

Hamlet, Revenge of a King, by Herbert Newsome

Hathaway-Howard Fine Arts Center, The University
of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. November 17-19, 2004.

Director, Stephen Broadnax. *Set Director*, Brian T.
Williams. *Lighting*, Melanie Morgan and Cynthia Talley.

Alan F. Hickman, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff

Abstract

Herbert Newsome's *Hamlet, Revenge of a King*, a musical updating of Shakespeare's tragedy, was directed by Stephen Broadnax and produced on November 17-19, 2004 at the Hathaway-Howard Fine Arts Center at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. The object, according to Newsome, was to make Shakespeare relevant to the hip-hop generation. In his rewriting, New York City substitutes for Denmark, the murder of Hamlet Senior is politically motivated, and Afi Parker (Ophelia) not only sleeps with Hamilton (Hamlet), but also aborts their unborn child. The Bard's soliloquies, furthermore, are replaced by rap arias set to a hip-hop beat.

Marjorie Garber begins *Shakespeare After All* with the claim that "every age creates its own Shakespeare" (Garber 2004, 3). Thus, it should come as no surprise that, in an age of "gangsta" rap and sampling, Shakespeare should catch the ear of hip-hop artists. Indeed, a hip-hop version of the famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, attributed to Jeff Rasmussen, has been posted on the Internet. It reads, in part:

Livin large or 86 it? that's got me wack:
How to best represent my own self:
When da Mans in my lunch,
Go medieval on the candy-ass sucka,

and pop a cap in him?
(Rasmussen 2005)

It's only a small step from rewriting a soliloquy to rewriting the whole play, and that is exactly what Herbert Newsome has done in *Hamlet, Revenge of a King*. In this musical updating of Shakespeare's tragedy, directed by Stephen Broadnax and produced on November 17-19 at the Hathaway-Howard Fine Arts Center at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, Hamlet (or Hamilton L. King, as he is called here) has moved to the 'hood, but he still lives on Denmark Avenue, where gangsters and politicians mix with rappers in skullcaps and baggies.

The object, according to Newsome, was to make Shakespeare relevant to the hip-hop generation. In his rewriting, New York City substitutes for Denmark, the murder of Hamlet Senior is politically motivated, and Afi Parker (Ophelia) not only sleeps with Hamilton, but also aborts their unborn child. Hamilton has been to New York Community College rather than to Wittenberg. He aspires to escape the 'hood, but family, and other forces, keep (to paraphrase another anti-hero) pulling him back in. The Bard's soliloquies are replaced by rap arias set to a hip-hop beat. The Ghost is still the catalyst for the revenge plot, but the narrative is limned by a new kid on the block, DJ Jive (of Radio WGAB), who, in her capacity as Greek tragic chorus, provides a running commentary on the play's action and supplies the epilogue. Instead of a play-within-a-play, we get a kind of rap face-off, in the course of which Hamilton's uncle Jean Claude confesses to murder.

The production's updating of *Hamlet* extends also to staging and stage design. The climactic duel between Hamilton and Lee Parker (Laertes) involves both fisticuffs and poison-tipped shivs, with predictably bloody results. When Hamilton swings his fist at Lee, he does so in slow motion (in an obvious cinematic homage to the *Matrix* franchise), the action picking up at normal speed once the blow connects. On stage, the focal point is a colorfully spray-painted BMW, the tires of which are either flat or resting on cinder blocks. The car is flanked by scaffolding that, on the one side, serves as DJ Jive's music booth and, on the other, as Afi's bedroom. The stage is used imaginatively, with a bleak cityscape painted on a brick wall above the BMW and the words "Denmark Ave." on a street sign. The action is fast-paced and edgy, and although dialogue is sometimes lost behind the music, the actors are all first-rate, with James Royce Massengill, Jr. a standout as Hamilton.

The young people in the audience (mostly students and family members of the cast) appeared to be having a good time; they laughed at appropriate moments and jumped when gunshots were fired. I asked students in my English Literature I class to respond to the production and received several replies. Everyone agreed that politicians make effective villains (one student claimed that Jean Claude's death "felt like justice"), several commented that the abortion plot helped to explain

the complex relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia — er, Hamilton and Afi — and no one felt that the play suffered in any way from modernization, although one student complained that the music was too loud.

Newsome has not entirely broken with the past. Hamilton, or Hamlet, emerges with his famous neuroses intact. As the program synopsis reads: "Hamilton longs for death and is disgusted with life, which he not only sees as the drive behind his mother's sin, but the force that inevitably produces more life and more evil. His disgust for life turns into revulsion for sex, the very thing that led to his mother's adultery. The tragedy deals with death and sex and with the psychological and social tension from these basic facts of life." Who would have it any other way?

I began with a hip-hop version of *Hamlet's* most famous soliloquy; for his play, however, Newsome decided, in this one instance, to retain Shakespeare's language, with only a modicum of tinkering. It seems that age cannot wither nor custom stale the Bard's essential message. Stephen Greenblatt calls the "To be, or not to be" speech "the play's key moment of psychological revelation — the moment that virtually everyone remembers" (Greenblatt 2004, 307). Admittedly, it is hard to imagine any version of the play without it. Greenblatt also claims that Shakespeare introduces more than six hundred new words to the English language in *Hamlet* and that it marks a "new way of writing" (308). Perhaps it is, at least in part, this very spirit of newfangledness that has kept the play fresh for succeeding generations of theatergoers.

Whether "Shakespeare meets the streets" (the play's advertising catch phrase) is a compelling formulation for the hip-hop generation, I can't rightly say. Hip-hop itself, however, appears to be here to stay, and Steve Broadnax, the director of *Hamlet, Revenge of a King*, has certainly found it a lucrative field to mine. He is now taking on the road his "Hip Hop Project II: The Remix," which is described as "a high octane theatrical experience that insights the hip-hop nation using music, dance, and spoken word" ("Theatre Program" 2004). Later this year, he and his students will compete nationally at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival.

In *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare*, Stanley Wells tends to dismiss the notion that new wine is superior to old, especially in the case of Shakespeare. He remarks:

It may be fascinating to overlay Hamlet with images of Communist Romania and the Ceausescus, as in a Romanian production of 1989, and to see how the tenor reacts with the vehicle, but no one could claim that the latter day significances had been available to Shakespeare as he wrote, or to early audiences as they saw the plays performed. (Wells 2004, 67)

Wells concedes that the "areas of psychological subtext, of personal and specifically sexual relationships in the plays . . . are less tied down to local and temporal circumstances" (67). Hamlet's sexual angst may be universal; his fashion sense is not. But if not his fashion sense, what then does account for Shakespeare's continuing appeal?

In the last decade alone, I have seen at least five film versions of *Hamlet*. The most successful have been those, such as Kenneth Branagh's monumental effort, that stick closest to "Shakespeare." The least successful appropriations of Hamlet have been those, such as Stacy Title's *Let the Devil Wear Black* (1999) and Michael Almereyda's MTV-influenced curiosity (2000), that either jettison the poetry or sacrifice it to other concerns. In spite of, or maybe because of such tampering, *Hamlet* may well prove to be the most enduring of all Shakespeare's plays. If, as Harold Bloom insists, William Shakespeare invented the "modern," then surely the most modern of heroes is Hamlet, the Western hero of consciousness (Bloom 1998, 409). Like the playwright, he is "not for an age, but for all time." The kids seem to dig it, and, besides, they can sometimes even dance to it. Herbert Newsome's *Hamlet, Revenge of a King* makes that pleasingly obvious point once more.

Online Resources

Internet Movie Database Information for *Let the Devil Wear Black*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0151331/>

Internet Movie Database Information for Michael Almereyda, *Hamlet*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0171359/>

References

- Bloom, Harold. 1998. *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Garber, Marjorie. 2004. *Shakespeare After All*. New York: Pantheon.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2004. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: Norton.
- Rasmussen, Jeff. 2005. "Modern English Translation Hamlet's Soliloquy" [cited 28 January 2005]. http://www.symynet.com/tao_te_ching/modern-translation-hamlet-soliloquy.htm# (link now dysfunctional).
- "Theatre Program Makes Second Debut with the Hip Hop Project 2: The Remix." 2004. *The Golden Letter*. Mass Communication Newsletter. University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. November.
- Wells, Stanley. 2004. *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.