

# *Hamlet* 2021's Outrageous Fortune

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## REVIEW:

*Hamlet*, dir. Neil Coppen. A live-online reading presented by DGC, in partnership with VRT and the KKNK, in association with the Tsikinya-Chaka Centre (Wits University) and the Centre for Creative Arts (University of KwaZulu-Natal). 31 May 2021.

In May this year, two close friends and I attended a live virtual performance of *Hamlet* via my laptop screen. The setup in the apartment where we gathered in our pandemic “bubble” required some improvisation. Load shedding (power cuts) in our corner of Pretoria coincided with the performance, so the laptop had to run on its own steam while internet access was channelled through a smartphone hotspot (the signal of which had proved unstable in the past but on this occasion held up bravely). Snacks and blankets in tow, we shared anticipatory chatter on the couch and on WhatsApp with friends preparing to watch the show in other homes. When the lights dimmed, a title card appeared onscreen informing us that twelve actors and six support team members were getting ready in their lounges, too, in Durban, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Luxembourg. As far removed as it felt from a typical theatre show, the production was nevertheless *live*. What with everyone – cast, support teams and viewers – expecting to contend with uncertain internet connections and national electricity supplier Eskom’s unreliable scheduling, a follow-up card summed up the situation: “Anything can happen ...”

The reminder might have been more humorous were it not also painfully apposite. In its virtual form, this *Hamlet*, directed by Neil Coppen along with associate directors Buhle Ngaba and Bianca Amato, was a product of more than a year’s worth of unanticipated happenings. Originally slated for performance in June 2020 at The Fugard Theatre in Cape Town, Coppen’s *Hamlet* was well-positioned to become a seminal local production of Shakespeare. The last definitive *Hamlet* produced for South African stages was, arguably, the Baxter/RSC collaboration directed by Janet Suzman in 2005 and 2006. A lot had happened in the fifteen years since, not least of which were the Fallist movements of 2015 and 2016. The effects of these protests on critical and practical paradigms were clear during the “Making Shakespeare” workshop for theatre makers and performers hosted by The Fugard in 2019. That event was an opportunity to reflect on the renewed urgency for critical, decolonial approaches to theatre-making and to Shakespeare in South Africa. Plans for *Hamlet* at The Fugard were then already under way; the play text became a frequent point of reference during the workshop sessions, and the three-day event closed with a roundtable discussion on the Fugard’s proposed production. The debates sparked during the workshop (including whether Shakespeare should be performed at all) were by no means resolved, and the prospect of “*Hamlet* 2020” evoked a range of reactions, from resistance and doubt to enthusiasm and anticipation. However one chose to view it, in 2019 the imagined future production stood for an as-yet nebulous possibility of something different: something new.

Then Covid-19 sent the world into lockdown. The effects on South Africa’s arts industry have been disastrous. The fate of The Fugard is emblematic of the hardships suffered by performers and theatre makers during this time. Along with the rest of the country, and all other theatres, it was forced to shut

down temporarily in March 2020. Productions were deferred and, later, cancelled. A first and second wave of infections came and went along with gear shifts between national lockdown levels. Artists and arts administrators have improvised and hustled with characteristic agility, but the protracted crisis is exhausting personal and institutional resources. In early 2021, a year after the start of the pandemic, The Fugard announced that it was closing its doors permanently. The theatre was thus survived by the online reading of *Hamlet*, one of the last projects it helped to nurture.

This *Hamlet* was produced on Zoom, hosted on the website of the KKNK (Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees) and made available to audiences for free. Like the National Arts Festival, the KKNK had moved to a virtual presentation model. In the blurb beneath the video link, Coppen paid homage to the support that the project received from Fugard Artistic Director Greg Karvellas and his team, as well as to the theatre's founder and benefactor, Eric Abraham.

The production format bespeaks the inventions mothered by pandemic-induced necessity. Traditionally, theatre is defined by the gathering of audiences and performers in the same space; a condition which simply could not be met in this instance. The online experience is defined by the physical separation of audience members and actors: the performance takes place in a makeshift, in-between virtual world of its own. This *Hamlet* has been described variously in marketing materials as a live, once-off reading, a rehearsed reading, a work in progress. Now, after the live performance, it remains available on the KKNK website as a recording. It is not a stage production, but it is a work clearly envisioned for the stage. It might, in future, make its way to live performances in a physical theatre: a consummation devoutly to be wished.

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The first scene, labelled "Prologue – the Funeral" in a cinematic intertitle, contains no dialogue. As the screen goes dark, Bianca Amato reads the stage directions as a voice-over which will become a consistent feature. The directions describe a South African state funeral. A coffin draped with the national flag is positioned beneath a mounted Kudu head. A procession enters: family members, officials, and traditional leaders. SANDF pallbearers carry the coffin to a gravesite, where the gravedigger works while listening to Zulu gospel music on a wireless radio. Hamlet (Anelisa Phewa) steps forward at the gravesite. It is at this point that the actor first appears on screen, framed in a video-call close-up against a black backdrop. The directions indicate his changing emotions: first impassive, and then full of grief as he lets a handful of earth fall through his fingers onto the coffin. The voice-over tells us that he lets out an echoing cry. On screen, his mouth opens in a silent scream as a blare of a Kudu horn fills the soundscape.

This lead-in provides a comprehensive introduction, from recurring motifs such as the mounted animal head (the Kudu is later juxtaposed with other wildlife) to the multilingualism suggested by the gravedigger's music (the production features translations by Ngaba and Fundile Majola into Setswana and isZulu). Phewa's Hamlet is a princely figure in an amalgamation of political and traditional dynasties. Subsequent scenes reveal that, in the wake of the noble father's funeral, Saxonwold has become the luxurious seat of a rotten state. The action takes place in Johannesburg mansions and estate golf courses, and directions are peppered with signs of affluence and excess. The allusions to the South African national political narrative are impossible to miss, though they work as a point of departure more than a blueprint. The funeral foreshadows the basic movement of the play: starting with the image of loss, it follows a series of characters in the wake of that loss, and ends after Hamlet's encounter with the gravedigger. The entire process is encapsulated in the contemplation of a handful of dust.

The efficiency and impact of this first scene demonstrate the uses of the voice-over stage directions. This is one of the compromises forced by the Zoom performance. Under the circumstances, many details cannot be shown – they can only be told. Much has been invested into the production concept and design, which are closely paired with casting, characterisation and performances. On paper and often in the reading, this narrated vision is compelling, and it is difficult to imagine how else this *Hamlet* might have given an accurate account of itself as a work in progress. Nevertheless, over the run time of roughly two and a half hours, the demands of integrating the verbalised directions and character dialogue wore down my imaginative energies. The worth of the directions lies in the hope of their physical manifestation; as materials for verbal performance they inevitably fall short.

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The quality of the performances elevated the production to considerable heights. Phewa gave an assured performance in the title role, providing an anchor for an immensely talented ensemble. While the individual camera frames and lack of a shared stage space effectively rooted each performer to one spot, the actors were able to mine the possibilities of close-up acting. The energy that would have been expended on blocking and large physical gestures was transferred to an increased focus on subtleties of expression and intonation. This was a style particularly suited to soliloquies, adding another layer to characters' various states of isolation. Appreciable attention was paid to the ways different characters filled their frames. The comically overbearing Polonius (Royston Stoffels) leaned towards the camera, apparently unaware of the way in which his visage was cut off by the frame at awkward angles; he drew back, slightly cowed, when accosted by Hamlet's apparent madness. Ngaba's Ophelia was restless, youthful, trapped: moving towards and away from the camera, resisting the influences exerted over her life even as she was constrained by them.

Ngaba's performance is made even more impressive by the fact that she, too, was plunged into darkness by load shedding during the reading. I only realised this afterwards when she reflected on the performance in her Instagram stories the next day. Aside from a lagging video and sound during one scene, she did not miss a beat. Her Ophelia was accompanied by Rehane Abrahams in the role of Laertes. Casting Laertes as a female character was a welcome modification; Ophelia benefits immensely from having a sister. Laertes' advice regarding Hamlet, here shared in a tête-à-tête in the ladies' bathroom at Claudius and Gertrude's wedding, became a pointed act of sisterly solicitude and pragmatism, instead of a well-meaning but patronising brother's attempt to control his sister's virtue and reputation (an attempt later reinforced by a less-sensitive Polonius). Abrahams' Laertes also made a formidable adversary and counterpoint to Hamlet. Typically, Laertes' reactions to the fates of his father and sister demonstrate a performance of masculinity – driven by determination for swift revenge – which Hamlet hesitates to fulfil. In this configuration, Laertes' rage and grief at Polonius' murder and later mourning of Ophelia's madness and suicide gained new valency.

This *Hamlet's* inclusion of ancestor veneration in its conceptual framework provided further opportunities for the addition of female characters to the play. I want to refrain from too much detail here for fear of spoiling the effect for prospective viewers of the recording or any future stage performances. Suffice it to say that Hamlet's father was not the only ancestor who featured in this production's cosmology: the accompanying textual interventions resulted in its most powerful moments, which managed to catch me quite off guard and vulnerable to their poignancy. It is also worth noting that these moments, beyond their affective value, have significant implications for the questions posed by the play: Who leads us? Who have we been led by? Who do we remember, and what do we do with this remembrance? The production's treatment of these questions is worthy of attention.

Hamlet, Ophelia and Laertes' positions are defined by the powers which act upon them, and by their ability or inability to take action in response. The older generation, by contrast, are characterised by the comforts of rulership as well as a simmering guilt at the costs of obtaining that rulership. Faniswa Yisa and David Dennis were excellent as Gertrude and Claudius. Yisa was variously aloof and charming in her role as first lady to the second king. Her character's disintegrating sense of control was clear, and her confrontation with Hamlet suitably emotional and chaotic. Dennis, in turn, moved between dignity and vulgarity, hospitality and deceit, shamelessness and shame. He inhabited these contrary states with commanding intensity; it was a compelling performance to watch. While Stoffels as Polonius was an effective comic counterbalance to the gravitas of the royal couple, the actor also imparted a sufficient sense that foolishness and corruption are not mutually exclusive. His lack of awareness was funny when he made himself ridiculous; it was less so when it turned into a perverse carelessness in using Ophelia to bait Hamlet.

The rest of the performances were similarly strong: Wiseman Sithole doubled as the ancestor king and the gravedigger; Richard September and Jemma Kahn made a fine pair as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Tshego Khutsoane was a no-holds barred player king (an actor freshly graduated from Wits drama school, per the directions). One character who was possibly underutilised was Horatio (Tony Bonani Miyambo). Miyambo is an excellent actor, though he was in this instance not given the

opportunity to demonstrate his abilities fully. Possibly it was difficult to avoid limiting his role because of the format of the performance and the fact that Horatio is a difficult character to embody at the best of times. He exists as a kind of audience stand-in, a witness to the action, a steady personality who remains unswayed while Hamlet endures the slings and arrows of fortune. In Coppen's script, Hamlet is the only character who sees his father's spirit appear. There is nothing inherently amiss with adjustment, but it does require editing and moving some dialogue which would typically establish Horatio's character and function in the narrative more firmly. If Horatio is the one who sees the spirit of the king first, then his report of the incident and subsequent counsel to his friend demonstrates his genuine care for the prince as well as his comparative level-headedness. If some more thought is given to the role in this adaptation, I am certain it would (will) be a great pleasure to see Miyambo in the role on stage.

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