

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet, by David Dalton, Jeremy Beck, and Christopher Patrick Mullen. *Quinnopolis*, NY. Shakespeare Association of America Annual Convention, Philadelphia, PA. 15 April 2006. *Performed by* Jeremy Beck and Christopher Yeatts.

Francisco and Bernardo do *Hamlet*

Helen Ostovich, McMaster University

Abstract

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet, performed at the Shakespeare Association of America in 2006 in Philadelphia, is a buffoonish production that manages to convey, almost despite the audience's disbelief, a profound sense of the grief and loss projected by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. A two-man show, the play more than compensates for its small cast by revealing multiple emotional fractures, complex motivations, and impending or enacted violence, both psychic and physical. The result is a profound sense of the *Hamlet*-world and its impact on Hamlet the prince, Hamlet the role, and *Hamlet* as attempted by particular actors.

The Shakespeare Association of America's 2006 meeting in Philadelphia provided an excellent venue for *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet*, the kind of densely theatrical and multi-leveled show that thinking audiences love. On the bare stage of the Loews Philadelphia ballroom, two clowns, played by Jeremy Beck and Christopher Yeatts, from a fictional upper New York state hamlet called Quinnopolis (also the name of the acting company), are putting on, or perhaps putting off, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, simultaneously playing all the parts needed to retell the basic plot and remaining both themselves as boyish American buffoons and themselves as Bernardo and Francisco, minor characters who do not really understand what is happening in Denmark, beyond "something rotten." They really do not want to know more about Hamlet or his play, but, because they have observed every event, from the Ghost's return to all the play's deaths, they have to keep retelling the story of personal and national despair. And it drives them nuts — or makes them

perform nuttiness. Role-playing as a response to grief, anger, and depression is not an unexpected response to death, and it is very much what *Hamlet* is about; it is also the key factor that makes this clown-play work so well. *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* is a play about acting and controlling the performance choices, and it is very sad and very funny, depending on what level of the performance you respond to at any given moment. The players are Mump and Smoot without the clown makeup.

The play sets the scene deftly. The two clowns, in identical dress (grey T-shirt, suspenders, loose black pants), walk out of an upright refrigerator crate (the key prop of the piece) and mime abject terror for what seems like five minutes, as they look for and fail to see the thing that panics them. Their fear of the Ghost of King Hamlet prods them into telling the story of the play, switching parts and miming costumes or props as needed. Although the treatment is minimalist, even essentialist, it manages to provoke powerful responses in the audience. The costume list conveys a lot about the method: one pale blanket with satin facings (for Claudius's monarchical robe, the ghost's winding sheet, an arras); a black jacket (Hamlet) mostly worn by an old-fashioned tripod with a large-lensed camera that stares out into or over the audience; a pink dress (Ophelia); striped pantaloons (Polonius). The list of properties is also short: aside from the crate and the camera, we see a music stand (holding title cards identifying scenes, some of which the actors refuse to perform, skipping to another card instead); a mop (Gertrude); sticks (as weapons); an Eeyore sock-puppet (another version of the Ghost); a bucket of water as the drowning pool. But what the two actors manage to achieve with this skeletal support is extraordinary. The concept behind this production suggests a symbiosis between actor and part characteristic of "Method" acting: if you play the role, you feel the feelings, whether you want to or not. Prince Hamlet is so deeply depressed that when Bernardo (Jeremy Beck) tries to perform him, he sinks into a catatonic state; in fact, merely putting on Hamlet's black jacket has the immediate effect of plunging him into the role of "Hamlet," paralyzed by grief. Francisco (Christopher Yeatts) does not even attempt the role, after he saves his fellow-actor by tearing off the jacket (in quite a struggle). The relationship between the two actors, rather than the relation to the part or the costume, is what complicates the Method-acting: Bernardo is always the one forced to play Ophelia, and he hates it. Although he apparently does not have a beard coming, he detests the pink dress, and he loathes playing a woman.

Playing a woman is actually something both actors resist. Gertrude is a mop, an ordinary grey cotton-headed mop, with no additional costume or personality, clutched in Claudius's hand during his formal speech to the court and the introduction of his bride in 1.2, and then passionately kissed before exiting. It is funny but also disturbing: Shakespeare's Gertrude is not passive, unresponsive, or thoughtless, and her concern for her son is patent throughout the play. But the mop is simply a prop, something Claudius uses to maintain power (mopping up after the murder?) and possibly

to enjoy his victory over his dead sibling-rival. As a character, mop-Gertrude seems to embody the actors' substitute for playing her: if they do not perform her or give her a costume, neither do they have to enact and feel her profound sense of loss, her desperation to recover her husband or her status, her depression that may match her son's. The mop may be strategic avoidance, in the same way that the clowns try to avoid playing Hamlet by putting his jacket on a camera tripod and letting the eerily unblinking empty "eye" of the lens scrutinize events (very effectively in the "Mousetrap" scene) or to represent philosophical musing.

Quinnopolis's Ophelia is a different story, with the actor (Beck) angry at playing the part, angry at his fellow actor for forcing the part on him, and angry at Ophelia's emotions, which he puts on along with the pink dress. The nunnery scene seems to end with the rape of Ophelia, which, along with the murder of Polonius (the pantaloons tossed out from behind the blanket-arras), pushes her to suicide. The suicide and its aftermath create the most effective moments of the play. The Ophelia-actor bitterly enjoys this release from the role. To the tune of "My Darling Clementine," he pours a gallon-jug of water, held above his head to create a waterfall, into a bucket, strips off the pink dress, shoves it into the bucket, and scrubs it to death. The moment is electrifying: the scrubbing mimics the thrashing of the drowning girl, the pressure that pushes her to her death, and her resistance to the death she seems to want. Or does she? It also echoes the play's male violence in Hamlet's angry, mostly passive-aggressive rejection of everyone, in Polonius's murder, and the almost-murder of Claudius in the prayer-scene. For the funeral scene, the crate is lowered onto its side, becoming the bier upon which the pink dress, after they wring it out, is spread. At that point, the pressures of cynical politics and personal despair catapult both actors into the Hamlet-role, the one role they have been sedulously avoiding. The result is catastrophic, not simply for Hamlet, but also for the two actors, who become manic, burbling up bits of soliloquies ("Oh, that this too too sullied flesh would melt," "To be or not to be," and other disjointed lines), mixed with gibberish and howls, and physically out of control, virtually bouncing off invisible walls¹. One actor manages to repress his Hamlet by covering his own mouth with duct tape, and it takes him some time to duct-tape the other, more violently reactive, actor, first taping his mouth but then taping his arms to his sides. The restraint seems to return the latter to sanity.

The clowns' attempt to play Hamlet literally blows their minds. Each segment of the story is bracketed by their resistance to undergoing what the play provokes in them. They try to mask their fear of the play itself by attempting to control the emotions it induces in them, but the play always overpowers them. Their no-affect Hamlet of 1.2 becomes, first, catatonic Hamlet and then, a camera, and finally bursts out into too-much-affect multiple Hamlets. The result is a

serious actor-problem: how can anyone play this part, which owns its own insatiable demands as well as the demands made by other characters? Hamlet's flattened affect explodes when provoked by the fear generated by Bernardo and Francisco, filtered through the Ghost's message of doom, Claudius's smarmy cynicism, Polonius's stupidity, Gertrude's emotional paralysis, and Ophelia's girlish confusion: all apparently insurmountable problems for performance. In trying to make a bridge from the hamlet/Hamlets of Quinnopolis to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the clowns bring to the play a profound sense of the overwhelming, the grief of loss, especially unnecessary loss — of father, mother, lover, friends, mental agility or clarity, political future — all the things that make Hamlet, Hamlet, and that actors hope to convey to an audience when they make *Hamlet* be (or not be) a *Hamlet* that moves us.

Notes

1. References to the works of Shakespeare come from the Riverside Shakespeare (Evans 1997), unless otherwise noted

Online Resources

Home page of Mump and Smoot. <http://www.mumpandsmoot.com/mumpsmoot.html>.

References

Evans, G. Blakemore, et al, eds. 1997. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.