

“HAMLET” - NOORD NEDERLANDS TONEEL

Laura op de Beke

“Hamlet”. It is unfortunate most people come across this play in secondary school, when they make you read it even though Shakespeare, iambic pentameter and Elizabethan drama are the last things your mind when you’re going through puberty. So even if you don’t understand it, or like it, you are supposed to recognise it for something epic and confrontational. Therefore my relationship with “Hamlet” is very much based on what others have said about it. However, that relationship is about to end as I am going to finally see it this Wednesday.



This is a review in two parts. The first half of it will be written in anticipation. What can you expect of this 400-year-old tragedy? The second part of this review will be written after Wednesday 25th when I will have seen “Hamlet” performed in Tilburg by the actors-group ‘Noord Nederlands Toneel’ (NNT). For those of you who don’t know the story (because you have had more merciful teachers), you will certainly have been exposed to something quite similar in Disney’s *The Lion King*, the story is about a young prince whose father is murdered by his power-hungry uncle. The prince, a surly Dane, suffers under the burden of his mother’s rapid remarriage to said uncle, and appearances of his father’s ghost around the castle. His manic depression, if I can call it that, affects the tender-hearted Ophelia. She goes mad under the wax and wane of Hamlet’s affections and ends up drowning herself.

I have always presumed it to be one of the less interesting works of Shakespeare. My reasons for this presumption are varied and vague: perhaps it’s that oft-quoted soliloquy ‘To be or not to be’; or perhaps it’s because I saw Mel Gibson once play the main part in that dreadful 1990 film; or, and this seems the most likely, it might be because the good girl dies. The idea of a young woman killing herself because of the instability of her lover’s affections strikes me as slightly ridiculous, the stuff of bad poetry and teenage diaries. And “Hamlet” is not a love-story, right? This Wednesday’s performance promises to be just that, a love-story.

April 26th, it’s one o’clock in the morning, and I have to say it: “Hamlet” proved to be not exactly what I had in mind, but certainly something just as magnificent. Even though the performance had promised me a love-story which it didn’t really deliver, it did highlight some very interesting themes. There was love, sure, but in the guise of frustration, pain, anger and doubt; two people hesitantly reaching out for each other, confused and lonely, trapped in world in which hypocrisy is king. Performed like this, suddenly the root of Hamlet’s and Ophelia’s problems became clear; not their youth nor their innocence, but rather the corruption of the world around them. The emphasis was on madness as well as on love. For research purposes director Ola Mafaalani and researcher Noraly Beyer even resided in a mental hospital for some weeks, and it showed. A cluttered stage; screens made out of plastic foil sometimes obscured the actors, making all characters into shades, ghosts almost, or the figments of Hamlet’s imagination: a subtle foreshadowing to the final denouement in which it is suggested that instead of suffering from some very serious character flaws, Hamlet might in fact be an early-modern catatonic.

If you are eager to judge for yourself whether “Hamlet” is all that you were told it would be, don’t fret; on 09-05 NNT will be performing “Hamlet” in the Leidse Schouwburg.