

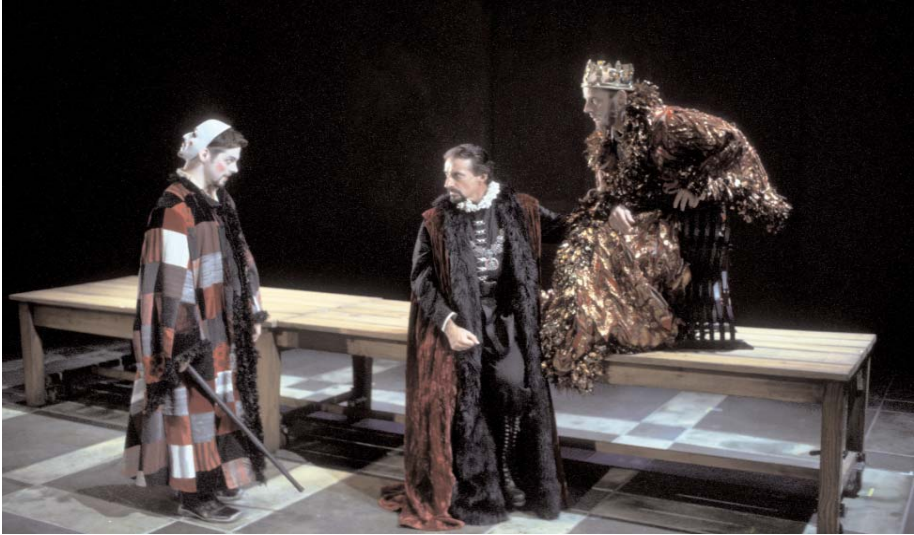
THE 2002 ALABAMA SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL'S *HAMLET*

by Craig Barrow

In addition to several films of *Hamlet* and productions of the play by other companies, I have seen a half dozen productions by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in the past 25 years. Until 2002, my favorite had been a 1988 production with Ray Dooley as an Oedipally-driven Hamlet of whom Ernest Jones would have approved.¹ Dooley had been especially hired to play the role of the Danish prince, and he was fantastic in projecting Hamlet's many-sidedness. In other productions, when regular members of the Festival's acting company have attempted the role in the past, the results were generally mediocre. Bruce Cromer, in a 1982, took pains to make Hamlet appear strategic, decisive, and forceful, an athletic Prince Hal stuck in a tricky situation, while Steven David Martin, in a touring production a few years ago, played up Hamlet's humor and warmth but made him appear a helpless, perplexed pawn, battling forces beyond his control, a hapless, delaying revenger. However, David Furr, whom I had seen only before this production playing Grumio in *Taming of the Shrew*, was more than up to the task of playing Hamlet. Perhaps having Ray Chambers, another ASF former Hamlet as director, helped Furr's interpretation of the melancholy Dane. Visually, Furr looked at times like a young James Joyce at the turn of the century in Paris, but before saying more about his appearance, I should comment on the stage, lighting, music, and costuming, the spectacle of the play, especially since any Shakespeare company as old as the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has to balance a true sense of the spirit of a play while at the same time create a fresh look. As director, Ray Chambers has to be aware that most of his audience studied *Hamlet* in high school or college and that many in his audience would be familiar with two recent films of *Hamlet*, one with Mel Gibson and the other with Kenneth Branagh. Almost as well known are such derivative, imaginative pieces as the frequently revived play by Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and the recent Updike novel *Gertrude and Claudius*. Because of these past experiences with *Hamlet*, any audience would have a difficult time experiencing anew the power of the play.

In his "Director's Notes"² Ray Chambers discusses the origins of *Hamlet*, his choice of text, and his interpretation of the play in terms of the history of the Renaissance. While Chambers decries the conflated text of *Hamlet* most people read, he chooses a "cut" text for his production based on Q2 but including "occasional word choices" from the First Folio as well as "structural influences" from Q1. Thus, his production ran approximately three hours with one brief intermission. While he cut lines in famous scenes, characters remained intact—even Fortinbras appeared in this production. Not only does Laertes become a parallel to Hamlet as an avenger of a father's death, but Fortinbras as well since Chambers wants his audience to see Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's murder not as a fault but as a virtue. As Chambers states, his project in directing *Hamlet* is ethical: "What if the enlightened—the reasonable man—were to seek retribution? Does the old tale of revenge change when the actor is moral? Can you fight a terrorist without becoming one?"³ The source of Hamlet's ethical views are Martin Luther's Wittenberg, according to Chambers. As

A.C. Bradley has observed about *Hamlet*, "the whole story turns upon the peculiar character of the hero. For without this character the story would appear sensational and horrible."⁴ Chambers must agree with Bradley's opinion, for in shaping the audience's response to *Hamlet*, his major problem is to help his audience experience a story that is familiar to them with fresh eyes and ears, to make a well-known play novel.



Chambers begins his quest with his use of the 750 seat Festival Stage. Although the thrust stage floor covering reminded me of the checkered floor of Branagh's film of *Hamlet*, here the floor was a series of pale green rectangles making up checkered squares, a nice surface for strategic maneuvers in a "rotten" game. The stage was bare and its bareness made the stage appear larger. End-to-end tables became the battlements of I:i⁵, while chairs with arm rests later suggested the thrones of Gertrude and Claudius. The only elaborate props used were the armoires on wheels.

The lighting sometimes featured opposing spots which cast multiple shadows on the back wall of the stage, particularly when Hamlet encountered the ghost in I:iv and at other times in the play, a visual image of Hamlet's many-sided nature. Visual perspective frequently called attention to itself, almost serving as a gloss to Hamlet's "mirror up to nature" comment in III:ii:21. During Hamlet's advice to the players, actors at make-up tables faced the audience as if the audience were a series of dressing room mirrors. Physical mirrors abounded in the play, and characters frequently served as mirrors for one another. In one of the oddest bits of staging, the audience watches behind the arras with a hidden Polonius in III:iv while out of the audience's sight, Hamlet berated Gertrude.

Although audiences are ordinarily accustomed to costumes as representations of one time period, in this *Hamlet*, costumes are visual symbols of the character's places in history. While Marcellus and Bernardo dressed as Renaissance soldiers with pikes and swords, Horatio appeared as an early twentieth-century student. In his first appearance, Hamlet also wore turn-of-the-century garb. Gertrude, except in the later scenes of the play, wore a red dress that appears almost 17th century, but it opened

below the hips, displaying black velvet tights and black suede boots of a more contemporary period, while Claudius' red and black robes evoked a Richelieu or a Machiavellian king of the Renaissance. Ophelia's initial costuming was a modest silver-grey eighteenth century, but her rapier thrusting while helping her brother pack for Paris added a phallic experience to her virgin image. Just as Branagh's film seeks to persuade its audience that Hamlet and Ophelia have become lovers, so this play suggested a knowledgeable innocence in Ophelia. In her mad scene of IV:v, Ophelia donned her father's ceremonial robes which had the look of a contemporary doctoral gown so that in her wild grief the audience is visually aware both of her loss of her father and her sense of betrayal by Hamlet. Fortinbras first appeared in the costuming of a typical medieval warrior, but in the play's last scene he wore contemporary camouflage battle fatigues, and he and his cohorts sported machine guns. Perhaps Terry Eagleton's description of the historical epochs in the play can partially explain the costuming: "Hamlet is a radically transitional figure, striking out between a traditional social order to which he is marginal, and a future epoch of achieved bourgeois individualism which will surpass it. But because of this we can glimpse in him a negative critique of the forms of subjectivity typical of both of these regimes."⁶ Ray Chambers as director and Kristine Kearney as costume designer have clothed characters in terms of the historical eras their consciousnesses represent. In his "Director's Notes," Ray Chambers sees the characters of the play in a similar fashion to Eagleton, as he describes King Hamlet as "a dead medieval king," while Claudius "embodies the contemporary English Renaissance ideals of leadership, diplomacy, Protestant values, and as we later find, the worst of Machiavelli." Chambers sees Hamlet as tied to Wittenberg and Martin Luther, and hence "a more severe and radical scholastic/scientific Renaissance world-view: a humanist."⁷

The cellist Jennifer Byers, who played on stage during the intermission of the play and continued during the dumb show of III:ii, was dressed formally as a member of a symphony orchestra would ordinarily appear. The music she had composed was modal with conflicted themes, a more bleak sound than Miles Davis's bluesy musings in the latter 1950s that echo Hamlet's internal dividedness. While the music could have easily been eliminated from the production, it served as an emotive bridge to the two parts of the play separated by the intermission. During the dumb show, the music's effect was similar to that of a piano or organ in a motion picture theatre.

A departure from previous Hamlets that I have seen was the portrayal of the Ghost of King Hamlet. In the beginning of the play, before Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo, Remi Sandri's movements as the Ghost are hostile, almost driving the three characters off the end-to-end tables on which they stood. When Hamlet appeared before the Ghost in I:iv and talked to him in I:v, the Ghost grabbed him to force Hamlet's attention. While the Ghost's voice was gentle when talking about Gertrude and her transgressions, the Ghost was positively abusive when dealing with Hamlet. The temper of the Ghost is even worse when he berated Hamlet's "almost blunted purpose" (III:iv:111) in Gertrude's bedroom; here, though again sympathetic to Gertrude, he seized and shook Hamlet. Also, while in most productions of *Hamlet*, the actor who plays the Ghost also portrays the First Player, in this production less is done to disguise this doubling, so that when the First Player movingly recounted Priam's death in II:ii, Hamlet's guilt in not pursuing revenge for the death of King Hamlet became clearer, a fine introduction to Hamlet's self-disgust in his moving soliloquy, "What's Hecuba to him, or he to [Hecuba]/ That he should weep for her" (II:ii:559-560)?



The harshness of the Ghost's physical actions in the production of the play to Hamlet makes one wonder about the closeness of father and son prior to King Hamlet's death. This treatment of the relationship in the play might advance the Oedipal triangle suggested by Ernest Jones. A youthful, attractive Greta Lambert as Gertrude and a sensual Greg Thornton as Claudius, who both frequently caress each other prior to the bedroom scene of III:iv, would seem to set up an erotically charged encounter of Hamlet and Gertrude; however, this initial staging of the scene with Hamlet and Gertrude out-of-sight nearly blunts this purpose as the audience watched Polonius listening to the mother/son dispute.

David Furr is a contemplative Hamlet appropriate to a former student who wishes to return to Wittenberg, a reluctant taker of action, although action is a release for him from the melancholy the audience initially sees. His mother's quick marriage poisons his sense of value and his idealization of his father, as Janet Adelman has observed,⁸ and his displacement in office isolates him, peeling away friends through the patronage of Claudius, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and his lover, Ophelia, whom he sees as being a puppet to the will of her father. Only Horatio, ably played by James Joseph O'Neal, is loyal to him. The Ghost of King Hamlet with his tale of murder and betrayal offers Hamlet escape from melancholy through action, and in this production, Hamlet's hesitations and delays in avenging his father and the seduction of his mother are actually sources of value rather than faults; the reluctance to murder Claudius, even with cause, is seen as positive, and many of Hamlet's great speeches, such as "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (III:I:55) are a working through of a tragic dilemma of revenge justice and Christian conscience. In a mysterious universe, how can one know anything with certainty, Hamlet ponders, and if we cannot know, how can we act?⁹ As Chambers directs the play, and as David Furr plays the part, the conscience that Hamlet decries as making cowards of us all (III:I:82) is a worthy value. Only after the treachery of Claudius in action at the end of the play, in which Hamlet sees his mother die from poison meant for him, is Hamlet able to kill Claudius. In this production, the delays and hesitations of Hamlet are a virtue rather than a vice.

Without a capable Hamlet this production would have floundered, but fortunately David Furr was up to the task, whether revealing the motives of others or anatomizing his own soul, being exuberant over the success of the play within the play or crestfallen at the betrayals of those he had valued. Also important to the production's success were Greta Lambert and Greg Thornton who reprised their roles from the 1988 ASF *Hamlet* as Gertrude and Claudius. Lambert, more subdued than in the earlier production, dramatized the shallowness of Gertrude here more than in the earlier, more Oedipal production, while Greg Thornton showed a more conscience-ridden villain than in the 1988 play. Ophelia, torn between father and lover, was ably portrayed by Devan Sorvari. Her madness, which has the danger of becoming a set piece by itself, was only a comparison to the feigned madness of Hamlet.

I have seen the Alabama Shakespeare Festival mar the great tragedies of Shakespeare by making casting errors for lead roles, such as in the *King Lear* two years ago and *Othello* in 1978 and 1987. Ray Chambers chose his actors wisely, and with the help of his staff put together a successful *Hamlet*, one that helped his audience see anew a familiar play.

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Notes

1. Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York: Norton, 1976).
2. Cast List, p.4.
3. Cast List, p.4.
4. A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian, 1955):79.
5. Quotations accord with *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakesmore Evans, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
6. Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987):74.
7. Cast List, p.4.
8. Janet Adelman, "'Man and Wife Is One Flesh': *Hamlet* and the Confrontation with the Maternal Body," *Hamlet*, ed. Suzanne L. Wofford (New York: Bedford, 1994):220-240. An intriguing earlier article by Rupin Desai, "*Hamlet* and Paternity," *The Upstart Crow*, 3 (Fall 1980), while not psychoanalytic as Adelman investigates, "How can Hamlet be sure he is not the natural son of Claudius" (97)? Both critics deal with the problem of Hamlet's idealization of the father.
9. See Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," *Hamlet*, ed. Edward Hubler (New York: Signet, 1987):234-56.