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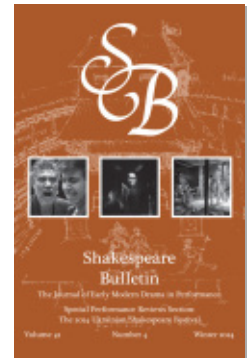
## Hamlet. Neo-opera-horror

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### *Hamlet. Neo-opera-horror*

Presented by **The Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theater in Ivano-Frankivsk** at the Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ivano-Frankivsk Drama Theater Basement Stage. 18 June 2024. Directed by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi. Translated by Yuri Andrukhovych. Costumes by Olesia Holovach. Music composed and directed by Illia Rozumeiko and Roman Hryhoriv. With Oleksii Hnatkovskyi (Hamlet), Olha Komanovska (Gertrude), Yurii Khvostenko (Claudius), Pavlo Kilnytskyi (Polonius), Ivan Blindar (Laertes), Iryna Onyschuk (Ophelia), and others.

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One of the high points of the first Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival was The Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theater's production of *Hamlet*, which has been a box office hit since its premiere in 2017. This production is a site-specific show, performed underground in the so-called "basement showground." Initially the venue was selected as an experiment with the limits of scenic space. However, since 24 February 2022, when Russia initiated a full-scale war against Ukraine, the theater basement has functioned as a bomb shelter too. As the festival took place amidst/ despite the war, bringing most of the shows underground was a decision made on the basis of safety concerns.

The space was not ideal for traditional theater: the director and the scenographer had to cope with a broken ceiling line, corners, centered pillars, and other architectural elements. These elements created issues with the sightlines that the designers used to their advantage, acknowledging that seat location affects the playgoer's experience. All members of the audience sat on ordinary office chairs placed on a series of wooden risers, and two strategically placed screens offered live broadcasting for those who could not see the left or right wings of the stage area. The experience

of seeing the action on the stage was completed for most spectators by the exercise of a degree of physical effort: to gain a glimpse of the most distant corners of the stage, you had to strain your neck, sometimes half-rise in your seat, and turn, your head in different directions.

The music, composed by Illia Rozumeiko and Roman Hryhoriv, and performed by a live orchestra, was a significant component of this production; in fact, the program characterized the show as *neo-opera-horror*, while the theater website described it as a *dramma per musica*. One could recognize within the music certain musical paraphrases and allusions, ranging from church chorales to melodies by Goran Bregovich (an internationally known composer and rock musician from Sarajevo).

As is common in modern productions of *Hamlet*, some of the roles were cut. These included not only Osric, Barnardo, and Marcellus, but also the Ghost, Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. However, in some cases their meanings and functions were retained: the Ghost haunted the bodies—and spoke through the voices—of Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia. The actors playing the latter two roles also performed the functions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as if they used to be Hamlet's childhood friends until the time came to say farewell to childhood. While several characters were cut, new characters were introduced: three infernal-looking women wearing black gowns and gothic makeup accompanied Hamlet and watched the kingdom of Denmark rotting. The program described them as the Erinyes, the Greek goddesses of vengeance sometimes called the Furies, but the horror they inspired made it easy to imagine them as witches from *Macbeth* who had immigrated to Elsinore. These figures sometimes sang, laughed, or called out to Hamlet, thus deepening the horror effect. They also acted as Players and Gravediggers. Similar Erinyes appeared in Derzhypilskyi's 2021 production of *Romeo & Juliet*, which was also performed at the festival (and reviewed in this issue), so one could easily see the two productions as if in dialogue with one another.

The director's aim was not so much to tell a story as to raise questions and present the audience with a skein of impressions that they could unweave to devise their own interpretation of the play. Elsinore was turned into a Sin City in which Hamlet was trying to drag himself through the chaos and entropy, alone against "the sea of troubles." His methods were sometimes crude, as "one must howl with the wolves," as we say. In this production Hamlet stood against a weak and cowardly Claudius, a licentious and aggressive Gertrude, and a Machiavellian Polonius, who seemed to be the true mastermind behind the murder of Hamlet's father.



Polonius (Pavlo Kilnytskyi) in *Hamlet*, dir. Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi. Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival, 2024. Photo by Bohdan Savliuk, courtesy of Ivano-Frankivsk Drama Theater.

This Hamlet chose laughter as a coping strategy against the horrors of the transgressive society in which he found himself. The laughter changed throughout the play: it was sardonic, cynical, sad, and artificial by turns. Laughter served Hamlet as a mask, and perfectly articulated his feigned madness. The other characters also used laughter, but primarily as a barrier to protect themselves from the dread of facing the truth. The absurd elements of this society were enhanced by the redistribution of the omitted characters' lines. Both of us particularly noted how the comic aspects of the Gravediggers passed to Hamlet and Polonius, who made a perfect comic duo. Hamlet became truly serious only in the face of art or death.

We experienced Derzhypilskyi's *Hamlet* not as an emotional experience but as an intellectual challenge that encouraged scrutiny, interpretation, and constant brainwork. The director achieved this effect by violating the traditional stage conventions that have come to encrust *Hamlet*. The prince spent most of the time in his mock madness mode, showing none of the traits of a pondering intellectual. He did not kill Polonius with a single dagger thrust but chased him, and eventually murdered him by wringing his neck with his bare hands. Gertrude was portrayed not as a weak or disoriented woman but as a lustful dominatrix who exploited her

sexuality to gain power. Polonius, defined by the monocle he wore, was not just a cunning schemer and courtier but a puppeteer who manipulated his children. Demonstrating his single, monocular perspective, he strove to make Laertes a copy of himself and Ophelia a copy of Gertrude. This attempt was evident in his efforts to shape the appearance of his children, giving Laertes a brown tailcoat similar to his own and tying his curly hair in a samurai knot, and attiring Ophelia in the same sexy corset dress Gertrude was wearing and a blonde wig with hair shaped into two Valkyrie-style horns.

Perhaps the most shocking challenge to received *Hamlet* convention occurred during act four, scene three, when Claudius asks Hamlet about Polonius. This production rendered this normally poignant scene a macabre farce. To answer the question, Hamlet, poker-faced and joyfully whistling, brought out a camping stove, a frying pan, and a piece of pork that he sliced up and started to fry. This stage business gave a grisly connotation to the line “Not where he eats, but where he is eaten.” Having cooked the meat, Hamlet fed Claudius, taking the pieces up with a comically long telescopic fork and putting them into Claudius’s mouth. Pushing the routine over the top, Hamlet also treated audience members in the front row to bites of his cooking. Finally, upon hearing Claudius’s plan to send him to England, the prince enacted a feigned mania, spilling out an entire set of foreign language clichés known to every Ukrainian student of English. All this comic acting made a sharp and striking contrast to future events—Ophelia’s madness and death.

Ophelia’s funeral and its aftermath marked the climax of the show. To the sound of the Erinyes singing a melody reminiscent of Roma music, Hamlet held the dead Ophelia in his arms, asking her brother for forgiveness. In this scene, Gertrude drank her poisoned wine, and then Hamlet stabbed Laertes and killed Claudius. In the macabre dance that followed, he took his own life.

The denouement upended the usual conventions of *Hamlet*: Fortinbras, who had hardly been mentioned before, appeared onstage and brought everything to a swift conclusion. Smartly dressed and speaking with a reserved tone, he embodied the type of politician who comes to put an end to chaos—though we were perhaps not alone in the audience in knowing those manners too well to believe in his goodwill. During that speech, Hamlet came back to life and stood behind Fortinbras’s back. He seemed at last to be alone to recite his most famous soliloquy, which he had hardly had time to think about earlier in the show. With his eyes closed, to beautiful music, in his most intimate tone of voice he recited the

most famous words in the play, concluding the monologue with “Who’s there?”, thus returning to the play’s starting point.

Taking Hamlet underground, making him expose his “mad” identity, and tailoring the representation of the other characters to this postmodern vision created an unorthodox and unexpected production that gave us a *Hamlet* for Ukraine today. This *Hamlet* made a peculiar kind of sense in its new space, this “basement showground,” which is now both theater and bomb shelter.



***Romeo and Juliet. Drama per musica***

Presented by **The Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theater in Ivano-Frankivsk** at the Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ivano-Frankivsk Drama Theater Basement Stage. 21 June 2024. Translated by Yurii Andrukhovych. Adapted and directed by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi. Music by Roman Hryhoriv and Illia Razumeiko. Set design by Yuliia Zaulychna. Choreography by Olha Semioshkina. With Oleh Panas (Romeo), Inna Bevza (Juliet), Oleksii Hnatkovskyi (Friar Lawrence), Olha Komanovska (Nurse), Ihor Zakharchuk (Montague, Romeo’s father), Yurii Khvostenko (Capulet, Juliet’s father), Ivan Blindar (Mercutio), Yurii Vykhovanets (Tybalt), Andrii Melnyk (Paris), Mariia Stopnyk (Erina), Nadiia Levchenko (Erina), Olesia Pasichniak (Erina), and others.

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*Romeo and Juliet. Drama per musica*, performed at the Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk on 21 June 2024, is the second part of a dramatic diptych by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi based on tragedies by Shakespeare. The first part, *Hamlet. Neo-opera-horror*, was shown at the festival three days earlier, and together these two performances formed a holistic impression of the post-apocalyptic world, through the gloomy labyrinths of which, according to the director’s concept, the viewer should walk together with Shakespeare’s characters in search of answers to the questions that are so urgent for our time: is there any place in this life for living humans and true feelings?