

Nashville Theatre and Performance Criticism

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Hamlet: A Mad, Mad, Mad, Man's World

Posted on [March 18, 2013](#) by [Trevor Anderson](#)

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* poses quite a conundrum for modern theatre companies: either you perform it "classic Shakespearean" and risk conveying the sense of relevance to modern times, or you elect to give it a chronological facelift and risk ostracizing the audience members who hoped you would perform it in the "classic" vein. Last weekend, Actors from the London Stage (AFTLS) opted for the latter. As their production showed, *Hamlet* can be a lens by which we use an older text to reassess contemporary notions, specifically those of madness and gender politics.

Though madness is a motif inherent in the *Hamlet* text, the AFTLS production expanded its significance by integrating madness throughout multiple plot points. From the opening scene, Pete Ashmore's Hamlet adopted a body posture filled with nervous energy, incessantly twitching and jolting, in a physical manifestation of his mental anguish and confusion. Because Ashmore displayed an obvious physical tick from the beginning, his decision adds a slant to Hamlet's later announcement that he will feign madness. In many ways, Ashmore's delivery of the speech was less of the announcement of a new tactic and more of an affirmation of something the audience probably already suspected. Additionally, when Ashmore arrives at Hamlet's famous reassurance of his sanity, "I am but mad north north west / When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw," he hardly convinces the audience he is in full control of his faculties.

Where Ashmore's performance takes a striking turn then, is in his Hamlet's madness manifests itself throughout the rest of the play. Where we might expect his pent-up energy to erupt into a passionate rush to his goal, Ashmore's Hamlet instead bares a cold, calculating demeanor. After Claudius' praying scene leads Hamlet to postpone his revenge, Ashmore menacingly whispers over Claudius' shoulder, unmistakably showing his cruel intentions. In the following scene, AFTLS' choice to stage Polonius' murder as a strangling rather than a traditional stabbing highlights Hamlet's sociopathic madness. A stabbing is a much more impulsive action – literally once done cannot be undone. A strangling, however, suggests a concentrated, prolonged effort to murder the intended victim and, in Ashmore's Hamlet's case, an unrelenting desire to enact his revenge. Hamlet's personal madness erupting in a series of murders strikes a relevant connection given the similar patterns that lead to many twenty-first century mass murders. Additionally, his cold, removed demeanor suggests underlying psychological difficulties that reinforce the connection to modern widespread violence. (Remember, Hamlet kills five people in the play.)

Beyond Hamlet, The AFTLS' production extends its study of madness to other characters – namely, Ophelia. Notably, the cast dedicates meticulous attention to Ophelia's infamous mad scenes and uses them to not only further the madness motif, but also to comment on gender politics. Structurally, this *Hamlet* includes major cuts to both speech and characters (we arrive at Act 3 barely an hour into the production) and yet, both of

Ophelia's mad scenes, typically reduced in films and stage productions, are largely preserved. By keeping the scenes largely intact, the play's action grinds to a halt, allowing madness to reassert its authority as the primary motif informing the AFLTS production.

Furthermore, Ophelia's madness also invites the question of gender politics within the AFLTS production. In the two Ophelia mad scenes, the audience gains a stronger understanding of the gender inequity surrounding Ophelia and Hamlet's stations. After their core, they share the same circumstance – a murdered father – but the gender-based social standards force distinctive responses. As a male, Hamlet can channel his madness into action by seeking revenge, while Ophelia, as a female, is wholly powerless. This lack of physical alleviation suggests one reason why her madness is genuine and entirely consumes her. As a result, the production challenges audiences to break beyond thinking of solely physical markers as measures of equality. Ophelia's tragedy is resultant of her victimization due to the prevailing mentality of the time, and only when *that* changes, the production suggests, can we hope to prevent similar tragedies.

Although AFLTS' minimalized set and costuming make it difficult to assign a concrete setting to their *Hamlet*, the focus on madness and gender politics implies a twentieth (if not twenty-first) century reading and presentation of Shakespeare's text.. By integrating these contemporary perspectives into a dramatic text that seems removed from our time, the moments that display contemporary connections force the audience to examine the treatment of madness and gender politics and how they compare across eras.

For those who believe Hamlet is a static story about “a guy who avenges his father's death,” they grossly misunderstand its power as a telling cultural piece of theatre.

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