Amanda Grissom

Professor Jaret-McKinstry

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Accessible, Relevant, and Meaningful Theatre

As David Ball writes in *Backwards and Forwards*: "Playwrights – even great ones – do not write for the ages. They write for their specific audiences at their specific time" (Ball 89). So why, then, are plays written for audiences hundreds of years ago still performed today? The world in which these centuries-old plays are now performed is extremely different than the ones in which they were originally written. Ball urges that theatre-makers must adjust for this difference to avoid losing the meaning of the play (Ball 90-91). Three of the plays we saw this semester, *Mary Stuart*, *Hamlet*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, are examples of plays being adjusted and made more accessible for contemporary audiences. These plays demonstrate that theatre matters today because even though it is ever-changing in how it is presented, its relevance is timeless.

In *Understanding Theatre: Performance Analysis in Theory and Practice*, authors Jacqueline Martin and Willmar Sauter write that "theatre has to be understood as an act of communication between its presentational side and its perceptible side" (Martin 79). To help audiences engage in this conversation, the directors, Robert Icke, Federay Homes/Elle White, and Erica Whyman, chose to modernize the plays. The first way that each of these plays were modernized was in their costumes. *Mary Stuart*, originally by Friedrich Schiller and adapted by Robert Icke, was performed in contemporary costumes with the exception of the final scene (designed by Hildegard Bechtler), Shakespeare's *Hamlet* had a mixture of contemporary and period costumes (supervised by Lorraine Ebdon-Price), and his *Romeo and Juliet* was fully

performed in contemporary costumes (supervised by Janet Bench). The result of these costuming choices is that, immediately, the audience perceives the characters onstage as more than just people from another time standing in front of them and reciting unfamiliar words; they are presented in ways similar and familiar to the audiences' experiences and world.

The characters who were costumed traditionally were thus alienated and emphasized in contrast to the familiarly-costumed characters. For example, costuming Queen Elizabeth I in her full, and restricting, regalia at the end of the play only reinforced the symbolic prison formed by the set. This prison, indicated by a wall falling into place accompanied by the sound of a guillotine, is used by Icke to emphasize the lasting effect of Mary's execution. The wall, unseen during any preceding scene, remained in place, enclosing the queen, for the rest of the production. This gave the sense that Elizabeth was trapped by her decision to execute Mary, and that just as Mary's death was final, so was Elizabeth's symbolic imprisonment. This execution, carried out both fictionally and literally in a world so different from the one in which we currently live, becomes a symbolic representation of how one decision made in anger can have detrimental, lasting results.

There was also a symbolic emphasis on the dead in *Hamlet*. After the play reached its written end, the dead rose from where they fell to join the company in a sign language-influenced interpretive dance. As communication, this dance did not have a clear meaning to audience members that did not understand sign language but, on the heels of Laertes's dying request that Hamlet "exchange forgiveness" with him, it seemed to indicate that, despite their differences and fights, all of the characters are connected and similar in some way. It reinforces the idea that in death, all feuds and disagreements seem minimal. Thus, without adding to or changing the original language of the play, Holmes and White built on what was already present in the script to increase its accessibility and meaning.

Whyman also chose to include the dead characters of *Romeo and Juliet* in the final scene, but for a different effect than *Hamlet*. Rather than highlighting the forgiveness and similarities between the dead and the living after the final lines of the play are spoken, the silent dead stand ominously while the living finish conducting the business and lines of the final scene. By placing them among the living, yet separating them in their stoic stillness, Whyman accentuates the consequences of their deaths. The tragic deaths of two star-crossed lovers and their fallen friends and family will remain with and affect the surviving characters, and hopefully the audience, even after the final lines are spoken.

In addition to these ending scenes, the blocking and physicality throughout the plays interpreted and presented the words in accessible ways. Robert Leach writes in *Theatre Studies: The Basics* that "the most telling use of space lies in the actor's physicality. Movements, gestures, poses, facial expressions – all are non-fixed features of spatial communication which the spectator rightly reads more carefully than anything else" (Leach 13). That audiences carefully read spatial communication is especially true in plays that contain unfamiliar language. Some choices of spatial communication included a highly stylized sexual scene between Leicester (John Light) and Elizabeth I (Lia Williams in the production I attended), a mockingly ridiculous bow by Hamlet (Michelle Terry) to his uncle Claudius (James Garnon), and a masquerade ball more akin to a club hosted by Lord Capulet (Michael Hodgson). Whyman also traded in classic swords for knives in *Romeo and Juliet* as a commentary on the knife violence in London (Green). None of these staging decisions were originally called for or intended by the playwrights, and yet they were included as attempts by the directors to either place the plays in today's world, make the events more recognizable, or both.

If theatre is communication, as Leach argues, then performing older plays is a way to not only continue the conversation, but to add to it through additional insight and emphasis. To do this, all directors chose to explicitly include sexual assault. The plays each feature characters who discuss unwanted romantic or sexual advances, but the directors chose to stage these scenes with actions that highlight the words. Peter Brook writes in *The Empty Space* that "[i]n performance, the relationship is actor/subject/audience" (Brook 101). This relationship indicates that if an actor understands their subject but is performing for a contemporary audience, who is potentially unfamiliar with the dated language of the play, there must be other aspects which help the audience to understand and connect with the story.

Icke staged an entire sequence where Mortimer (Rudi Dharmalingam) pursues Mary (Juliet Stevenson) while monologuing about wanting to touch her. This exchange, which is much less stylized and much more explicitly violent than the scene between Elizabeth I and Leicester, ends with Stevenson on the ground, resisting, with Dharmalingam straddling her and undoing his belt before they are interrupted. Similarly, during her "get thee to a nunnery" monologue to Ophelia, Terry's Hamlet attacks Ophelia (Shubham Saraf), who falls to the ground and is then straddled and thrusted on by Terry. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Whyman casts Donna Banya as Gregory and stages the opening conversation between her and Sampson (Stevie Basaula) to include Basaula groping and kissing Banya while talking about violating the Montague women. Banya resists and pushes him away, making it clear that these advances were not consensual.

These choices take the language of sexual violence that could be missed or overlooked because of its unfamiliar phrasing and presents it in such a way that it cannot be ignored. The result of this is that not only are contemporary audiences confronted with the social issue of rape and sexual violence, but they are reminded that these issues were prevalent hundreds of years ago, just

as they are today. Sexual violence is not considered to be the main subject of any of these plays; it can easily be said that *Mary Stuart* is about a deathly, political power struggle between two women, *Hamlet* is about a son enacting revenge on his uncle for his father's murder, and *Romeo and Juliet* is about two star-crossed lovers whose relationship and feuding families have mortal consequences, but it is likely never said that these plays are "about rape." By highlighting these exchanges, the directors are adding to the commentary and subjects of the plays and expanding their meaning and reach.

A final way that these productions attempted to connect with their contemporary audiences was through their setting. *Mary Stuart* included video screens and a turn table, *Hamlet* was performed at the Globe where audience members are visible to the actors and some are inches from them, and *Romeo and Juliet* contained visual effects such as a wall of stars and a metallic box that was constantly shifting and sliding. Although the setting of *Hamlet* is the most similar to what it originally would have been, it is still new to the audiences who have not visited the Globe previously, and being inches from actors is a much more personal experience than what most modern theatre-goers are used. Although contrasting in their execution, the technological additions in *Mary Stuart*/*Romeo and Juliet* and the proximity in *Hamlet* all attempt to connect with audiences who are potentially used to being separated from their entertainment.

Theatre matters today because, unlike films, books, or even the original written scripts, it is not stuck in the time in which the plays were written. Theatre is always new, just as the audience always is. In the cases of *Mary Stuart*, *Hamlet*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, the continued relevance of the classic plays is emphasized and made new through costumes, blocking, and set. Reviving and updating these plays results in new insights, emphases, and conversations about lasting issues like politics, religion, murder, revenge, sexual violence, feuds, and love.

Works Consulted

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