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# Please, Continue (Hamlet) review: Forensic firepower on show in courtroom drama

Cameron Woodhead



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PLEASE, CONTINUE (HAMLET) ★★<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>

Arts Centre Melbourne, Until October 9

Putting Hamlet on trial for the murder of Polonius using real lawyers and judges, *Please, Continue* brings the theatre of the criminal law into an actual theatre. There are probably as many actors manqué in the legal profession as there are law school runaways in the performing arts, so the idea of a crossover is a natural one. Just don't go in expecting this case to have terribly much to do with Shakespeare.



Please, Continue (Hamlet) stars different lawyers every night. Photo: Greg Noo-Wak

The whole Hamlet angle is window-dressing, really. No longer Prince

The whole Hamlet angle is window-dressing, really. No longer Prince of Denmark, the accused here (Chris Ryan) is a disturbed young man living with his mum (Genevieve Picot) in a rat-infested Collingwood flat. Pissed off at his dad's death, his mum's hasty remarriage, and his ex-girlfriend Ophelia (Jessica Clarke), he stands charged with the switchblade killing of his ex's dad through a curtain in his mum's bedroom.

The key issue is Hamlet's state of mind. Did he know there was a human being hiding behind the curtain? Or did he, as he claims, think it was a rat? Of course, the play provides a clear answer to this question – Polonius cries for help before Hamlet stabs him through the arras... and rats do not, as a rule, cry for help.

Yet proving this in court, when both eyewitnesses have a strong motive to lie, is another question entirely. No shortage of forensic firepower has been amassed to represent either side, and there will be different lawyers every night.

At the trial I attended, Hamlet was defended with rhetorical assurance and flair by Lesley Taylor, QC, head of Victoria's Criminal Bar Association, and her junior Daniel Aghion, and prosecuted with granular attention to detail by Victoria's DPP, John Champion, SC, and his junior Jeremy McWilliam.

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Presiding, retired Supreme Court judge the Hon. George Hampel, possessed the same avuncular demeanour and intensely focused mind I recall from advocacy classes in a former life.

Witnesses were examined and cross-examined at length. Exhibits, demonstrations and photographic evidence were presented. There was even expert testimony from forensic pathologist Professor David Ranson.

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As the jury is selected randomly from the audience after the trial, the event demands a peculiar concentration that makes it easy to take, despite the tedium, and despite running significantly over its allotted three hours.

Perhaps the liveliest moments in this courtroom drama were improvised – unexpected ripostes from witnesses, especially Clarke's traumatised Ophelia and Picot's mousy Gertrude, or the elaborate, Rumpole-like courtesy that's the sole permissible form of insult in court, where you must say "I am grateful for the advice of my learned friend" instead of "F--- off and die".

Eventually, Hamlet was acquitted, though it seemed a foregone conclusion. Shakespeare buffs may lament that *Please, Continue* pays only lip-service to the psychology of the play, but a bigger problem lies in tweaking the rules of the game to even the odds in a common law jurisdiction. Charging Hamlet with manslaughter in the alternative might be the way to go.

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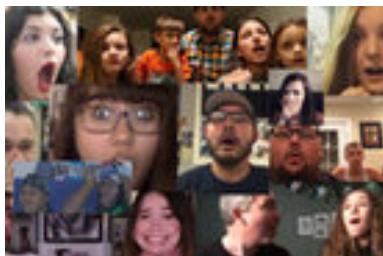
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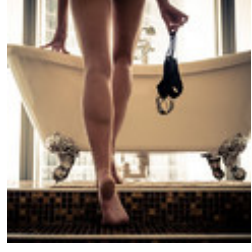
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