

Theatre

A Hamlet perfect for age of irony

Hamlet

Lyttelton Theatre, London

★★★★

Simon Russell Beale's National Theatre Hamlet is everything one could hope for: witty, ironic, intelligent. "a Henry James who is also a swordsman" to borrow Harold Bloom's phrase. My one regret is that John Card's production strips the play of its public context. This is Hamlet with the prince but without the vital politics.

But first Russell Beale. Like all Hamlets, he accommodates the character to his own nature. He is not athletically built - indeed he mockingly pats his stomach when announcing he has "forgone all custom of exercises". But our first glimpse of him is scribbling notes while still mourning his father's loss. Instantly one feels this is a Hamlet who is bookish, inward, reflective and intensely capable of self-scrutiny.

Russell Beale's great quality is his capacity for surprise. He registers genuine moral disgust at the depravity he encounters within the court: there are prolonged pauses first at the revelation that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been sent for and then at the realisation that Ophelia is being used as a tactical decoy. But Russell Beale, for all his moral sensitivity and parodic wit, also conveys the paralysis of the intellectual caught up in

a world of realpolitik: there's a defining moment, after Polonius's death, when he has the chance to stab Peter McNery's taunting Claudius and slowly allows himself to be disarmed. This is a first-rate, deeply intellectual Hamlet whose weapons are primarily verbal and who understands that revenge cannot offer meaningful redress.

Card deserves credit for Russell Beale's interpretation. But it seems typical of the times that he strips the text of all its political resonances. There is no sense of a Denmark on a war-footing, no urgent diplomatic missions, no Fortinbras, so that we lose Hamlet's crucial soliloquy "How all occasions do inform against me" and a character who is a practical counterpoise to the meditative hero. In that sense, this is an old-fashioned production that focuses exclusively on Hamlet's tortured sensibility.

Where Shakespeare offers variety, the production also offers a glittering sameness. Tim Hatley's set is a candle-lit mausoleum filled with upended trunks and John Cameron's insistent score swaths the play in choral religiosity. Few of the surrounding characters also have a detailed inner life although McNery's Claudius displays conspicuous bravery. Sara Kestelman's Gertrude decisively hangs her husband's portrait in a case at the end of the closet-scene and Cathryn Bradshaw's Ophelia for once goes mad in her daytime clothes. But the glory of the evening lies in Russell Beale's performance, which is a perfect Hamlet for the age of irony.

Michael Billington