

# This rare, remarkable Prince gives the Hamlet of a lifetime

**H**AMLET WILL never be quite the same again. Simon Russell Beale caused one of the great Shakespearian sensations of our time last night, when he took on the Prince and won. He triumphantly confounded the belief that Hamlet ought to be played by a romantic leading man, with youth, sex appeal and a fine physique to flaunt while he suffers. Beale, who is overweight, almost 40 and without the advantage of conventional good looks, converts these facts of life and body into advantages.

He never strikes up a storm of synthetic emotion as he used to in his noisy past. What's more, much more, his bearded Hamlet, dressed in dark grey and Jacobean white ruff, musters a new kind of conviction. This is not a traditional Prince who wears a bleeding heart upon his sleeve, who revels in words and emotion at the expense of action. Russell Beale's Hamlet is stricken by the meek quietness of the truly depressed. He is never mad or mother-fixated, though he discovers vehemence when facing up to Sara Kestelman's bland, icebox of a queen.

Being without athletic prowess or the physical courage to kill, Russell Beale broods about his lack of the right stuff in



ashamed, despairing calm. He almost shudders at the sight of the corpse of Denis Quilley's airhead Polonius. Never before have I heard "To be or not to be" sound such a close-call over suicide. There's a baffled loneliness and reserve about this Hamlet, too. He reeks of physical awkwardness. Neither Cathryn Bradshaw's squeaky debutante of an Ophelia or Simon Day's semi-detached Horatio reach through to this royal outsider. No wonder he was not elected



Family tragedy: from left: Sara Kestelman, Simon Russell Beale and Sylvester Morand

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

king. Russell Beale's performance is contained within a production by John Caird that's highly original and imaginative in concept, often thrilling in execution, but not without perversities and ponderousness. Caird's Hamlet is an eternal ghost story, a requiem for Elsinore, a Pirandellian ritual in which the characters are forever doomed to enact their bloody revenge drama. Tim Hatley has designed an expressionistic, crepuscular Elsinore that's a cross between church, prison and purgatory. The back-walls are windowless panels, those at the side composed of bars. Candelabra lights swing up and down from the ceiling.

The first scene, to the accompaniment of John Cameron's dirge-

like, sacred music that keeps recurring through the action, springs a surprise. There are spotlight figures in what look like upright coffins, who emerge to bring Elsinore to life. At the close of play, Sylvester Morand's ashen ghost reappears in a cross-like blaze of blue light and the characters return to their coffins. Between these two action points, the stage is piled with trunks and packing-cases, as if this equipment emphasised the impermanence of Elsinore existence, with all its comings and goings.

The weakness of Caird's conception is that it converts Hamlet into family or domestic tragedy. The play's political dimension and framework go missing. The warlike Fortinbras

and references to the military threat Denmark faces are excised. No wonder the momentum slackens, the tension falters. In this Elsinore, Peter McEnery's suave though guilt-racked Claudius never shows much steeliness either and Guy Lankester's Laertes stints on vengeance. But what holds eye, mind and heart is Russell Beale's unusual, exceptional Hamlet, with only flashes of wit and amusement to console him. He dies in slow, astonished calm, then abruptly crumples — the last surprise from this rare, remarkable Prince.

Ratings: - ○ adequate, ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor

More reviews: Page 57

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