University of Groningen

Hamlet, an opera by Ambroise Thomas

Heijes, Coen

Published in:
Cahiers Élisabéthains: A Journal of English Renaissance Studies

DOI:
[10.1177/0184767818794621g](https://doi.org/10.1177/0184767818794621g)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Heijes, C. (2018). Hamlet, an opera by Ambroise Thomas. *Cahiers Élisabéthains: A Journal of English Renaissance Studies*, 97(1), 111-114. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0184767818794621g>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

on-screen, but now a shift occurs. A character appears on-screen who is not also onstage. It's Dad! He tells Hamnet that it's okay to talk to strangers after all. Hamnet is visibly shaken by this presence, and, as he moves to take his father's hand, he vomits. His on-screen doppelgänger also vomits, but it is now clear that the screen is no longer capturing live events. The blocking is crucial here, and young West must be careful to duplicate whatever movements his double makes or spoil the illusion. Still queasy, he lies down onstage in a pose reminiscent of a dead child.

On-screen Shakespeare tries to google the reference on his cell phone, but onstage Hamnet recovers and asks him the question that has been most on his mind: 'Who do you prefer? Me or Hamlet?' It's Shakespeare's turn to vomit. Hamnet responds by announcing how 'bad' he (Hamnet) is. He claims to know what 'country matters' are, and, in another topical reference, he begins quoting President Trump's infamous 'grab 'em by the pussy' comment. His father strikes him. Hamnet responds that he deserves to be punished. He then sits down onstage and sings a Johnny Cash song that was popular in the 1960s: 'My name is Sue! How do you do!' The screen again goes dark, and when the lights return, the players' roles are reversed. Hamnet is on-screen but not onstage, while Shakespeare is only onstage. The latter begins a recitation of his own: 'Grief fills the room up of my absent child: / Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me, / Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words, / Remembers me of all his gracious parts . . .' (*King John*, 3.3.95–8). Shakespeare removes his false beard and performs a sort of striptease. Soon he is naked and alone onstage, a 'bare, forked animal', to quote Lear. The set again goes dark. When the lights come on, Hamnet is back onstage, and he and Shakespeare are both on-screen. The two make a pact that Shakespeare will not 'play out' the boy's life onstage in the future. Shakespeare's image disappears ('Dad? are you there?'), leaving Hamnet to throw a ball one last time at the screen; this time it goes through, in a successful act of quantum tunnelling.

Hamnet and Shakespeare finally arrive at an accommodation of sorts. The playwright won't portray the boy onstage, and Hamnet will no longer 'haunt' him. Is the play a refutation or a confirmation of this pact? Is Hamnet a ghost or a figment of his father's imagination? Is Hamnet the product of parental (or perhaps scholarly) neglect? His last words are more Bobby McFerrin than Shakespeare: 'Don't worry. This isn't very long'. The screen turns white then black. The boy disappears from onstage and is returned to the screen. The audience's reflection disappears. Applause.

Author biography

Alan Forrest Hickman is an associate professor of English at the American University in Dubai. In addition to reviews, he writes articles on Shakespeare's sonnets.

— — — — —

Hamlet, an opera by Ambroise Thomas (libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré), directed by Serge van Veggel for Opera2day, conducted by Hernán Schvartzman, New European Ensemble, Drachten, The Netherlands, 7 March 2018

Reviewed by: Coen Heijes, University of Groningen

Exactly 150 years after the 1868 premiere at the Paris Opéra, Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* returned to the Dutch stage after an absence of almost 100 years. At the time, the opera was very popular. After the premiere in 1868, it enjoyed overwhelming success in France, with over 300 performances at the Paris Opéra until the outbreak of World War I. Opera houses around the world included it in their repertoire and it was performed 153 times at the Théâtre Français in The Hague between 1872 and 1919. The libretto was based on an 1847 stage adaptation by Alexandre Dumas, père, and Paul Meurice, who changed the ending: Hamlet survives and is crowned king. 'Vive Hamlet! Vive notre Roi!'. Such changes were not unusual in France and were considered to be improvements. Cuts included the removal of Fortinbras, Osric, Rosencratz and Guildenstern, while the roles of Horatio, Polonius and Laertes were severely reduced. Text was also added to the libretto, especially for Ophelia, who became almost as prominent as Hamlet. The scene leading up to and including her suicide was a major addition. The British reaction was, predictably, 'not amused', and in appeasement, Thomas rewrote the ending for the 1869 Covent Garden premiere – having Hamlet commit suicide at the end.

Opera2day is known for making historically informed operas more accessible for a large audience, by using an interdisciplinary approach. The text was further cut to allow for a production of two and a half hours. The ballet, often criticized for being disconnected from the text, was dropped, as were many 'grand opéra' moments. The choir was replaced by the 12 singers themselves. The production started in the foyer, as a group of local players entered, carrying a coffin, covered with the Danish flag, and moving slowly towards the entrance of the auditorium. The audience followed, becoming an almost integral part of the funeral procession. As the audience sat down, the first thing they saw was a coffin, draped in the Danish flag, which remained onstage throughout the production, a visual reminder of death. While Thomas's *Hamlet* starts with the celebration of Claudius, Gertrude and the court, this production started with a voice-over, as Hamlet (baritone Quirijn de Lang) was seen sitting alone, despondently, next to the coffin. The voice-over plunged the audience into Hamlet's mind, and straight into the most famous lines of the play: 'Être ou ne pas être? / Être ou ne pas être? Voilà le problème...'

The idea of entering Hamlet's mind was one of the core elements of this production, further enhanced by the extensive use of film images (by Margo Onnes) projected on two large screens. Drawing on the moody, expressionist atmosphere of film noir, the projections provided an insight into Hamlet's inner thoughts, as in the opening scene, with alternating images of Hamlet, his father, Ophelia, blood, water, a forest, reflecting the turmoil in his mind, but also foreshadowing Ophelia's and Hamlet's death. In the love duet between Hamlet and Ophelia (soprano Lucie Chartin), images of the couple, in a carefree, Arcadian setting, were shown on-screen. The images backed up the action onstage, but also provided an interesting counterpoint. As Hamlet and Ophelia sang their love duet, the imagery changed from a carefree to a pondering Ophelia, reflected in the water of the lake next to which they were seated. The lines on eternal love were thus accompanied by imagery reflecting Ophelia's later suicide. In Act 4, during Ophelia's famous Mad Scene aria, the brutal action was accompanied by a poetical, Millet-like

Ophelia on-screen, but also by the earlier, relaxed images of Hamlet and Ophelia, making the contrast and the sense of loss excruciatingly stark.

Likewise, as Hamlet entered Gertrude's (soprano Martina Prins) bedroom, she was visibly nervous about the confrontation, whereas the film images offered us a different perception of her – sensuous, putting on make-up and red lipstick – which reflected the discrepancy between what was happening and Hamlet's perception. In fact, the question whether or not Claudius (baritone Martijn Sanders) killed Hamlet's father remained unanswered. Director Van Veggel removed all the clues from the libretto on the history leading up to the murder, for example, cutting lines from Claudius's prayer in Act 3, arguing that he wanted the questions that haunted Hamlet to be questions that would haunt the audience. This made for a particularly strong scene when Hamlet asked his mother whether she could see the ghost. Almost frantically he turned round and round onstage, trying to reach the invisible ghost, seemingly surrounded by invisible barriers, as if he were trapped within the imagery of his own mind, his own madness.

In a personal interview, Van Veggel stated that he struggled to find the right ending for almost a year. Ultimately, he incorporated both the 1868 Paris and the 1869 London endings in a new, multilayered version. The film images showed Hamlet's father and Ophelia dancing in a forest. This instilled a sense of 'might have been', a vision perhaps in Hamlet's mind of how his bride and father might have danced at the wedding. But they didn't. There could never be a happy ending to this version of *Hamlet*, and Hamlet shot himself at the end, virtually alone onstage, while the choir could be heard singing 'Vive Hamlet! Vive notre Roi!' Whether or not Hamlet was justified in his suspicions remained unclear. Whether the images of Ophelia and his father were too painful, or whether they helped him summon his courage to commit suicide remained equally unclear. It reinforced the picture of Hamlet moving around in his own inner reality, with outer reality only partially reaching through.

Did this *Hamlet* do justice to Shakespeare? It depends – among other things – on one's preconception of what 'Shakespeare' is and is not, on one's awareness that opera is a different medium, requiring different solutions, on one's ability to mediate between a seventeenth-century English text, a nineteenth-century French adaptation and a twenty-first-century Dutch production. What the production did achieve was a coherent focus on four protagonists, Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude and Claudius, and a penetrating sense of loss, of individuals stumbling in a broken world. The cuts resulted in a more intimate setting, which turned a grand opera into a direct and intense penetration of Hamlet's mind, supported by the accompanying film noir images and the historically inspired music by the small New European Ensemble. Questions remained at the end, as Hamlet's paranoia and doubts were almost allowed to continue in the minds of the audience.

Author biography

Coen Heijes teaches at the University of Groningen. He holds MAs in Shakespeare Studies, Shakespeare and Theatre (Shakespeare Institute), English Literature and Anthropology, and a PhD in culture and communication. He has authored, edited and contributed to books on emancipation,

cross-cultural communication and early modern drama and published in *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *Shakespeare, Theatre Journal* and *Cahiers Élisabéthains*.

— — — — —

Richard II, directed by Guillaume Séverac-Schmitz with Collectif Eudaimonia, Théâtre Firmin Gémier La Piscine, Châtenay-Malabry, France, 28 March 2018, stalls, rear, and 29 March 2018, stalls, stage left

Reviewed by: Guillaume Foulquie, University of Worcester

This production, which has been touring France since 2015 with a cast of seven, is a fine example of how to achieve excellent theatre with limited resources. The audience entered the auditorium to discover a wide dark set with a white sheet spread in the centre of it. Scaffolding on the sides gave a sense of backstage access, politicized as a stage for the revelation of court mischief. And indeed the show opened with a (rare) staging of Woodstock's murder – in his bathtub. A man entered from upstage, wearing a black vinyl apron and rubber gloves, and stabbed him several times to a rap metal soundtrack. Blood and water splashed around over the white sheet on which the tub stood. Richard (Thibault Perrenoud), an energetic young man in royal blue, stood downstage, facing the audience, reacting to the murder behind him with excited satisfaction, screaming, shuffling and pacing the stage. The blood fleetingly formed a vague cross-like shape on the sheet, suggestive of St George's Cross, before spreading. Both the stained sheet and the pool of blood remained central to the design throughout the performance.

A brief mourning tableau showed the bathtub-turned-coffin (draped in black), with handfuls of red petals thrown over the body, marking the genuine mourning of Woodstock's widow (Anne-Laure Tondou) and brothers, York (Jean Alibert) and Gaunt (Pierre Stephan Montagnier). For the rest of Act 1, Richard strived for audience approval and laughter with excited histrionics, like a game show host. Gaunt remained serious, while Richard already seemed to enjoy the anticipated entertainment of the confrontation. A middle-aged Mowbray (Nicolas Pirson) responded mockingly to the first accusations of a tall, young and formal Bolingbroke (François de Brauer), but mention of Woodstock's murder lent sudden gravity to the atmosphere.

Marking the transition to Act 2, the bloodstained sheet was hooked to chains and hung upstage. The lighting saturated the play's psychological atmosphere with the spilled Plantagenet blood, which dripped loudly onto the floor. When Richard visited John of Gaunt, he screamed 'crève!' – French slang for 'die!' – at him repeatedly (about 30 times the first time I attended; 7 or 8 times, more intensely, the following night), seemingly causing Gaunt's heart to stop. This made Richard his murderer – in front of the inescapable bloodstained sheet – and a double uncle killer. The absence of emotion and the casualness with which Aumerle (Baptiste Dezercès) and Richard tossed red petals over Gaunt's body made their hypocrisy so obvious that they were decidedly comical. The comic side of death was a recurring theme: In Act 3, the gruesomeness of Bushy's