

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet: Pickers and Stealers

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Abstract

Quinnopolis, NY is, according to its website, "a theatre company creating original productions adapted from classics," and the company is aware of its oxymoronic quest to wrest something "original" from a "classic." Unique among recent *Hamlet* adaptations, only Paul Rudnick's *I Hate Hamlet* (1991) matches Quinnopolis, NY's obsessive focus on the daunting task of facing down history's most famous dramatic role.

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet, by David Dalton, Jeremy Beck, and Christopher Patrick Mullen. Quinnopolis, NY. Shakespeare Association of America Annual Convention, Philadelphia. April 15, 2006. *Performed by* Jeremy Beck and Christopher Yeatts.

In the introduction to the New Arden *Hamlet*, Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor organize their material around the multiple challenges of *Hamlet*: "The challenge of editing *Hamlet*," "The challenge to the greatness of *Hamlet*," and "The challenge of dating *Hamlet*" (Shakespeare 2006, vii) — the last, disappointingly, an essay on textual provenance and not Ophelia's plight. Pride of place, however, goes to "The challenge of acting *Hamlet*." If it is true, as Tyrone Guthrie claimed, that "*Hamlet* is always going on somewhere" (Guthrie 1966, 72), some plucky actor is even now steeling him or herself to wrestle with the ghosts of Hamlet's past: Burbage, Betterton, Garrick, Kemble, Kean, Booth, Bernhardt, Barrymore, Gielgud, Olivier, Kline, Fiennes, Branagh, Beale: "Remember us?"

The pugilistic title of Quinnopolis, NY's bout with *Hamlet* may sound nervy — I know where my money was — but it captures well the daunting task of actor or editor when confronted with this cultural colossus. Step up and take a swing. The two fine actors, Jeremy Beck and Christopher

Yeatts, who nervously emerged from an onstage crate labeled "Quinnopolis, NY" (upstate, surely) only to find themselves thrust into *Hamlet* had to wrestle not only with William Shakespeare but with Tom Stoppard, a doubly daunting task to which *Quinnopolis* initially posed a brazen solution: *Hamlet* without Hamlet. That is, the performers initially adopted the roles of Francisco and Bernardo to interrogate a mute Hamlet, and the play staged a stubborn stand-off between the performers and Hamlet. How long could any actor resist the intoxicating allure of all those words? (Cunningly, *Quinnopolis* initially draped a blazer over an old-style camera mounted on a tripod to signify the prince. This seemed simultaneously an over-determined and under-realized pun on subjectivity, the camera "eye/I" both observing and observed.) But *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* veered from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (Stoppard 1967) and towards *Hamlet* by staging the guards' slow seduction. Inexorably, the gravity of the play's center drew these bit players from their detached orbit toward the play's dense core.

The production staged this seduction with canny ease, for once "Hamlet" inhered in an item of clothing — the blazer — the actors alternately, and at one point simultaneously, slipped into the role. Tellingly, and perhaps purposefully, the jacket was too big for either. The tattered jacket visually punned on how many have inhabited the role and on how habitual are its lineaments. In fact, these hyperkinetic actors straightened their limber postures when they tried on "Hamlet," like school-boys chastened by their first suits. Empty, the jacket seemed ghostly, a form without presence, awaiting the next challenger to try on its mantle.

Ultimately, these "rivals" of the watch lived up to the word's early English valence by becoming both enemies and allies. They alternately shied from and vied for Hamlet; at one point their tussle over the jacket gave them both a sleeve. This moment gestured toward something stubbornly ungenerous about the role. We speak of "Olivier's Hamlet," "Branagh's Hamlet," and, perhaps less often, of "Gibson's Hamlet." The proprietary syntax conveys the disquieting possessiveness about the role, which runs both ways. In a kind of inevitable rite of passage, "name" actors step up to apply a transient grip to the role, hoping to make a mark, usually leaving but fingerprints. In *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet*, Yeatts and Beck had initially clung to one another in palpable terror at the multiple ghosts that confronted them, a literally touching relationship that bordered on hysteria. Slowly, their desire to play Hamlet introduced a tension, then an antagonism into their relationship. This combativeness reached a witty and witting head at "To be or not to be," with the downstage, blazered Hamlet delivering the Q2 text while his upstage rival underscored him with Q1's "unauthorized" version woven amid his lines. In the production's most striking moment, these dual and dueling Hamlets reminded us that however definitive a performance might seem,

there are and will be other *Hamlets*, just as "Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" is but one instantiation of a performance without end.

The company claims on its website that "the ghost that haunts the stage is the play itself," and while that might promise a kind of navel-gazing solipsism, *Quinnopolis* took on the ghost with a no-holds-barred physicality. Beck and Yeatts countered the play's famous logorrea by literally throwing themselves into it. Ophelia, like Hamlet, was played by a dress that Beck would, with fey reluctance, occasionally don. At her death, Beck stripped the dress and repeatedly dunked it in a bucket of water with an anger bordering on vehemence. This was not a suicide; this was murder. That anger seemed directed not just at the dress, or the role, or Ophelia, but rather at corpses and corpses that will not stay in their graves. In a play whose title announces its combativeness, Ophelia's murder seemed an attempt by *Quinnopolis* to stake its claim through the heart of the play.

The toll of the actors' toil was evident in their sweat and fatigue, as they took possession of and were possessed by both play and prince. Near the play's end, Yeatts physically restrained Beck's Hamlet, stopping his mouth with duct tape, which, had Beck been a less compelling performer, might have invited ungenerous comment from an audience of conference attendees. Instead, it rendered with lucid economy the repulsion/attraction dynamic at the core of the play. As much as Shakespeare's words entrance us, we might agree with Jonson that "sometimes it was necessary he should be stopped" (Jonson 1947, 584). *Quinnopolis* agreed. Ultimately, Shakespeare was stuffed back in the box from whence the players initially appeared, silenced for the moment.

If *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* had a fault, it was that it did not know how to end, and so ended several times before merely stopping. But endings are notoriously difficult to write and notoriously easy to criticize. (Apart from *Paradise Lost* and *Robocop*, it's difficult to think of books, poems, plays, or films — or theater reviews — that manage a satisfying end.) Quinnopolis, NY is, according to its website, "a theatre company creating original productions adapted from classics," and the company seems very aware of their oxymoronic quest to wrest something "original" from a "classic." Of all the *Hamlet* adaptations I have seen, from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) through Heiner Müller's *Hamletmaschine* (1990) to Charlottes Jones's recent *Humble Boy* (2001), perhaps only Paul Rudnick's *I Hate Hamlet* (1991) matches Quinnopolis, NY's obsessed focus on the contest between ham and *Hamlet*. Rudnick plays it for laughs, of course, and so does Quinnopolis at points. But the joke has a serious punchline, and after an hour or so with Beck and Yeatts, the play's title read quite differently. *Hamlet* wins on points, but the play's a knockout.

Online Resources

Internet Movie Database information for Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116477/>.

Internet Movie Database information for Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0040416/>.

Quinnopolis, NY Website [cited 15 October, 2006]. Available online at http://www.quinnopolis.org/Quinnopolis_vs._Hamlet.html.

Internet Movie Database information for Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093870/>.

Internet Movie Database information for Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099726/>.

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- Stoppard, Tom. 1967. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. London: Faber, 1967.
- Verhoeven, Paul, dir. 1987. *Robocop*. Performers Peter Weller, Ronny Cox, Kurtwood Smith, Miguel Ferrer, Robert DoQui, Paul McCrane. USA. Color.
- Zeffirelli, Franco, dir. 1990. *Hamlet*. Performers Mel Gibson, Glenn Close, Helena Bonham-Carter, Alan Bates. USA. Warner Bros.