

CONCEPT & INSPIRATION

HAMLET AND FILM NOIR

Can you talk a little bit about your inspirations for the production?

In an effort to focus in on the Hamlet story, observing his suffering and his death, it was important to me to reflect the world in which he lives. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. This world is a contained environment which has experienced extraordinary corruption. There is a void in the middle of it, a power void after the death of Hamlet's father, and a moral void. The whole place is rotting from the inside.

Our production is meant to evoke the moral ambiguity of film noir on stage, the duplicity, the two-facedness, the fractiousness. This is a world in which there is no more absolute hard and fast, right or wrong. Everyone is adrift, almost in limbo, there's barely a floor underneath our feet anymore. It's very dark, very shadowy, it's a world of heavy surveillance. Everybody is peering in and listening, eavesdropping on everybody else.

In a way, it's about police state. The time in which Shakespeare was writing Hamlet, there's a very good reason to think that England was very much in the middle of a police-state-like culture. There was massive suppression of Catholicism. The England of Shakespeare's day more closely resembled the Afghanistan of the Taliban than it does our world. Religious freedoms, many freedoms were suddenly in short supply. Freedoms that people had enjoyed for generations were suddenly gone, and if you were caught practicing any of those freedoms that you used to take for granted, you would be tried and most likely executed. That police state aspect is revealed through Polonius, and Claudius too. They don't use technology to do it, they hide behind curtains, but there's that atmosphere of surveillance and paranoia. And it's surveillance where everybody knows they're being surveyed.

Everybody knows that there's eavesdropping, everybody knows that every room is bugged, so nobody says aloud what they're actually thinking. Everyone keeps their cards very close to their chest, everybody is wearing a mask, and everybody is trying to get away with something. Everybody is, including our hero. It's just that we hope he will get away with it.

How will we see those ideas represented onstage?

Many of the visual elements in the piece are borrowed from film noir. Stylistically that has to do with a lot of dark shadows, fedoras and trench coats, and our world resembles that. You'll see an environment that's full of reflective surfaces, a world of shadows and darkness; there's no expanse of light. The lighting is from steep angles, so there are highly shadowy eyes and faces. People walk around with these long coats and umbrellas, everybody is dressed for the rain, because it's always raining in our Elsinore, which I relate to. I'm from Vancouver, so that feels like home a little bit. I guess I was feeling homesick when I did it. [Laughs.] So you're going to hear the rain.



In the second half of the play, you're going to see a femme fatale. In our production there's a strong suggestion that, although she's a soft-spoken, seemingly ideal mother at the beginning of the play, Gertrude gradually reveals herself to be the corrupt power at the heart of the entire story. There's one horrifying moment where, after a very emotional exchange with her son, she betrays him. She turns on him, and laughs at his emotional duress, and reveals herself to be the nastiest person in the whole place. And that kind of reversal is typical of film noir; strong, duplicitous women, very weak men are at the heart of film noir and we do that too in our world. Many film noir movies deal with a central character who is one step away from madness, and is struggling with the myriad choices in front of him and really doesn't know which way to turn, and the walls are actually closing in on him. And sometimes, quite literally in our play, the walls close in on Hamlet. Highly noir film idea, and one that exists in our play too. The colours of our world are white, black, lots of grey, and red. Or, as we say around the office, the colours are white, black, and blood.

How is all of that reflected in your cutting of the text?

I decided to eliminate the Fortinbras plotline. Fortinbras comes in as the successor, the light who will get rid of the dark, who will put everything back on the right path. Without him coming in there's a serious question of, "Now what?" What will happen? In the world we live in today, there is no Fortinbras. In our world there are more Horatios than Hamlets. There are more witnesses and observers than there are heroes who will suffer and endure. We're a culture of Horatios. Most of us don't engage. Most of us watch fighting on TV. That's why Horatio has the last line. He is our witness, our observer. For this play to work in our world, I don't believe there can be a Fortinbras who can arrive. There is no saviour. There is only us.