Something's Rotten in the State of Denmark

Hamlet, by William Shakespeare, presented by the Boston Shakespeare Company.

Imagine the Ghost scene with Hamlet riding piggysack on the Ghost, clinging so tightly to him that Hamlet’s line, “Speak, I am bound to hear,” becomes funny.

Imagine a “nunnery” scene in which Hamlet and Ophelia kiss, hug, caress, and very nearly make love on the floor, and then imagine Claudius, who has been secretly observing this steamy scene, concluding, “Love? his affections do not that way tend.”

Imagine a Mouse-Trap in which the Actor/Murderer begins to pour poison into the Player King’s mouth, causing Claudius to kneel beside the Actor to correct him and show him that the poison should be poured in the ear.

Imagine Polonius pounding his staff on the ground and the rest of the Court clapping so loudly every time Claudius makes a political pronouncement that the audience can barely hear what Claudius is saying.

Imagine Laertes in Ophelia’s grave holding her body in his arms, and Hamlet leaping into that grave, not to grapple with him, but to hold her body in his arms, and Hamlet can barely hear what Claudius is saying.

Imagine the Ghost scene with Hamlet admit he has not been present, “All my soul’s in my bones,” in act five, he has apparently come to realize that he may not even hear Claudius at the play’s end.

Hamlet does not choose to act, but director Bill Cain thinks he runs the last three acts almost continuously, often merging scenes into each other, apparently in an attempt to heighten the action, and he cuts Hamlet’s “How all occasions do inform me” speech, in which Hamlet admits he has not been “acting.”

In the end, however, Cain’s interpretation fails because the text will not support it. Hamlet does not kill Claudius while he is praying, he lets himself be sent to England, and only through remarkable luck does he find himself in a position to get revenge on Claudius at the play’s end.

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Does Cain’s misinterpretation of Hamlet fail? Not entirely. Shakespeare’s masterpiece is almost invincible, and the cast is very strong, including Richard Moses as a masterful Polonius, and David Fonteno as the Ghost. The rewrite of Hamlet’s soliloquy goes to the heart of the BSC’s misinterpretation of Hamlet. They apparently believe that in the “to be or not” speech, Hamlet is forthrightly choosing “to be.” According to notes provided by the BSC, Henry Woronicz a dynamic though confused Hamlet, believes it is a speech in which Hamlet chooses action over cowardice.

He is wrong. Hamlet himself concludes 27 lines later, “thus conscience does make coward of us all.” By the end of the speech, Hamlet has chosen not to act, not to commit suicide, but director Bill Cain thinks differently, and it shows in his production. He runs the last three acts almost continuously, often merging scenes into each other, apparently in an attempt to heighten the action, and he cuts Hamlet’s “How all occasions do inform me” speech, in which Hamlet admits he has not been “acting.”

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