

# Then and Now



A comparison of **cube's** hamlet to its original production conditions.

## Social, Cultural and Historical Context

cube wants to make the play relevant for today's audience, a play for our modern times. As such the play focuses on modern concerns and sets it in a modern environment.

The play no longer centres on the social and political situation of the original text, the state of Denmark which is threatened by invasion from Norway, as in Britain and Western Europe nowadays this is not a relevant threat. In the late 1500s and early 1600s, there was a constant threat, mainly from Spain, and a weakness in, or problem with the state (represented by the royal family) may have made this danger more tangible. In the original text the Norwegians arrive to take over at the end when the royal family has effectively destroyed itself. In cube's production this aspect of the story is removed. The play was also originally resonant of Henry VIII's action in marrying his brother's wife and the great religious turmoil in the country during his reign as it became split in a struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism. Henry might have been accused of putting the country into danger with regard to invasion from Catholic Spain by turning his back on the Catholic church. (Indeed it could be argued that the religious references in the text to forgiveness of sins, especially mortal, and personal relationships with God are arguments representative of the different views of this two Christian denominations.) There is no obvious parallel in the present day and so instead cube's telling of the story becomes one focused on more personal, familiar and psychological issues (these are issues which are more relevant to our more secular and less hierarchical society) and this is shown in the relationships between the characters. There is still a sense of formality and decorum in the palace but the relationship between Gertrude and Hamlet for example is more that of mother and son than queen and prince, particularly in the moment when he briefly seems to seek solace in a motherly embrace after he has killed Polonius.



The action still centres on a royal family but cube treats them as a royal family similar to that of many modern European countries rather than one which still runs the state. They are a private royal family with status and wealth but no real constitutional power. It is that that helps cube to answer the question as to why Hamlet has not been named as the heir to the throne after his father, Old Hamlet the King, has died. It might be argued that historically when then play was set (earlier to the time in which it was written, distancing Shakespeare from any possible accusation that he was writing about public figures from his current or recent time) the heir to the throne might not have been decided through primogeniture (the oldest male in the family) but by a decision taken as to who to pass the throne to (e.g. in Macbeth, Duncan

names Malcolm his son as heir, suggesting there is a choice). But if that were to happen now in England there would be constitutional uproar. So the European model of Royal family helps explain this.

The fact is that Hamlet has been usurped by his uncle Claudius but the succession to the throne, despite being a story of newsworthy note, is essentially a private decision, based on young Hamlet's background and current perceived 'unworthiness' to be king. Our Hamlet is from a modern celebrity culture, from a generation of rich young party-goers, whose money and lack of real purpose has left him and his peers with an emotional immaturity. This does tie in with our modern conceptions of royalty and the aristocratic classes, the 'it-girls and boys' who appear in the pages of Hello and Ok magazines. This is shown in various ways in **cube's** production: the designer suits and sunglasses of Hamlet and Horatio, the tequila drinking scene between the two friends, and the paparazzi photo of Laertes and Hamlet exiting from a club in the opening news footage.



Hamlet still is a prince from a royal family as both his status and the position and power the new king holds are integral to the play. This power of leader over subjects is still relevant, albeit not with regard to royalty but rather with politicians, and this aspect of the play remains important in the **cube** production. Claudius is a charming politician, particularly shown in his speech to camera and the associated news footage at the start of the show. But his spin conceals a greater grip on power.

Britain is the most watched country in Europe with 14 million CCTV cameras. With the perceived breakdown in the social fabric of the state and the continued fear of terrorist attack, this 'big brother' -esque situation may continue. As one recent commentator put it, 'Hamlet' is the 'most watched' of all Shakespeare plays meaning that throughout the play there is a great deal of characters watching and spying on others. **cube** places the play then in a world dominated by cctv images and cameras. With the action in the play centred around a coup d'etat (a seizure of power) and the king nervous of Hamlet's behaviour, both Polonius and



Claudius look on in order to control the situation (albeit for different reasons, Polonius believing that Hamlet's behaviour is due to his love for Ophelia).

These CCTV cameras are pointed out to the audience in various ways: Polonius is seen in 2 earlier scenes to be watching images of the corridors of the palace and sees Ophelia and Laertes (and later Hamlet and Ophelia) exit her room as we see them pass the camera live on stage, and we see both Horatio and Hamlet aware of them in later scenes, Hamlet even reacting to them by way of realizing he is being spied on, particularly in the 'get thee to a nunnery scene' in which the understanding of it inflames him further and makes him feel Ophelia has betrayed him.

Most significantly the CCTV is used as the way in which Hamlet comes to encounter the 'ghost' of his father. Perhaps in our less superstitious and more rational world, ghostly apparitions may be harder for an audience to buy into, and particularly hard with regard to the limitations of the stage. **cube** present the ghost as something that appears to Hamlet through 'through the system' as we see Hamlet's image turn from 'live' to ghostly images and sounds of his father's face and voice fading in and out of the 'white noise'. In the original text, the ghost is seen by other characters, again perhaps suggestive of the social plausibility of such an apparition. Here however, only Hamlet experiences the event and we are left wondering whether it is something inside his own head.



## Dramatic Contexts

cube treats the play as if it were a new piece of writing, as it was when it first appeared over 400 years ago. As such a classic and well known play the actors, creative team and even audience could easily get distracted by placing the cube performance next to productions from the past or perceptions of who the characters are and why they do what they do, muddying the concept of the show. There is also the danger that, by treating the audience as if they know the play, the production could both be playing to a 'Shakespeare elite' and also allow the storytelling to be loose. cube attempts to treat the play as if nobody knows the story, either in what will happen or in who the characters are, allowing for no assumptions to be made.

An example of this might be when Claudius enters after Hamlet has killed Polonius and finds Gertrude crying. Her instant reaction is to hide the gun and so when she reveals it there is a moment where we, and Claudius, wonder whether she will pull the trigger in her trauma at what Hamlet has told her.

Another aspect which suggests this treatment of the text as new piece of writing is the lack of over-reverence to the original text. The most famous soliloquy 'To be or...' is broken up slightly into dialogue delivered between Hamlet and Ophelia. But this is perhaps not so different from the original intention of the soliloquys. Mark Rylance, ex-artistic director of the Globe Theatre believed that soliloquys were meant to be delivered to an audience and not spoken as if they were thoughts that we could somehow magically hear.

cube also aims to make the play accessible for its modern audiences. One important aspect of the production however is that it does not attempt to 'dumb-down' its content and so, in order to maintain the extraordinary power of the poetry, the production has to find ways of entertaining the audience without solely relying on the words and it does this in a number of ways. The language is pared down to the essential, the performance is physical and musically scored and there is a great emphasis on the visual, particularly with the use of integrated film. These aspects are discussed in more detail below.

### ***Language***

When Shakespeare's plays were first staged, they would have had various elements that were engaging to differing sections of the audience. The less-educated might have enjoyed the physicality and bawdy prose word-play of the comic characters (even in the tragedies - e.g. the porter in Macbeth) whereas the more-educated might have enjoyed the intrigue of the world of the court and the high flown language of the verse. Hamlet's comedy comes more in witty and intelligent word-play however and it is perhaps worth noting that the company clown Will Kemp (i.e. the one who would play and often improvise the comic roles) had, by the time this play was written, been asked to leave and Shakespeare's plays after his departure were darker in tone. As the verbal jokes are not accessible for all, cube's hamlet seeks entertainment and amusement in other ways as well. Perhaps an example of this is in the fresh portrayal of the grave-digger as white Rastafarian. The comedy is also found in the scene where Hamlet and Horatio get drunk and the parody of an 'arthouse' film (made as a consequence of that drunken evening) that stands in for the 'play within a play' (The Mousetrap) also provides an element of lighter entertainment.



The original performance conditions in a noisy and open air venue would have led to the original text being a mixture of exposition (narrating what has happened up to that point) and action with dialogue. This would have allowed the audience to keep up with the story and ideas should they have missed anything. There are also many references in the text both to classical stories and folk stories that we are not as familiar with in our modern culture. And there are words in the text that are no longer in modern usage. For all these reasons, **cube** has decided to cut the text right back to focus on the essential elements of character and story, to foreground the most powerful lines and to create a text which allows for a faster pace. In our quicker, channel-flicking era, this is maybe what is required to keep the attention of all the strands of the audience.

In cutting the text for a company of 7, **cube** also discovers its flexibility by being able to double the roles of Laertes with the Player and Polonius with the Gravedigger. This financial need for a smaller company has similarities with performance conditions of Shakespeare's time where the play might have toured the country due to plague closing the theatres in London (or simply to keep life in a play that had saturated its London audience). Then, just as now, the company would have been ill-able to afford to tour the many hired hands who were not part of the company but who would play the smaller parts. An effect of this is to have conflated the role of Horatio, Hamlet's loyal friend with those of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the friends that are brought to spy on Hamlet. This makes for a much deeper and complex role in Horatio and allows for a tension to be found in the need to be loyal whilst being placed in danger of being found to be not carrying out the king's command.

**cube** makes use of modern rehearsal practices and a modern dramatic approach

### ***The playwright's theatre vs. the director's theatre***

When the play was originally written, due to the limited run time of plays and the limited number of available audience, the lead actors would have been given their parts 'to con' (learn) but not the whole manuscript. They would have gathered, possibly even the morning of the opening, and any complicated blocking would have been organized by the stage manager (sword fights etc.), the closest thing to our modern day director. He would have also kept 'the book' for prompting lines. One might imagine that this brief, almost non-existent rehearsal period, would certainly lead to spontaneous theatre with an edge. What was being fore-grounded was the delivery of the lines, the play was the thing. It was 'the playwright's theatre'.

As the centuries progressed and rehearsal periods became longer, actors were able to explore the characters more as well as the meaning or themes of the play. From the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, with the emergence of figures such as Stanislavski who demanded that actors have time to learn to inhabit the characters more truthfully, this began to lead more to what has been called 'the director's theatre'. Directors could now make interpretative choices about the play and make decisions about the world it was set in and the meanings they wanted to

foreground, particularly in relation to its relevance to the events or culture of the day (see context section above).

This director's interpretation has already been touched upon with regard to the world in which the play is set but it can also be seen in the portrayal of the central character. It has been said that whatever the character of Hamlet is like is representative of the culture of the day and looking back throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century it might be said that there was a rebellious Hamlet for the swinging sixties, a gangly Bowie-esque Hamlet for the seventies and so on.

cube's hamlet is a man less sure of himself and his place in the world (suggested by the non-capitalisation of his name). Hamlet, the play, is about a son trying to grow up, a son whose power and purpose has been taken away from him and who now must choose between reason and instinct to reach maturity. This son loses his father, doesn't know who to trust and makes terrible mistakes. He is, as the poster reads, 'vulnerable, dejected and raw'. Surrounded by all the tools of the modern communications age he cannot voice his feelings and is consequently as far from the declamatory Hamlets of old as can be. He is a 'filmic' character, who only finds the volume of his feelings too late.



Because of the lack of significant rehearsal time in Shakespeare's period, the portrayal of the characters would have been in the hands of the actors entirely and they would have relied on their stock repertoire of techniques to show character. This partly came from the tradition of commedia dell'arte where characters were seen as 'types'. Indeed in the early manuscripts, the characters names are not used as prefixes to the speech as they are now; Gertrude would simply have been 'queen' showing that she should be played by the same person in the company that normally played that type of role.

In most modern pieces, actors are chosen to play characters for their particular qualities: their way of acting, their ability to interpret the character sensitively and their look. This of course allows the director to choose actors that fit into his or her overall interpretation of the play and the world they want it to be set in.

An example of this might be seen in cube's choice of Ophelia, an actress who brings a surprising freshness to the lines and who, rather than being 'an English rose' has a striking and bold look which complements her portrayal of Ophelia as a strong character unlike the rather febrile

creature in the original text. Both Ophelia and Gertrude are interpreted as stronger women in this production representative of the different views on gender of today's society.



This longer rehearsal time and ability to cast particular individuals also leads to an ability to find depth and subtlety in the roles, a three dimensionality that might have been harder to find with stock character types. In **cube's** production, Polonius is shown a meddler whose desire to please his new boss and cosset his daughter eventually leads to greater tragedy but his actions are played with an understanding of the motivations behind them. We sympathize with his position and feel a certain warmth for him which explains his son and daughter grieving so mightily for his death.

### ***Style***

The longer rehearsal period and the presence of a director also lead to an integrated approach to the work which might be seen as a style. In the case of **cube's** hamlet, this style was a blending of naturalistic acting with a physical ensemble approach to the movement between scenes. The company employed movement directors from a dance company to enable them to achieve this physicality and this is particularly shown in the interaction with the set which will be discussed shortly. This gives an intensity to the piece; we get the sense that all are involved at all times, playing the tragedy out and being moved by it.

There was also a degree of physicality to the scenes themselves. Far too often productions of Hamlet have seemed too controlled to be real, too measured, too clean. This play is brutal and **cube** wants this production to show that. Claudius has seized power violently and manipulates this power to keep it. To redress the balance Hamlet is pushed into violence, both emotionally and physically, dragging all around into the whirlpool. To help with this the company made use of a fight director.



cube was able to make use of modern technology and modern materials in delivering the play. \_

### The designer's theatre

As suggested before, the theatre of Shakespeare's day was predominantly a theatre made for the ear more than the eye. Documents show that audiences spoke of going 'to hear a play' rather than 'see'. The stage was always the same with only very few scenic devices (maybe the back of the stage would have been painted and possibly some elements of staging might have been wheeled on and off on 'trucks' similar to Greek theatre) but really the plays were written with this shape of space in mind (*see images of 'The Globe' in London and original artist impressions of 'The Theatre'*) in order to utilize all its functions (the stars painted on the canopy ceiling above as 'the heavens', the small balcony up on the back wall, the columns holding up the canopy, the curtained alcove to provide 'reveals'). For example, in Hamlet, the columns might well have enabled some of the spying that takes place in the play and the curtained area at the back would have allowed for the hiding pace and stabbing of Polonius.

Nowadays modern companies tend to utilize design to bring out aspects of the text they wish to foreground and both to help make the text relevant to their current context and to allow for the style of playing (elements which have been discussed already). With this in mind, **cube** attempts to design a setting which allows their production to be accessible and understandable to the variety of modern audiences in many ways.

### Set

The set is made up of high narrow metal screens which have seats at the base. Their shiny metallic nature, as well as suggesting a harshness of atmosphere, also makes them feel very modern. When placed in a circle, these are resonant of a crown, a castle and a prison. They are all on trucks and it is in the moving of the screens for different scenes that different locations can be suggested. During the scene changes, action is also suggested as we see glimpses of what is going on in the corridors of the palace. The way the screens move also represents the instability of the place, the uncertainty of what will happen. The screens also allow for film to be projected onto them. The abstract nature of the set allows for a greater 'globality' in location as there is less that is geographically specific.



### Lighting

With the limited lighting potential of open air theatre and indoor theatre with no electricity, it is obvious that it is in lighting effects that modern theatre is hugely different in design to theatre of former periods. In **cube's** production, there is much up-lighting, allowing the production to play with shadows and silhouettes, aiding the atmosphere of things hidden and revealed and it is conceivable that in the indoor theatres of Blackfriars and the court, a similar effect might have been achieved with lit torches. In the **cube** show however, this is much more tightly controlled, with specific areas picked out and the screen used to project significant shadows onto, such as the shadow of the gun. Use is made of both open white light and cooler blue gels which against the metal of the set confirm the foreboding nature of the place.



### **Sound**

There are only two sound effects used in the **cube** production but the play is heavily musically scored with modern music both playing throughout the changes between scenes and also across some action. Whereas the original production conditions might have featured some incidental music and some sound effects played live, in **cube's** production at every turn, the music serves to highlight the atmosphere or either confirm or play against the mood and pace of the story. This music, the sounds that the younger characters might listen to, helps to engage younger audiences but is never contrived for that reason alone.

### **AV**

Beside the cctv images there are other films used in **cube's** production. These are used for two main purposes: to show off-stage action (e.g. Hamlet's escape from his 'rendition' and Ophelia's drowning) or to suggest something about the 'back-story' of the characters (the happy beach memories of Ophelia and Hamlet used as counterpoint to their break-up scene or the home video of them as children watched by Gertrude). The films help set **cube's** production in its local environment; the marine landscape of Cornwall features heavily and it is integrated by having live mix seamlessly with recorded, for instance in the appearance on stage of Horatio with the drowned Ophelia, both wet after their filmic immersion in the ocean, and Hamlet's texts on screen are received live on stage. Again, in our modern visual culture, this helps a 400 year old play live happily in the modern context.

