

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Presented by the American Shakespeare Center, Staunton, Virginia, January 19-April 8, 2018**

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Hamlet. ‘Actor-managed’ by John Harrell. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. ‘Actor-managed’ by Josh Innerst. With Allie Babich (Horatio), Lauren Ballard (Marcellus/Osric), Sarah Fallon (Voltimand/Reynaldo), John Harrell (Francisco/Guildenstern), Josh Innerst (Hamlet), Chris Johnston (Bernardo/Rosencrantz), David Anthony Lewis (Ghost/Player King/The Player), Shunté Lofton (Ophelia), Benjamin Reed (Laertes/Alfred), Tim Sailer (Polonius/Fortinbras), Christopher Seiler (Claudius), and Jessika Williams (Gertrude).

Production Images:

[Image 1](#) (from ASC production of *Hamlet*)

[Image 2](#) (from ASC production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*)

Preceding American Shakespeare Center productions, and during intermissions as well, cast members provide musical entertainment, singing and playing instruments. For example, before *Hamlet*, Benjamin Reed sang the Wood Brothers’ pensive ‘One More Day’, then invited Lauren Ballard to join him for, first, a bass duel, and then a duet, both sharing the same bass. And during the first intermission for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, the titular couple comically strummed and sang ‘Just the Two of Us’ together in matching falsetto. More than mere diversion, these musical selections clearly complemented the content of the plays, setting or sustaining the productions’ tone as well as showcasing the manifold talents of the company.

Those talents were well spent on these texts. This is not the first time I've attended side-by-side productions of *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The plays can pair very well, obviously allowing for staging efficiency, as well as dramatic resonance. The ASC thoroughly realized that potential. Apart from some minor blocking adjustments, most of the shared scenes in both plays repeated themselves pretty precisely, enhancing the impact of each. For example, in both productions, after Hamlet's first conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the Prince extended an open palm to each, joining all three in a vigorous handshake, while he acted out the 'hawk' (flapping his 'wings') and the 'handsaw' (pulling and pushing an invisible blade), and ended by swiftly and smoothly pulling the other two hands together and extricating himself neatly from the tangle, leaving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern linked in wide-eyed and befuddled astonishment – their default state in both productions. This tidy bit of business was a delightful double depiction of Josh Innerst's playfulness and ingenuity as Hamlet, as well as the haplessness of his former friends.

All three actors gave strong performances as the core characters in their respective plays. Chris Johnston's Rosencrantz was appropriately slow in speech and motion, slack-jawed and brow-furrowed, whereas John Harrell's Guildenstern was rightly proud of his quicker wit, as when articulating the trifecta invocation of 'un-, sub- or supernatural forces' with a self-satisfied panache. The interaction between these two men was dynamic, ranging from ignoring one another entirely (deliberately or not) to sharing rapt attention, to neither, as when Guildenstern waxed poetic about autumn, speaking straight to the audience – 'Brown is creeping up on us' – while Rosencrantz looked around nervously, presumably, for any encroaching brown.

When attending any Stoppard play, I am always curious how an audience will respond to the complexity – often baffling in its brilliance, even for longtime enthusiasts – of the texts. This audience was thoroughly engaged, laughing almost as hard at the many heady jests as they did at the far less sophisticated but still hilarious gags. For example, they roared as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern removed their belts to make a barrier, and Hamlet easily skirted that barrier, while Rosencrantz's pants fell down. That sort of humour is easy to enjoy, but as much as they did so, the audience guffawed even louder at the sharper joke about England as 'a conspiracy of cartographers'. What a pleasure to hear such pleasure at such wordplay.

Before moving on to *Hamlet*, I must note the work done by David Anthony Lewis's Player. Lewis presented the perfect combination of tragedian and philosopher, consummately shifting between grandly hyperbolic and desperately vulnerable. The exaggerated pathos of 'the uncompromising birds listened' plummeted abruptly to a

calm but pitiable ‘We’re *actors* – we’re the opposite of people!’ This antithesis itself serves as an apt illustration of the ASC’s general sensitivity to and keen cultivation of both epic and intimate, the bombastic declamation alongside the naturalistic whisper.

Another of the ASC’s hallmarks is in pacing. *Hamlet* can run for four plus hours, but this was, as are most ASC productions, a brisk two and a half, not including intermission. And not a lot was cut. Fortinbras survived intact, even in the lengthy speech by Voltimand, spoken in its entirety and with arch diplomacy by Sarah Fallon. Of course, there were textual trims, and I missed such gems as ‘and therefore as a stranger give it welcome’ (1.5.167)¹ and ‘it shall to the barber’s, with your beard’ (2.2.479), but those lines are rarely candidates for cuts, and it was surprising and refreshing to hear Voltimand instead, for a change.

In any case, and even at so brisk a pace, there was no sacrifice of quality of speech in this production. On the contrary, the ASC excels in investing detail and nuance into the text, and indeed, Innerst’s was an exceptionally intelligent, insightful, and expressive Hamlet, right from his first entrance. Scribbling in a journal, and shaking his head at the court’s subsequent entrance, he lay on his back and crossed his legs disrespectfully, effectively establishing his disdain for his surrounding society. This was not a mild, mooney Hamlet, but an angry and aggressive youth. On ‘I’ll go pray’ (1.5.136), he glared down on his extended sword, clearly thinking of something more violent, and he punctuated ‘Except my life’ (2.2.213) with a threatening tap of his drawn dagger on Polonius’s chest after each syllable, foreshadowing his eventual murder of that man with that blade.

Yet Innerst did not make his Hamlet an unsympathetic lone wolf, but a man with many meaningful relationships. On Laertes’s initial exit from the court, he and Hamlet exchanged fierce hugs, and Laertes’s subsequent cautioning of Ophelia about Hamlet’s attention was not harsh, but more regretful, as if he genuinely wished otherwise. Incidentally, the love between Laertes and Ophelia and Polonius was also apparent in this scene, as Laertes’s laugh at Polonius pulling open his notebook to read his ‘few precepts’ (1.3.58) was not critical but affectionate, and when Polonius realized that Hamlet truly did love Ophelia, his apology to his daughter sounded sincere.

¹ All quotations from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

Hamlet's love for Ophelia was plain, and painful. Noticing her after 'lose the name of action' (3.1.90), he smoothed his clothes and hair and addressed her tenderly. Ophelia's vulnerability was illustrated by the pause between 'when' and 'givers prove unkind' (3.1.103) and the catch in Hamlet's throat, and his pause and repetition of 'I did' before 'love you once' (3.1.116) betrayed his real feelings. Later, his 'I loved you ever' (5.1.275) in the graveyard was directed not to Laertes, but to the buried Ophelia.

The connection between these three underscored the final duel's outcome, which was rendered as a tragedy of errors. After a quick first and second pass, and in a more concerted struggle for control of the swords, Laertes was cut and doubled over in pain. Confused by the wound, Hamlet ran his finger along the blade, fatally knicking himself. The rueful laugh with which he realized 'I am dead' (5.2.175) brought a fitting end to a multifaceted portrayal full of humor and danger.

Innerst was far from alone in his excellence, but rather surrounded on all sides by bold work, from Christopher Seiler's anxious Claudius to Jessika Williams's sharp Gertrude to Tim Sailer's sympathetic Polonius to Benjamin Reed's splendid Laertes. Maybe most impressive was David Anthony Lewis's Ghost. As Francisco warmed himself by the fire, we heard a loud 'woooooooh' off stage. Francisco glanced up, and he and we saw a flash of white behind one of the tiring house doors. The door burst open, and a white-sheeted figure emerged, again 'wooh'ing loudly, while transitioning smoothly to 'Who's there?' (1.1.1) as Bernardo doffed the sheet, laughing at Francisco's fright. This broad comedy perfectly prepared us for the terror of the actual phantom Hamlet. Painted pale and his visage grim, he was accompanied by offstage howls, and when he himself eventually spoke, his fearsome roar of 'Mark me' (1.5.2) was echoed to chilling effect.

Of course, there are always at least a few less effective moments. The pirate attack in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, consisting mostly of off-stage shouts, was underwhelming, and in *Hamlet* it wasn't completely clear whether or not Gertrude overheard Claudius's plan to murder her son. But what is far more worth emphasizing is the remarkable fact that all this work, the vast majority of it superb, was done under unusually challenging conditions. During the ASC Renaissance season, actors follow original practices as closely as possible, with limited rehearsal time and no direction. The remarkable results of the process evident here serve as a testament to the capacity of this approach for greatness.