

Prince Charming

Are things rotten enough in the state of Denmark? **Michael Billington** on the National's sweetly reasonable Hamlet

SHAKESPEARE is everywhere right now; but the standard of acting and direction has lately been getting alarmingly low as under-subsidy starts to erode the classical tradition. So the first thing to say about Richard Eyre's production of Hamlet at the Olivier is that it combines wit and intelligence with a grasp of the play's huge Gothic structure. It is very like late Peter Hall in that it depends not on a fashionable concept but on a classical quest for meaning.

What it lacks is a sense of danger and that is largely because Daniel Day-Lewis's courtly Hamlet seems deficient in daemonism.

The tendency in recent years has been to play Hamlet as a certifiable neuroasthenic whom no sane man would want to see on the throne of Denmark. Mr Day-Lewis gives us a Hamlet who is noble, sweet-souled and gently ironic. He looks like everyone's picture-book idea of Hamlet. When Fortinbras says "he was likely, had he been put on, to have proved most royal", one is inclined for once to agree rather than utter a loud, deri-

sive snort. Hamlet, as Agate said, must make us cry one minute and shudder the next - and, after all, responsible for five deaths before he kills Claudius. Of menace, however, there is little in Mr Day-Lewis's performance.

He periodically lapses into a crouching, crab-like gait to indicate an "antic disposition". But I never really felt this couth, charming prince could "drink hot blood." And, in the big soliloquies, I heard the words clearly without feeling I was being given access to a restless and tormented brain.

That said, there is much else in the production to admire. For a start, Elsinore emerges as a real place. John Guter's set is dominated by a huge martial statue, helmeted and weapon-brandishing, of Hamlet père, that irresistibly reminds one of the Commendatore in Don Giovanni.

Interiors are cunningly suggested by two sliding walls in-laid with Uccello-like images of battle. This is clearly a society that celebrates war, pomp and public ritual: when we first see Claudius and Gertrude they are hailed with a shower of gold



Oedipal kiss: Judi Dench and Daniel Day-Lewis

PHOTOGRAPH DOUGLAS JEFFERY

(pure Eisenstein) as they execute a slow, stately pavane. I wish Mr Eyre made more (as he did in his 1980 Royal Court production) of the theme of feverish eavesdropping. But (partly because it is a full text) you get the sense of Elsinore as a bustling diplomatic court in which Hamlet's anguish is an unwanted eruption. There are also some inspired touches, such as officials rushing in from adjacent rooms, with Switzers laying down their pikes, when they catch a whiff of a play in rehearsal.

Mr Eyre also conjures up some exciting images such as a snow-bound frieze of Fortinbras's troops en route for Poland or the sight of Laertes invading Elsinore at the head of a

revolutionary army. Mr Eyre constantly reminds us that private events exist in a public world. But, if there is any one performance for which I shall remember this Hamlet, it is Michael Bryant's Polonius. Instead of a boring old dodderer, Mr Bryant gives us a self-important chamberlain with a habit of blurting out blunt truths ("Your son is mad") which he then proceeds to qualify.

The single most moving moment in the whole evening is also Mr Bryant's touch of aphasia as he sets Reynaldo to spy on his son: instead of a cheap laugh, we get a sudden chilling glimpse of a public official facing the reality of old age. Time and again the produc-

tion overturns barnaced cliché. The current fad is to have Claudius and Gertrude groping and nuzzling each other like a couple of Miami honeymooners.

But Judi Dench invests Gertrude with her own brand of sweet melancholia and actually shows her sleeping conscience stirring to life after Hamlet has implanted an Oedipal kiss on her.

John Castle as Claudius also overcomes his initial dourness to remind us that this is a man who has murdered for love.

When he suddenly tells Laertes that Gertrude is so conjunctive to his life and soul that he has no existence without her, it is like hearing an intimate confession from a public figure.

But Mr Eyre has not simply banished cliché (including the tired notion of Fortinbras as a proto-Fascist). He has come up with a vibrant, sure-footed, well-spoken production that combines intimate human detail (only Stella Gonet's Ophelia seems rather thinly characterised) with grandeur of scale and that acts as a corrective to the slovenliness of so much recent Shakespeare.

And I cannot blame Mr Eyre for the feature of the evening that irked me most: the noisy, late arrival of dinner-jacketed members of the sponsors' party who, in my vicinity, proceeded to chatter and gobble sweeties. But that, I suppose, is British theatre in the era of Thatcher's decline.

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