

Please Continue (Hamlet)



Conceived by Roger Bernat & Yan Duyvendak; scenography in collaboration with Sylvie Kleiber. Dreams Come True, Geneva. Melbourne Festival. Arts Centre Melbourne, Fairfax Studio. 5-9 October 2017

Anyone who's attended a trial, in whatever capacity, knows that there's a considerable element of theatre involved. The rhetoric, the probing of character and motive, the excesses of emotion, the wigs and costumes, and the uncertainty of outcome. Yan Duyvendak and Roger Bernat were fascinated by the 'Byzantine dynamics' of the Guantanamo trials of alleged terrorists in which traumatised prisoners could hardly string sentences together, but were repeatedly told, 'Please continue.'

But Duyvendak and Bernat couldn't make the transcripts work as theatre. They decided that it was a mistake to bring a real courtroom into the theatre, so instead they would bring a fictional case into a courtroom. (There may be a flaw or two in the reasoning here, but never mind). They combined a famous fictional case – the death of Polonius at the hands of Hamlet – with a real murder case. They then employ actors, unrehearsed but acting out the crime scenario provided beforehand, to play the accused (Hamlet – here Chris Ryan), his mother Gertrude (here Genevieve Picot) and his ex-girlfriend Ophelia (here Jessica Clarke). Polonius was, as we know, hidden behind a curtain in Gertrude's bedroom. He made a noise; Hamlet heard it and stabbed into the curtain only to discover he had killed Polonius.

Finally, Duyvendak and Bernat employ real lawyers (different for each performance) to try the case. On opening night, the judge was Justice Hempel, formerly a Justice of the Supreme Court, his Associate, Grant Lubofsky, John Champion QC, director of the Victorian DPP, for the prosecution, with Jeremy McWilliam as his junior; and Lesley Taylor QC and Daniel Aghion for the defence. After evidence is heard from the accused Hamlet and the two witnesses, each giving their *version* of the night and following day in question, a forensic pathologist – Dr David Ranson, but also different each night – is called. Finally, counsel sum up and the judge selects a jury at random from the audience. They retire to consider their verdict.

It's an intriguing idea with the admirable intention of exposing the dynamics of the legal system – and the theatrics of it – as well as the differing versions and approaches of the changing legal teams. Unfortunately, however, the intention is not necessarily realised. The first problem – at least for me – is the use of Shakespeare's characters' names. Surely, half to two-thirds of the audience know the play, but here it's stripped to the barest of *events* and combined with that 'real' case. Early on, we hear that Gertrude and Claudius live in a flat (in Collingwood) and that, according to Ophelia, her father Polonius, encouraged her relationship with Hamlet. But here Hamlet is not a prince, so... maybe that's okay. The hand-up brief, in fact, states that Hamlet is 'unemployed'. Claudius has a statement in the brief, but he's not called. In the play, Hamlet reckons it's Claudius behind the curtain and very much intends to kill *him* – but that doesn't come into it. In effect, we're being asked to forget Shakespeare, and attend to the 'facts, as presented here. So why use the well-known names? Shorthand?

Secondly, despite the best efforts of the actors, the case is a grubby little one and their characters are not that fascinating. Mr Ryan verges on inarticulate, and while Ms Clarke plays her Ophelia most convincingly, the character is an urban airhead. Both, we suspect, are selective with the truth for obvious reasons. Ms Picot's Gertrude is the most interesting since Ms Picot makes her cunningly but plausibly evasive in her efforts to protect her feckless son.

Thirdly, the most brilliant of lawyers may not necessarily be the most brilliant of performers, especially when they are constrained by this particular case. (Although, if I got into trouble, I'd hope to have Ms Taylor on my side).

While the mode of the proceedings may be a revelation to anyone who has *not* attended a real trial in a real courtroom, what we saw was excessively drawn out, not helped by Hamlet's defence ('I thought it was a rat') being (to me) ludicrous, nor by the lengthy forensic evidence, with all due respect to Dr Ranson, being merely confirmatory.

It's a *process* driven presentation and the process takes as long as it takes. It's meant to wrap up at nine pm, but by ten past ten, we hadn't yet heard counsels' summing up. When the jury retired, I'm afraid many the audience did



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too. As the Companion whispered to me, 'Do we care?'

Perhaps the succeeding three performances were snappier, depending on the legal personnel. But they would still be stuck with the confusing case of Hamlet-but-not-*Hamlet* and the plodding but absolutely necessary nature of getting 'the facts'. What could be interesting would be to attend on two or even three nights and note the differences. *That* could be a revelation although rather a matter of endurance.

Michael Brindley

Photographer: Greg Noo-wak

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