

# Please, Continue (Hamlet): how a play highlights the inconsistency of justice

Hamlet is on trial for the murder of Polonius, but Shakespeare is less important here than the legal system itself



Hamlet is on trial for the murder of Polonius: actor Chris Ryan in yellow with the legal teams and judge. Photograph: Jim Lee/Melbourne festival

## Stephanie Convery

Monday 9 October 2017 22.41 BST

**A** judge in red robes sits at the back of the stage. To his left sits the prosecution; to his right, the defence. As we enter the Arts Centre's Fairfax Studio, the house lights are up and the judge is speaking. He is instructing us, potential members of the jury, on the importance of the presumption of innocence, on the standard of proof that is "beyond reasonable doubt".

Hamlet is on trial for the murder of his girlfriend Ophelia's father, Polonius. But that's about

all the Shakespeare that is evident in *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*, showing as part of Melbourne Festival. The title is a reference to the coolly delivered, infinitely repeated phrase that punctuates courtroom proceedings. The show is structured somewhat like a law school moot: there is no script, only an evidence brief assembled by the show's writers, Roger Bernat and Yan Duyvendak (Spanish and Dutch respectively), fusing the story of Hamlet's murder of Polonius with a real-life killing.

Three actors participate in the show as Hamlet (Chris Ryan), his mother Gertrude (Genevieve Picot), and Ophelia (Jessica Clarke), in entirely improvised performances. The rest of it is down to the real-life lawyers who follow the conventions of the courtroom to bring Hamlet to justice based on the evidence before them - and the audience, 12 of whom will be chosen as jurors and ultimately decide his fate.

It is, first and foremost, a fascinating conceit: an opportunity to see top-notch legal minds in action, but also to get something of an insight into how justice is administered. (The trials at Guantanamo Bay were the inspiration for *Please, Continue* though their influence is all but invisible in the show as it stands.)



Jeremy McWilliams, the Hon Prof George Hampel AM QC, R John Champion SC in *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*. Photograph: Jim Lee/Melbourne festival

Yet Hamlet as we know him has little to do with what is happening on stage. Forget iambic pentameter, ghosts of dead kings or armies marching through Denmark; Hamlet and his mother live in a public housing complex that may or may not be plagued by rats. When he stabs Polonius, it is through a threadbare curtain that covers a wardrobe, and Hamlet claims he thought the moving object was literal vermin.

The actors know who is lying and who is not - before the performance, they act out the scene that will be under examination. It is up to the audience to decide who they believe. But the complicity of the audience in the outcome of Hamlet's trial is not simply a neat trick to sustain our attention, although it certainly has that effect; it also highlights the strict theatricality of the courtroom, and the terrifyingly subjective nature of justice. If "something is rotten in the state of Victoria", as the brochure copy quips, it's not corruption of royalty or politics; it's a criminal justice system in which a person's life or death can be

decided almost entirely on the basis of a performance by educated sophisticates.

The outcomes are unnervingly variable: the show has been performed more than 150 times internationally; Hamlet has been acquitted in approximately half of those, and when he is found guilty, sentences have ranged from a couple of months to 15 years. In Australia at the time of writing, he had been acquitted three times with one hung jury. Judge Ray Finkelstein oversaw the performance I saw, with Sally Flynn and Rachel Ellyard acting for the prosecution, and Julian Burnside QC and Lucy Kirwan acting for the defence.



Hamlet has been acquitted in approximately half of the show's performances internationally. Photograph: Jim Lee/Melbourne festival

If *Please, Continue* is an fascinating and compelling exploration of the legal system, one can't say the same for its treatment of Shakespeare. There are ways to recast Shakespeare in a working-class context, but *Please, Continue* doesn't really try to do that in any coherent way, and the transposition of Shakespeare's characters from royalty to rough-as-guts is a very partial one.

If the classic text has resonance here it's because of the limited, keyhole view we are given of these characters that we already know from previous experience are rich with nuance and whose lives are infused with great drama. Hamlet is merely a cultural touchstone, an emblem for the depth of human motivation, dignity and feeling that becomes stifled, distorted and ultimately broken when pumped through the machine of justice.

*. Please, Continue (Hamlet) was part of Melbourne festival*

## Since you're here ...

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading the Guardian than ever but advertising revenues across the media are falling fast. And unlike many news organisations, we haven't put up a paywall - we want to keep our journalism as open as we can. So you can see why we need to ask for your help. The Guardian's independent, investigative journalism takes a lot of time, money and hard work to produce. But we do it because we believe our perspective matters - because it might well be your perspective, too.

I appreciate there not being a paywall: it is more democratic for the media to be available for all and not a commodity to be purchased by a few. I'm happy to make a contribution so others with less means still have access to information. *Thomasine F-R.*

If everyone who reads our reporting, who likes it, helps to support it, our future would be much more secure.

Become a supporter

Make a contribution

Topics

- Melbourne festival 2017
- Theatre
- blogposts