

HAMLET: PRESS RESPONSES

Almeida (2017)

Shakespeare

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TIME OUT

Andrzej Lukowski

★★★★★

Star director Robert Icke's achingly compassionate take on 'Hamlet' presents Shakespeare's masterpiece as a shimmeringly sad vision of love. The play is always morally ambivalent, but here it's a world free of heroes and villains, in which nobody really means badly, but everyone is damned by their passions and frailties.

Admittedly most of it is one man's passions and frailties. When we meet Andrew Scott's Hamlet he is confused and miserable, blinking back tears and barely functional as he tries and fails to rationalise the recent death of his father and the rapid remarriage of his mother Gertrude (Juliet Stevenson) to his uncle Claudius (Angus Wright). But when he apparently sees his father's ghost, who tells him he was murdered by Claudius, this withdrawn young man starts to drift in a dangerous direction. Desperate to find sense in his father's death, he starts to tear down Elsinore.

Icke is famed as an avant-garde director with a European bent, but it's striking how little he tries to foist a big concept on 'Hamlet'. Instead his main innovation – aside from adding a bunch of Bob Dylan songs – is to cast serious doubt on whether Wright's Claudius did in fact commit the murder. Scholars of the text will be aware Hamlet does in fact overhear Claudius confessing to the murder, but Icke smartly – and audaciously – presents this as though it might be a hallucination of the declining Danish prince. Right to the end of this production of history's most famous revenge thriller it remains unclear whether there is actually anything to take revenge for. And if there is, Gertrude and Claudius's love for each other is shown to be absolutely genuine and true, and Hamlet's poisoning of it as great a tragedy as anything else that happens.

Scott speaks the verse beautifully, conversationally. It sounds like he is saying everything for the very first time, that these timeless soliloquies are his unfiltered stream of consciousness, that almost anything might happen. One moment he is calm and morose, the next he is in a genuinely frightening rage. It is livewire, edge-of-the-seat stuff. Clearly this Hamlet is not in his right mind, but as the play wears on you sense a terrible anxiety propelling his actions, a fear he isn't right about Claudius, the tragic sense that his eloquent existential dread has nowhere legitimate to ground itself.

Icke's production is stripped back and unhurried (a watch is a recurring motif); the only person in a hurry is Hamlet, desperate to do something – anything – to make sense of his dad's death. It's a long but uncluttered production, giving plenty of room to the words, letting the family relationships spool out gracefully. It's also intimate and wryly comic, warmed by the rustic Dylan songs – a world away from the misguided sturm und drang of London's last major 'Hamlet', the 2015 production starring Scott's mucker Benedict Cumberbatch.

The cast is strong all over: Wright's Claudius is a brilliant study in ambiguity; Stevenson offers an increasingly harrowing vision of fierce, instinctual maternal love; Peter Wight's Polonius is less light relief than usual, more a powerful patriarch whose powers are starting to fail him; Jessica Brown Findlay's Ophelia is painfully gawky and innocent, collateral to Hamlet's greater passions for his parents.

The fireworks come from Scott, but he's a long ways from his Moriarty ham mode – he is playing a bright, brilliant, sensitive young man suffering indescribably. Though Icke avoids the whizbang conceptualising of so many productions of this play, the sheer tenderness of his staging consistently and brilliantly wrongfoots us. Even the climactic fight scene is presented as warm and companionable, one last poignant glimpse of love, one last rattle of the minute hand, before silence descends.

OBSERVER

Susannah Clapp

★★★★★

Robert Icke is one of the most important forces in today's theatre. He blew the dust from Oresteia and made 1984 newly penetrating. Now he and Andrew Scott give us a terrific modern-dress Hamlet. Full of ideas but not manacled to a concept. The originality is a question of pitch and pace and breath. It is as if the lungs of the play are different. Every moment of the text rings with significance.

Scott is convulsed with emotion on a small stage. From the beginning he is emphatic, tipping easily from fury into tears, a windmill of small gestures, pointing to his eyes when he talks of weeping. He is on the brink of being too much. But then Hamlet is too much – for himself. Scott, spilling over with emotion, continually moves in unexpected directions. Away from lucidity, towards illusion, and suddenly dipping into laconic humour. In an inspired moment, on the eve of his death he sends up the idea of his fitness as a fencer.

This is one of the least declamatory of Hamlet stagings. It has extraordinary conversational ease. These characters are members of a family as well as a dynasty. They are also – again unusually – in the grip of love. Gertrude and Claudius are intoxicated with each other. Entwined on a sofa, they have to be woken to receive an ambassadorial visitor. Ophelia flings herself into her loving father's arms. Hamlet sobs on Ophelia's shoulder.

Angus Wright is an exquisitely subtle Claudius, using his great height slowly to uncoil himself. Juliet Stevenson's Gertrude is fervent and finely calibrated. As Ophelia, Jessica Brown Findlay actually makes the mad scene work. She is in a wheelchair, rigid-limbed and staring. There is no Scarborough Fair sweetness about her herb handouts. She hits herself; she hates her life.

Could this – given the unforgiving nature of the Almeida seats – be a little shorter than four hours. Possibly. Yet it is hard to see where, apart perhaps from the extended dumbshow, it would profit from a tuck. Could it be more three-dimensional and searching? Scarcely.

Dylan songs thread through the action like the voice of a goblin damned. The great designer Hildegard Bechtler divides the stage with sliding doors, their opalescent green giving a hint of aquarium. At the beginning these separate the brooding Hamlet from a fairy-light waltzing court. At the end – in a brilliant touch – they become a different frontier. Patrolled by the Ghost.

This may be a small space but it has a long reach. There's a touch of Scandi-noir and a touch of The Bridge in the bulletins from Fortinbras's Norway, relayed on giant video screens. But modern tech-y touches go well beyond the modish. The Ghost is seen through surveillance cameras, making his way through a puddled vaulted space: when he disappears, the screens fizz as if a big brain is malfunctioning. During "The Mousetrap", Claudius's face is captured in closeup. The machine goes wrong and the tormented image gets stuck there, flickering anguish above the stage. Claudius abruptly walks away from the play within a play. The action pauses. It looks for a moment as if something has gone wrong with the production. The audience is left in as much doubt as Hamlet himself.

THE STAGE

Natasha Tripney

★★★★★

Robert Icke understands the power of a pause. His production of Hamlet contains a lot of them. Not just the two intervals that break up the four-hour running time, but all manner of breaths and beats between the lines. Icke slows things down. He allows air into the text. He takes his time – and this tortoise approach wins out.

In Andrew Scott he has an actor capable of making the verse feel like tip-of-the-tongue stuff, the words clean and new. Scott is a moving and human Hamlet. In the beginning he glitters with grief, he radiates pain, and his reactions on encountering the ghost of his dead father and his uncle's murder plot are as normal as it's possible for them to be. He is bewildered, suspicious, angry and bereft. He greets all the twists of the play in a similar way, living them, unpicking them. He splits open the lines and gets at the sweet, ripe stuff inside. It is a performance of wit, delicacy and clarity, with silences that are equally as eloquent.

Icke, returning to the Almeida after Mary Stuart, directs with his customary precision. The production is one of twilight quiet and gentleness (for the most part – Icke does love a jump-scare). The aesthetic is familiar by now. Hildegard Bechtler's sleek set is one of sliding glass

screens and white curtains, the colour palette muted. There are occasional bursts of Bob Dylan. The Mousetrap scene is played with Hamlet and family sitting among the audience, their reactions filmed in close up. The ghost is first glimpsed on CCTV and Peter Wight's genial Polonius wears a wire.

The other members of Team Icke put in fine performances. Juliet Stevenson's Gertrude and Angus Wright's Claudius seem genuinely besotted with each other, hands forever entangled, slow dancing while Hamlet fights back tears in the foreground. They are almost inappropriately hot for one another, tumbling onto the sofa together, staring into each other's eyes. Jessica Brown Findlay, meanwhile, avoids some, if not all, of the Ophelia cliches to poignant effect.

Icke eschews gestural, explanatory acting. Each line reading feels considered in a way that makes the play feel contemporary. The betrayals hurt, the characters suffer, and the whole cast performs that magic trick of making you hear fresh things in one of the most – and, before this, I would have argued too – frequently staged of Shakespeare's plays.

While there's nothing here to match the excruciating death of Iphigenia in Icke's Oresteia in terms of tension, and Juliet Stevenson's awakening to the nature of the man she has married almost gets lost, Icke's production is never less than captivating, certainly not when Scott's on stage. He's an actor who sometimes stamps his foot on the accelerator, he's capable of maniacal excess, but as anyone who's seen him in Simon Stephens' Sea Wall can attest, he's also capable of restraint and grace. He can break you if he puts his mind to it – and does so here.

METRO

Claire Allfree

★★★★★

First we had Sherlock. Now it's the turn of Moriarty, aka Andrew Scott, to take on the Dane in an up-close revival of Hamlet that makes a terrific virtue of the Almeida's intimate stage. Scott's Hamlet is so luminously exposed in Robert Icke's downbeat, modern version that you can't just see his thoughts, you can almost touch them.

Dressed in hipster black, Scott is tremendous – tremulous, grief saturated, almost undone by the death of his father and, as the production progresses, enraptured more and more by the idea of death. At times his performance feels like an overlong suicide note but Scott, so good at wily sarcasm, mines plenty of sour humour too. In a mark of this tonally unpredictable production, he is also given to thrilling ruptures in mood.

Icke cleverly plays around with viewpoints. Surveillance and scrutiny are common themes. The ghost of Hamlet's father is first observed via CCTV. During the players' scene, live footage of the watching faces of Claudius (Angus Wright) and Juliet Stevenson's excellent Gertrude is projected on to the back wall. Sliding glass doors – a favourite device of Icke – illuminate private moments: Hamlet rejecting Downton's Jessica Brown Findlay's Ophelia in the bath; Gertrude and Claudius smooching at their wedding. The audience feels it is privy to more than it ought. It's a slow burn (nearly four hours) with a few irksome distractions but also many startling ones. Bob Dylan is on the stereo.

Throughout it all Scott's Hamlet is almost unbearably moving. Many of his soliloquies are directed straight at the audience and I felt I was hearing them anew. It's gorgeous.

EVENING STANDARD

Henry Hitchings

★★★★★

Andrew Scott's Hamlet is engaging and accessible, but also strange and dangerous. It's a performance that combines fragility, charm, biting humour and predatory desperation.

At first his Danish prince appears contemplative, a natural outsider whose key traits are hushed melancholy and delicate intelligence. Yet later in moments of outrage or passion he howls, his frenzied words bursting from him like bullets.

Scott finds new paths through Hamlet's soliloquies, dwelling on certain words as if caressing their edges. He makes the most famous speeches feel fresh and unpredictable, and his silences are no less eloquent.

Director Robert Icke, alive to the play's emotional heft, is certainly not afraid to linger over details, and his production, which has two intervals, weighs in at nearly four hours. But it has an admirable lucidity. Much of the time it feels like a modern and highly charged family drama, steeped in Nordic Noir. Shakespeare's Elsinore has become a surveillance society in which rolling news provides juicy updates and the ghost of Hamlet's father is monitored via CCTV.

There are striking performances around Scott's Hamlet. Chemistry fizzles between Juliet Stevenson as his mother Gertrude and Angus Wright as her new and discreetly malign husband Claudius. Jessica Brown Findlay is a memorably raw and wounded Ophelia, and Peter Wight is especially good as her father Polonius, a man who's essentially a pedantic bureaucrat but sometimes sounds more like a failed poet.

Icke's interpretations of classic plays are unapologetically audacious, yet they have a rigorous logic. Here the tone is conversational rather than declamatory. There's an abundance of Bob Dylan songs, and wristwatches assume unexpected significance — tokens of fathers' bonds with their sons. Laertes has a flashy one, whereas Hamlet's is an antique, a symbol of the family traditions shattered by tragedy.

Not all the modern touches work, and there are scenes when the deliberately leisurely pace means the production loses some of its grip. But mostly it's rich and beautiful — with Scott delivering a career-defining performance that's charismatic and surprising.

THE ARTS DESK

David Benedict

Andrew Scott's electrifying debut as sing-song psychopathic Moriarty in the BBC's "Sherlock" opposite Benedict Cumberbatch in 2010 was the most career-changing cameo since Judi Dench's Oscar-winning eight minutes as Queen Elizabeth I in "Shakespeare in Love." That, and his slew of subsequent stage and screen roles ("Spectre," "Pride," "Denial"), meant his two-month run as "Hamlet," now playing at the Almeida Theater in London, sold out in moments. Luckily for those with tickets — or those who can bag day seats — his wholly arresting performance is front and center of a production of thrilling intelligence. Director Robert Icke's "Hamlet" pulls off the exceedingly rare trick of being consistently surprising and surprisingly consistent.

You can tell a lot about a Shakespeare production by the director's choice of where to place an intermission — i.e., where the action stops and in what state it leaves the audience. In this three-and-three-quarter-hour (but never long-winded) production, there are two startlingly adroit choices. The second sees Scott's Hamlet at a terrifying peak of tormented self-loathing. All his hitherto suppressed rage floods forth and his soliloquy climaxes with a furious "O from this time forth/ My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth" and the stage snaps to blackout, leaving audiences reeling.

The first intermission is even more audacious. For the play-within-the-play, designed to bring Claudius's guilt to public attention, Icke has Hamlet seat the Danish royal family in the front row of the audience with a video camera trained on their faces, so that their smallest reactions can be seen on the screen lowered onto Hildegard Bechtler's crisp, contemporary-cool set. The moment that the Player King (David Rintoul) is poisoned, Claudius (Angus Wright) stands uncertainly. Everything stops. He then walks slowly through the action and off stage, leaving everyone suspended in a tense grip of bafflement: What is about to happen? At which point a stage manager comes on to announce a pause in the action — for both characters and audience.

This control of moment and mood is typical. Using live video in theater is close to cliché, but Icke gives it true dramatic impetus. Surveillance is part and parcel of a play fundamentally bound up with spying. From the opening, which sees Horatio and friends spotting the ghost on the palace's security cameras, the production makes use of what Claudius refers to as "lawful espials" but without letting the idea predominate to the point of being crass.

Power, in every sense, is maintained throughout in ways that are smartly rethought but never gimmicky. The politics surrounding Fortinbras and the war-state of Denmark are seen solely on screen, with the character's speeches presented as on-camera news reports. And in the scene in which Laertes and Polonius lecture her, Jessica Brown Findlay's notably forthright Ophelia deftly hides Hamlet so that he can overhear the plotting. Not only does that bind the two of them more fully into the personal politics of the play, it gives much needed weight to the underwritten Ophelia, which in turns makes her madness and death more moving.

Casting Wright, an actor whose demeanor exudes decency, as Claudius is symptomatic of Icke's thinking. Presenting the new king as fine and upstanding lends affecting doubt to Hamlet's revenge plans, turns Gertrude (Juliet Stevenson) into a far more interesting character — her late discovery of Claudius' guilt is fascinating — but, most of all, allows the play to move, in part, like a genuine Scandi-noir thriller. With the villains keeping the behavior under wraps, tension is ramped up, allowing for moments of revelation.

Binding all this together is the immediacy of Scott's riveting Hamlet. Although his trajectory is finely graded from initial grief through mounting anger to quiet resolution, his performance is summed up by his line, "But I have that within which passeth show." He never resorts to mere display. His handling of the verse is so adroit that it sounds at all times conversational. He's talking to the audience, not at them.

Like a great comedian, Scott can stretch time almost indefinitely because he makes the character's thoughts so legible. Coupled with his lightning-speed ability to switch thought without apparent anticipation means audiences find themselves hanging on his every word, waiting to find out what will he'll say or do next.

There are points at which Icke overplays his hand, notably in the near-constant soundscape. It adds to the brooding, low-lit atmosphere, but sometimes betrays an unnecessary lack of confidence in the actors. That, however, is a small price to pay.

Unexpectedly, it's the final act which bears testament to the production's masterstroke: its quiet emotional resonance. The scene with the gravedigger (Barry Aird) is remarkable for being so gentle. Scott's Hamlet is lightly witty, but what shines through here is the warmth of a man who has matured in front of our eyes. That's even more fully achieved in the duel and multiple deaths of the last scene, usually something of a routine plot wrap-up. Scott and Icke not only find tenderness of thought and expression, they open up Hamlet's moment of death in a way that is utterly unexpected, yet entirely wedded to the text — like this masterly production as a whole.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Sarah Hemming

★★★★

Death may be the country from whose bourn no traveller returns, but this *Hamlet* brings us a report from the borderlands. From the outset of Robert Icke's modern staging of Shakespeare's tragedy, Andrew Scott's charismatic, moving prince is obsessed, one might almost say possessed, by it. His father's death has poleaxed him, made him feel for real what it means to be alive and to die. Everything else is dust. He sits at the heart of the royal celebrations – here a sleek, silky affair at which the besotted Claudius and Gertrude waltz dreamily – like a sore tooth in a soft pink mouth. His mother and new stepfather regard him warily as if he were a ticking time-bomb. Meeting his father's ghost, he clings to the spectre for dear life.

At their best, Icke's productions bring lucid freshness to well-known texts and in Scott, best known for playing Moriarty in the BBC TV series *Sherlock*, he has a Hamlet who draws us with him along this painful edge between being and not being. He's racked by thought – aware that his mind is both a gift and a curse, unable to trust his grief-blasted consciousness – and almost perplexed by his physical presence: in the 'too too solid' speech he stares at his hands as though he had never really noticed them before. He feels his way through 'To be, or not to be' as if genuinely thinking it out for us, lingering longingly over the word 'sleep'. He's wired, desolate and – ironically – vividly alive.

He is also haunted by the chance that he might be wrong. In this Elsinore, a claustrophobic contemporary palace of smooth surfaces, sliding doors and flickering screens, where the outside world appears only in news flashes and the ghost on CCTV, certainty is hard to come by. Here, boldly, Angus Wright's slick Claudius even appears to confess before him, but this could be a hallucination. Scott's Hamlet wants answers, but his very senses are skewed by loss.

And grief rolls through this staging like a boulder, knocking down first Hamlet, then Jessica Brown Findlay's fragile Ophelia, Luke Thompson's impassioned Laertes and Juliet Stevenson's subtle Gertrude, who starts flush with desire for her new husband and gradually freezes before us. It's a very long production that sometimes loses focus and drive and has some awkward moments. But it brings out vividly (and boldly at the end) the great ache of loss in the play: the longing for reunion that can make absence so potent it feels like presence.