as well as Kevin Kline's recital of "I have of late" flat on his back looking up at the "most excellent canopy" of the stage.

Some bits are fresher. Hamlet sits on the throne only once -- when he tells Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, "I lack advancement." The actor of Lucianus twice is interrupted in rehearsal by author/director Hamlet, who tells him neither to saw his hands nor to speak too tamely. And Kahn and Hulce solve the problem of Hamlet's seeming to think up the Gonzago stragegem after he's already commissioned it by having the later speech clearly intended not as discovery but as justification for previous inaction. These solutions to momentary *Hamlet* problems are effective and notable. But however many

such moments, it's hard to shake the tendency to hold up a scorecard for a production that might have held a mirror up to nature instead.