

## The 'Cumberbatch' *Hamlet* (1): 'The very age and body of the time his form and pressure'

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Abstract: This essay reads Lyndsey Turner's 2015 *Hamlet* at the Barbican Theatre in London against the production's priorities, namely, being star, new audience and box-office driven. It explores the negotiation of the script, space and politics at the heart of this production. Giving its due when discussing the cinematic employment of cuts, editing, lighting and freeze frames, it acknowledges that some of the special effects were lost to the theatre spectator, *per force* cast in a secondary role in a production that prioritised live-streaming across the world.

Keywords: Cumberbatch, Turner, cinematic, politics, action design, Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude

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This assessment comes more than a year after the much hyped production of *Hamlet* with Benedict Cumberbatch took stage and screens by storm. The delay has afforded us the comfort of the longer view, after the dust of the media hysteria has settled, as have our own emotional responses to the production, directed by Lyndsey Turner, which we saw in different venues.<sup>1</sup> As audience members and as reviewers here, we inevitably bring to the table our own *Hamlet* experiences, which are informed by a broader European tradition of the play in performance and adaptation. As a consequence, we are perhaps more at ease with textual cuts and rearrangements, with the performance of politics and with the theatre taking a political stance.

### 'No biz, like show-biz'

In her review for *Hollywood Reporter*, critic Leslie Felperin noted that the aims of this private enterprise – Sonia Friedman Productions – were to 'add gilding to the reputations of all involved, attract new audiences to Shakespeare and make the producers a fortune

with a sold-out run and full-price preview tickets for the three weeks before opening'.<sup>2</sup> It banked on the appeal of the lead actor to young, non-Shakespeare audiences, a following he acquired when propelled to fame by *Frankenstein* (NT London, 2011) and the TV hit remake of *Sherlock* (2010–17). It was also unusually aware of its medium and audience.<sup>3</sup> Being the first *Hamlet* to be live-streamed internationally, to 25 countries, it had a cinematic dimension at its core.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the first-ever streamed *Hamlet* (directed by Nicholas Hytner for the London National Theatre in 2010), which was designed as a theatre production, and had a smaller outreach, fitting the early days of live streaming, this was a filmic production in aim, scale and design. Supported by massive advertising, which secured a sold-out run a year in advance,<sup>5</sup> it had a quarter of a million international viewers and a hefty intake from encores.<sup>6</sup> In this, it revealed a culture fissure between the seasoned Shakespeare audiences and theatre critics, and a new wave of techie groupies, ready to pay top dollar to see their favourite star. In this pursuit, *Hamlet* was an additional, but secondary, attraction. As often noted, this production used slo-mos, freeze-frames, saturated lighting, stunning special effects, diegetic and non-diegetic music, in a widescreen vision, typical of epic film rather than stage.

The cyclopean set, considered by many theatre reviewers as an encumbrance,<sup>7</sup> was designed to sustain the filmic impact. Indeed, it worked better on screen than on the stage where it belittled the actors and impeded human interaction. Cumberbatch was not the only star on the bill though. The other one was Es Devlin, a designer whose work straddles genres and media – from shows for Lady Gaga and Louis Vuitton to productions at the Met and the closing ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games. She gave *Hamlet* its grandiose Victorian ghost-story dimension, which, along with the Cumberbatch effect, was its most commented-upon feature on audience blogs.<sup>8</sup> On her part, director Lyndsey Turner needed to address the new audience taste for action, star-sparkle and shorter formats, which resulted in a textual version cut like a film script. Such an operation includes, as Trevor Nunn put it in a discussion about the shooting of *Twelfth Night* (1996): 'changing [the] chronology', 'considerably reducing', 'cross-cutting between incidents', increasing 'both contrast and meaning and ... making shorter, more charged scenes'.<sup>9</sup> Here, too, Shakespeare's text was subject to such an operation to be made amenable as a part of a grander cinematic design.

According to Aidan Elliott, Turner's stage adaptation used 64% (of the combined Q2 and F1 texts),<sup>10</sup> streamlined it to straighten up the plot and speed up the action while retaining all of Hamlet's soliloquies. While 50% of Act 4 and 55% of Act 5 were used, Acts 1 to 3 saw complex plot tightening and refocusing through reordering, line reassignment and splicing. Some critics created a storm in a teacup around the original placing of 'To be or not to be' at the opening of this production – a pressure to which the director bowed in preview. Few though noted that it was not returned to 3.1 and even fewer commented on the interpretive shift this created. Some, however, were alert to the way 'the tightening distribute[d] weight more equally on the other actors' shoulders'<sup>11</sup> without sacrificing Hamlet's iconic soliloquies (and the Cumberbatch effect). The outcome was a star-driven production which did not completely suppress the ensemble whose parts were (re)balanced. All main male characters were reduced (Claudius to 68%, Hamlet 62%, Polonius 52%, Horatio 47%), while the female parts retained a higher percentage of their lines (Gertrude 85%, Ophelia 82%) and gained a fleshed-out Voltmand character (whose part grew by 222% through cannibalizing lines from 5 other

characters, many of them Horatio's).<sup>12</sup> Lines were reassigned to support the logic of the plot and in the process give voice to smaller characters. Elliott has detected borrowings from nine other Shakespeare plays.<sup>13</sup> While playing around with the text to such extent is untypical of the contemporary British stage, the approach has a long and honourable pedigree (listing the lights of Garrick and Irving among its proponents), not to mention filmed Shakespeare.

### **'Who's there', actually?**

The filmic code to this adaptation was revealed from the start. It was not just that the first line of the play was reassigned to Hamlet, but that the underlying tensions were first established non-verbally. In a cone of light, Hamlet grieved the loss of his father: crouched on the floor, he flicked through an old photo album while listening to a record of Nat King Cole's 'Nature boy':

There was a boy  
A very strange enchanted boy  
They say he wandered very far, very far  
Over land and sea  
A little shy and sad of eye  
But very wise was he

And then one day  
A magic day he passed my way  
And while we spoke of many things  
Fools and kings  
This he said to me...<sup>14</sup>

At this point the lyrics were interrupted, letting the play replace the boy's response with the *Hamlet* play which we observed, thus, stating the interest of the production in the protagonist, loss and the young. Similar suggestions were visible in the publicity stills showing disgruntled children seated at the royal banquet table instead of the play's characters.

Rummaging in crates stashed in a non-descript space, Hamlet picked up a dark corduroy jacket which he fondly cuddled, weeping. This intimate moment was interrupted by an eerie noise – a stock in trade of filmic ghost narratives – which drew out the first line of the play. In walked Leo Brill's Horatio, the Dr Watson who would soon drag Hamlet from his reverie into becoming the Sherlock of this Shakespearean crime story. The opening sequence established for the audience the viewpoint towards the unfolding events: it was Hamlet's own. It also suggested an uncomfortable dynamic between the personal and the political. Hamlet was too much involved in his emotional turmoil to be interested in the world outside. Outside reality though was abruptly brought to him by a cinematic lighting sleight of hand. We were transported to a grand hall decked out for a royal wedding – a space anything but intimate, exposing the entire breadth and depth of the Barbican stage. Lurid blue-ish green walls and a grand staircase loomed stage right. Centre-stage, a wedding table Miss Havisham could have left behind, was decorated with stuffed birds perched on antlers, deer skins and crystal goblets. A

profusion of artificial blossoms completed the ghoulish atmosphere. The low lighting was a strain on theatre audiences – and remained so throughout. Denmark was a really DARK place.

Politics and family sat at the ghostly feast: men in military uniform (Claudius, Polonius, Laertes) and women decked out like human versions of the dead birds. In his father's jacket, Hamlet's isolation was further signalled by a cinematic narrative fracture. While he jumped onto the table to deliver his first soliloquy (here a spot-lit aside), the wedding guests faded into slow-motion, suggesting a reality separate from Hamlet's inner turmoil. Juxtaposing word and action was a repeatedly used trope. Another important template was provided by the multiple suggestiveness of the action design.<sup>15</sup> Commonly employed in (Eastern) European productions, action design puts politics silently at the heart of stage business by illustrating what cannot be verbally articulated. Here a 'little patch of [stage centre] ground' was a spot where the 'quick and the dead' played their passions. Slap underneath the wedding table lay the underworld where the Ghost disappeared at the end of 1.5. Later, the same table became part of a war office and Hamlet showed his contempt for political affairs by marching on top of it, and disrupting its neat order. There he performed 'To be or not to be' – on his knees, 'like Niobe, all tears' (1.2.148), accompanied by the customary eerie sound and cut off from reality. The makeshift theatre erected for the *Mousetrap* stood also centre-stage and remained there for the closet scene. With metaphorical convenience, its curtain served as Polonius' deathly hiding place and the liminal space where the Ghost returned. In 5.1, real bones were disinterred from the underlying grave where the body-bagged Ophelia was buried in the dead of night.

When Hamlet stepped out of action to soliloquise, he rationally worked his way through evidence. As Susannah Clapp saw it, '[e]ach possibility is laid out with complete clarity and assessed. ... The big soliloquies become a way of Hamlet's reasoning himself out of difficulty'.<sup>16</sup> These, and their emotional charge, were performed with intensity by Cumberbatch – a big boy who did cry a lot. Was this a sign of a refusal to grow up, or a shield from an antagonistic world? (Toys remained visible under the stairs and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern found him in his toy castle.)

Dr Watson-like, Horatio provided palpable clues that directed Hamlet. From his perambulations, this heavily tattooed intellectual, living out of his backpack, brought in a royal accession china plate, predictably used in the closet scene as a contrast to Old Hamlet's stately portrait. If during the *Mousetrap* he was tasked to watch the king, during the final duel he spontaneously exclaimed: 'the drink, the drink! She's poisoned' (5.2.304), unambiguously pointing to the reason for Gertrude's death. A man of fewer words (after the cuts) and key witness to 'deaths put on by cunning and forced cause' (5.2.377), Horatio was the only relational anchor to Hamlet, as well as a framing device – he was the first and last character to be with Hamlet.

### **'Graves like beds': Victims and Villains**

Ben Brantley sees the women in this production as 'such whispery, self-effacing presences you expect them to evaporate'.<sup>17</sup> From the position of a theatre critic, his judgement is fully justified. The vastness of the stage had a diminishing effect on all. It made Cumberbatch's part visibly physically taxing and sustained gaping distances among characters. Yet, at a closer look, the two women had carefully plotted and coherent parts

to play, an effect more legible on screen. The black emptiness so annoying in the theatre enabled comfortable individual framing without background clutter. Similarly, smaller detail, like photographs, tattoos, or the inside of Ophelia's room, were there rather as cine-detail – in the theatre, they were lost beyond the front few rows.

Fragile from the beginning and visibly uncomfortable throughout, Sian Brooke's Ophelia was, like Hamlet, in permanent distress. Controlled by a humourless martinet of a father, her sympathetic brother abroad, she was both fearful and defiant. Hamlet's visit to her room, 'pale as his shirt' (2.1.82), was performed as a rather courageous act of pulling the wool (having been kissing with him a moment before). Nor did she 'give' Polonius her letters, as he would claim: they were obtained by raiding her room. Though shaking in her canary yellow top in 3.1, she still tried to warn Hamlet that they were being spied on. Her madness (triggered when finding the bloody dagger that killed her father) vented the nature of the tensions that had broken her through a lacework of lines from Hamlet, Polonius and Laertes. Her songs were not about sex, but about loss and loneliness. Along with the fragile memory of photographs which she left, she was also its 'music ... overwhelmed by forces greater than herself'.<sup>18</sup> Before disappearing up the rubble heap that filled the stage after the interval, she gave Claudius the rue he deserved, but the performance allocated none to her, the victim of a monstrous world.

Anastasia Hille's Gertrude, another nervy and uneasy inhabitant of Elsinore, was highly involved in state business and war preparations, so much so that Claudius (Ciarán Hinds) had to run circles around her to control her agency. The closet scene was a moment of real transformation, after which she unambiguously took her son's side. As in Ophelia's case, the text did not allow her to think him mad – 'alas, he's mad' (3.4.106) was cut – while her suggestion that he was 'mad as the sea and wind' (4.1.7) was, similarly, an invention meant to placate Claudius, whom she led in the opposite direction to Hamlet's exit. Gertrude was the only adult who understood the young of Elsinore and could read their turmoil and distress. Discovering Ophelia's abandoned trunk and the camera she never parted with, she correctly read the sign. Her willow speech, in a dress wet from wading in the river, was a touching attempt to cushion Laertes from the horrible news; drinking the poisoned cup felt as an act of self-sacrifice. Gertrude's swift death did not go completely unnoticed since Horatio drew attention to it, but it was subsumed under the production's penchant for darkness and foregrounding the hero. Fortinbras, too, only commanded 'the *body*' – Hamlet's – to be 'take[n] up'. Gertrude and Ophelia thus became a casualty of 'enterprises of great pitch and moment' (3.1.86), unnamed collateral damage, always invisible, left 'unwept, unhonoured and unsung'.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever its problems, there was no mistaking this production's anti-war animus, or its unforgiving view of the politics of power. The movement of troops was highly visible and part of Horatio's text was used to flesh out a cockney-sounding Tommy, yet again hauling ammo across the vast battlegrounds of history. Fortinbras' captain's Norwegian accent gave a sense of the international nature of events. Here the set served its purpose well by enabling the visualisation of the massive movement of arms and people, bound to their 'graves like beds' (4.4.62), which looked convincing on both stage and screen.

The godless world of Turner's *Hamlet* was dominated by dangerous men, angry, devious, obsessive. The ghost (Karl Johnson) irefully commanded revenge, frozen, at attention, in a rotting general's uniform. Lois Potter noted the reduced number of

references to love as well as the general erasing of religious imagery.<sup>20</sup> Unremittingly cruel and deceitful, Claudius clung to power, making a comeback after every challenge to his power. Never repentant, never giving up, on the screen he was often in frame with his back to the camera (or in a long angle shot) as an ominous, looming presence. Polonius (Jim Norton) was the typical apparatchik, without any other interest but proving his loyalty. Often, Gertrude felt intimidated by the two and, unsurprisingly, Hamlet dragging her to a chair in the closet scene was interpreted as an immediate threat. At the end of the first part, the stage world collapsed like a ghostly House of Usher, in a violent storm of charred Styrofoam and the fast-paced second part took its inevitable course amidst the devastation.

One of the suggestions of this production had to do with Hamlet's unwillingness to join the real world. Like a drugged Sherlock, he was locked in his past. According to Matt Trueman, he stood for 'a generation ... stuck in adolescence and shirking all responsibility'.<sup>21</sup> Though this could mean a rejection of the militaristic world, clinging to the games of childhood created a problem of trivialising the tensions within the play's society, *pace* the vision of the 'wise boy' of the opening song. The other line, the betrayals that emblematised moral collapse, was more clearly and convincingly developed. Apart from the obvious villain, Gertrude was implicated in Hamlet's wretched state, a realisation which brought about her profound change. Ophelia was betrayed by her father and by Hamlet while in the very act of betraying him herself. Laertes (Kobna Holbrook-Smith) was persuaded by Claudius to betray Hamlet and eventually, himself. The cycle of violence moved from the old to the young. As for the unfathomable Fortinbras, in a no-triumph no-tragedy manner he declared his 'rights of memory' (5.2.383) of a place which had slipped into a ghostly fictional Victoriana. This was no world in which 'the greatest thing you'll ever learn / Is just to love and be loved in return' (the – last – two lines the production cut from its 'Nature Boy' leitmotif track).

### **'Questionable shape[s]'**

The enormous machine behind this commercial blockbuster Shakespeare took care of levelling its sights beyond obvious middle-class punters. An outreach project with Langdon Academy, a school in ethnically diverse East Ham, London, enabled a group of children to perform 'To be or not to be' to international audiences in a carefully edited film showing Benedict Cumberbatch visiting their school. This was a nice touch, which, somehow 'protest[ed] too much' (3.2.240), since the promise of success for all can only deliver in a real world where these children would receive a good, free education. To achieve this, a brush with *Hamlet*, exciting as it might be, would not be enough. The little film was also a framing device. At the end of the performance, Cumberbatch addressed real-life concerns with an impassioned address on behalf of Syrian refugees and a call to donate to the charity Save the Children. Yet, as in the case of the opening film, one could not help wondering whether generosity in the aftermath of watching *Hamlet* in expensive seats is not just token politics, the same as that which has undermined the democratic foundations of our own royal Denmark. An estimate puts the amount raised in the post-*Hamlet* appeal to about £150 000, an impressive sum in itself, and just about the annual salary of the CEO of Save the Children.<sup>22</sup> Good gestures and honestly spoken good-will are heart-warmingly reassuring and no doubt, flattering to our own virtues. Sometimes they can even save lives. Yet, in spite of the actors' earnestness, something in the vast

designer emptiness on the Barbican stage was symptomatic of the difficulty of entrusting Shakespeare with the political work from which real politicians abscond. Poets are legislators, but only in the golden world of imagination.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> *Hamlet*, directed by Lyndsey Turner (Sonia Friedman Productions), London, Barbican Theatre, 25 September 2015, back stalls stage left; Cinema, 29 November 2015; National Theatre archive, 27 February 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Felperin, *Hollywood Reporter*, 9/4/2015, vol. 421, pp. 62–3.

<sup>3</sup> On developments in digital theatre transmissions see Tom Cronford, ‘Will Digital Change Live Theatre Forever?’ *The Stage*, 21 April, 2016, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2016/tom-cornford-will-digital-change-live-theatre-forever/>.

<sup>4</sup> Credited for special effects in the Theatre Production alone were two separate companies: Visual Special Effects – The Twins FX and Special Effects – Quantum Special Effects Ltd.

<sup>5</sup> Here’s the testimony from a techie viewer: ‘We bought tickets a year ago. We were up until three in the morning waiting for tickets to go on sale, and we planned a trip around it. Months in advance, I bought the highest-tier [Barbican] membership [at \$164], and then we had three computers out, two iPads, and an iPhone. All trying to get in.’ See Bridget Arsenault, ‘Benedict Cumberbatch’s *Hamlet*, Reviewed by His Biggest Fans’, *Vanity Fair*, 26 August, 2015. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/benedict-cumberbatch-hamlet-fans-review> (last accessed 11 March 2017).

<sup>6</sup> It took ‘£2.93 million’ in the cinema, more than the Michael Fassbender *Macbeth* (at £2.82 million) and ‘broke the record for largest global NT Live audience to date’. See David Hutchings, ‘Benedict Cumberbatch *Hamlet* takes £3m at NT Live box office’, *The Stage*, 9 December, 2015, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2015/benedict-cumberbatch-hamlet-takes-3m-at-nt-live-box-office/> (last accessed 11 March 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Billington, ‘*Hamlet* Review – Benedict Cumberbatch imprisoned in a dismal production’, *The Guardian*, 26 August, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/aug/25/hamlet-barbican-review-benedict-cumberbatch-imprisoned-prince> (last accessed 11 March 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Arsenault, ‘Benedict Cumberbatch’s *Hamlet*’.

<sup>9</sup> Interview given by Trevor Nunn, director of the film *Twelfth Night*, to François Laroque’, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 52 (1997), 89–96, 89.

<sup>10</sup> We are grateful to Aidan Elliot for letting us use ‘The “Cumberbatch” *Hamlet*: Where did the great axe fall?’ before its publication in the current issue.

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<sup>11</sup>, *Hollywood Reporter*. See also Peter Kirwan's review on <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2015/10/30/hamlet-sonia-friedman-productionsnt-live-the-light-leeds/> (last accessed 11 March 2017).

<sup>12</sup> See Elliot's chart, 'The "Cumberbatch" *Hamlet*...'

<sup>13</sup> Elliot, 'The "Cumberbatch" *Hamlet*'.

<sup>14</sup> The song was written by Eden Ahbez in 1947 and made a hit by Nat King Cole in 1948.

<sup>15</sup> With its formative roots in 1940s Czechoslovakia, action design was a scenographic methodology used as a political and theatrical strategy to escape communist censorship. More than just creating sets, costumes and lighting, action design was, as Christilles and Unruh argue, 'an approach to scenography that [wa]s physically and psychologically functional, and intimately interactive with the actor', Dennis Christilles and Delbert Unruh, 'The Semiotics of Theatre Design', *Theatre Topics*, 6.2 (1996), 121–41, 121. See also Nicoleta Cinpoes, *Shakespeare's Hamlet in Romania, 1778–2008* (Lampeter: Mellen, 2010), 152–184.

<sup>16</sup> Susannah Clapp, 'Hamlet Review – Benedict Cumberbatch is the sanest of Danes', *Observer*, 30 August 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/aug/30/hamlet-review-benedict-cumberbatch-the-sanest-of-danes-observer> (last accessed 11 March 2017).

<sup>17</sup> 'Review: Benedict Cumberbatch in "Hamlet"', *The New York Times*, 25 August 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/by/ben-brantley> (last accessed 11 March 2017).

<sup>18</sup> John Cage, 'Hamlet: Review', *The Oxford Culture Review*, 26 August, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Sir Walter Scott, 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel', Canto VI, <http://www.bartleby.com/360/8/2.html> (last accessed 11 March 2017).

<sup>20</sup> We are grateful for her private communication on the subject.

<sup>21</sup> Matt Trueman, 'Hamlet: review', *Variety*, 26 August, 2015. <http://variety.com/2015/legit/reviews/hamlet-review-benedict-cumberbatch-1201577724/> (last accessed 11 March 2017).

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/staff-costs-at-save-the-children> (last accessed 11 March 2017).

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