

# Theatre and Metatheatre in *Hamlet*

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'I don't really agree with the notion of setting the plays anywhere in particular. When asked that question about *Hamlet* I tend to say that it was set on the stage.'-Neil Armfield<sup>1</sup>

According to his melancholy admission, neither man nor woman delights Hamlet. Yet when a troupe of players arrives at the court of Elsinore, he makes a gleefully reiterated plea that they perform for him; here and now: 'We'll have a speech straight. Come, give us a taste of your quality. Come, a passionate speech.'<sup>2</sup> Without hesitation, and to further prompt the Player's performance, he nominates and begins a speech himself. At this moment, theatre is consciously made the centre of the action. It is one of several instances of metatheatre in *Hamlet*. Others include Rosencrantz's report of the success of the boy players (2.2.319-46), Hamlet's advice to the Players (3.2.1-40), Hamlet's 'antic disposition' and of course 'The Mousetrap' or play-within-the-play (3.2.80-248).

*Hamlet* is a play deeply concerned with notions of play: the power of play, the danger of play<sup>3</sup> and the threshold between play and reality. Many of the instances of metatheatricality mentioned above have received insistent critical attention. Hamlet's advice to the Players has been used both to support and to contest the hypothesis that Shakespeare there puts forward a manifesto of naturalism.<sup>4</sup> Likewise the play-within-the-play has been taken up repeatedly as a key to the dramatic dynamics of the play by which it is encased.<sup>5</sup> Hamlet's 'antic disposition' - whether analysed as a purposeful strategy within a unified psychological profile, or as a complex subversion of representational logic - seems to generate endless speculation.<sup>6</sup> The arrival of the Players and the First Player's impromptu performance, however, seem to provoke relatively little inquiry. Yet this moment has a unique significance in the play's ongoing discourse of play. As an

impromptu, the First Player's performance activates the manifold nature of play: 'play' as a game, 'play' as performance, and even 'play' in its technological meaning, as the space allowed for a moving part in machinery. It is a staged moment in which both the fiction and the power of performance can be acknowledged simultaneously. As such, it sets up a test, not only for the First Player, but also for the actor and for the audience.

Hamlet requests of the First Player a performance of Aeneas's Tale to Dido which recounts Pyrrhus's violent slaying of ancient Priam, and Hecuba's grief and rage at her husband's slaughter. The 'Tale', as a story of grief and bloody revenge, has immediate implications for Hamlet's predicament and provokes Hamlet into a frenzy of self-abasement. The test that every production of *Hamlet* encounters at this juncture, then, is whether or not the First Player can realise the *idea* of theatrical power. Hamlet's fervent anticipation, Polonius's dismay at the Player's force of performance, and Hamlet's ensuing soliloquy will only have veracity if the Player's performance is, in fact, forceful. If the Player does not compel and astonish the audience it will seem incredible that the on-stage audience are so deeply affected. While it may seem an elaborately clever and digressive theatrical 'in-joke' this scene is quite the reverse. It is an acid test for drama's capacity to compel.

The scene also harbours a challenge for the audience. The challenge is to see with what W. B. Worthen calls the 'double-vision' of 'theatrical seeing'. In his essay on *Antony and Cleopatra* he explicates this complex notion in a manner pertinent to the First Player's performance of Aeneas's Tale: 'The actor seems to inform and to stand apart from his "character", and our task is to enable this double perspective to become part of our play, rather than a necessary failure of art, the falling short it may otherwise seem to be.'<sup>7</sup> While Worthen is describing the relationship between an actor and the character Antony, his insight proves apt for the way in which the First Player 'informs and stands apart from' his narratorial persona. Whatever the First Player's resources are, his force must ultimately inhere in the 'falling short' of his ability to *be* Aeneas or to 'give' Hecuba. His force resides in the poverty and transparency of his means for making theatre. Worthen's 'double vision' is not innate to modern audiences. Most contemporary

dramatic mediums, such as film, sustain audience complicity through the creation of a complete, self-contained 'reality' - a seamless illusion. In contrast, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is self-reflexive; it constantly draws attention to the greater reality by which it is encompassed: an audience in a theatre watching actors perform as characters. The challenge for the audience, then, is to remain consciously complicit - to submit to the fiction even while being aware that it is a fiction.<sup>8</sup>

When Aeneas's Tale to Dido is effectively performed, the audience is compelled to remain dually aware of the First Player's status as Player and of his 'conceit': his Aeneas-the-tale-teller identity. No matter how good the performance is, there is no mistaking the Player for the 'real' Aeneas. As Pauline Kiernan points out, in Shakespeare simple mimesis is never the chief end of performance: 'Where Shakespeare uses the word "imitation" in the sense of mimetic drama, the activity is derided, and it is made quite clear to us why: the actor is condemned for trying to re-present the actual physical presence of real people.'<sup>9</sup>

Aeneas's Tale is a deliberately obvious contrivance and so functions to keep part of the imagination awake, as it were, to the powerful effects of a dream. Moreover, this microcosm of the theatrical moment reflects upon the overarching dynamic of theatre, compelling recognition of its simultaneous actor/character paradox. Hamlet the character uses the force of the Player's acting to berate himself for his own inaction. Here we see an ever more intricate spiral of self-reference. Hamlet's 'rogue and peasant slave' soliloquy (2.2.526-82) is of course no less a performance than the Player's Tale. Moreover, the close proximity and shared heightened style of the two speeches serve to reinforce their mutual status as performance. The words 'Now I am alone' (2.2.526) are ironic when addressed to a theatre full of people. With this phrase the actor who is playing Hamlet embarks upon his 'tale' for the audience just as the Player has performed the 'Tale' for him.

In his study of mimesis in *Hamlet*, Robert Weimann ably explicates the exceedingly complicated relationship between Hamlet as character in a play and as the '*actor-character* [who] revitalizes, on the dramatic plane of stylised art, the legacy of the Vice actor as director and master of ceremonies

theatrical'. Weimann argues that in doing so, Hamlet challenges 'the authority of the whole neoclassical theory of representation as a theory of verisimilitude'. Most pertinent to the present discussion is Weimann's point that Hamlet disturbs simple mimesis by being both its product and, consciously, its producer. Hamlet is 'a character performed in a role and one who himself performs and commissions a performance'.<sup>10</sup>

Weimann's work participates in an enduring legacy of 'stage-centred'<sup>11</sup> theorizing that identifies metatheatres as an intrinsic dynamic of Shakespeare's drama, and the various nuances of metatheatres as a theoretical concept have been long debated. Yet, the degree to which the metatheatricity of *Hamlet* is exploited, and the force of the First Player's impromptu, are necessarily determined afresh by each instance of performance. Accordingly, the present article investigates the very different uses made of this scene by three recent Australian productions. The productions in question are *Hamlet* directed by John Bell for the Bell Shakespeare Company in 2003, *Hamlet* directed by Jeremy Sims for Pork Chop Productions in 2001, and *Hamlet* directed by Neil Armfield for Company B Belvoir in 1992. Each of the *Hamlets* under discussion reflected an awareness of the self-referential power of the scene but utilized that power in radically different ways.

### **The Bell Shakespeare Company's *Hamlet* The Playhouse, Sydney Opera House, 2003**

In the Bell Shakespeare production, the Players were marked out from their first entrance as belonging together and to a different world from the court. They created a distinctive stage picture - forming a line along the far horizon of the stage and then stepping forward to fill the space in stately yet energetic manner. The moment of their arrival created a new warmth and sense of anticipation. Discussions during the rehearsal period had yielded an aesthetic loosely associated with 1930s Eastern Europe and drawing upon a notion of the poor and itinerant actor.<sup>12</sup> Their costumes gave the impression of formal attire that had become shabby with age. They carried a combination of old suitcases and assorted props. Bille Brown, who as First Player led the

troupe on stage, had an ostentatiously theatrical style resembling popular images of Oscar Wilde. He wore a wide brimmed hat, a cravat, and a short flowing cape.

The behaviour of the Players was brimming with delightfully recognizable modern 'show-biz' idioms. During the interval, while audience members returned from the foyer and found their seats, the Players 'warmed-up' on stage for their *Murder of Gonzago* performance. The First Player and Hamlet (Leon Ford) held conference downstage as if finalising details for the 'show'. Paul Eastway and Julian Garner practised sword fighting with wooden sticks and Luisa Hastings Edge, presumably the troupe's diva, stood in a silk gown alternating elaborate vocal scales with smoking a cigarette. The effect was a humorous inversion of the onstage/offstage divide, bringing the means of theatre to the audience's attention by performing, as it were, the chaos of the dressing room.

It is illuminating to trace the development of this uniquely cohesive troupe identity back to the distinctive rehearsal strategy employed for the Players. Most of the play's scenes were approached through the conventional progression from reading and discussion around a table followed by the actors getting on their feet to block the scene on the marked-up rehearsal floor. In contrast, the Players' scenes were deliberately permitted a period of formlessness. Even costuming and music decisions were allowed to evolve as the group identity of the Players evolved.

During the first week of text rehearsals, the Players spent afternoons working with Darren Gilshenan, an associate artist with the Bell Shakespeare Company recognised for his skills in physical comedy. Gilshenan led one session of improvising in which the Players were prompted to explore their identity as a troupe by preparing for a journey, travelling together, and arriving at Elsinore. The actors adopted objects and items of clothing as suited their storytelling. The text of *Hamlet* was not used at all in this session. Obviously very little of the improvised material appeared in the eventual performance, but it is important to note this practice as a fully embodied approach to interpretation which reversed the usual format of intellectual engagement with the script before 'moving it'. The way play was

used in the formation of the Players' identity contributed a force to their use of play within the play. In the First Player's playing of Aeneas's Tale to Dido this production realised on stage the idea of theatrical power prefigured in the text.

Bille Brown's evocation of Hecuba, grieving and raging through burning Troy, was an extraordinary transformation; all the more so for its physical improbability. Brown's shaman-like power consisted in the utter simplicity of his magic, in his gift for storytelling. For 'Pyrrhus's sword', a member of the troupe handed him a cricket bat. Such was the power of the storytelling that even this ludicrous device seemed transformed to support it. Similarly, with Hecuba's 'blanket':

But who, O who had seen the mobbled queen ...  
Run barefoot up and down, threat'ning the flames  
With bisson rheum; a clout upon her head  
Where late the diadem stood, and for a robe,  
About her lank and o'er-teemèd loins  
A blanket in the alarm of fear caught up. (2.2.482-9)

At this point the Player used his own cape - clutching it with a painfully feeble gesture in front of him. The Player's utter commitment to his story transformed him and the energy of the stage. It was as if he had become a vortex of intensity - winding in the unsuspecting court and the theatre audience. The performance feat was neither an act of mimetic impersonation nor simply one of narrative description, but rather a kind of conjuring which included both.

The effect of this conjuring was intensified rather than diluted by the interjections of Polonius (Robert Alexander). During the first part of the 'Tale', Ford, as Hamlet, set himself up as the model audience member. After his own applauded attempt at the speech, he made room for the First Player, crouching and watching with his arms across his knees in a posture of child-like curiosity. The first part of the Tale reached its climax with:

And never did the Cyclops' hammers fall  
On Mars his armour, forged for proof eterne,

With less remorse than Pyrrhus' bleeding sword  
Now falls on Priam. (2.2.469-72)

At this Polonius made his interjection, 'This is too long' (2.2.478).<sup>13</sup> The mounting tension of the speech was at this moment attenuated by Polonius's inability to 'submit to the fiction'. Yet this breach in the Player's performance only served to emphasize the accumulated tension. The Player appeared to absorb Polonius's interruptions and proceed to the mesmerizing climax of the Tale where Hecuba runs through burning Troy to find 'Pyrrhus make malicious sport / In mincing with his sword her husband's limbs' (2.2.493-4). It was at this point that Polonius seemed to undergo a revolution. From being unable to 'submit to the fiction' he moved to being unable to see it as fiction. He was not able to hold in tension the reality of the Player and the reality of the characters he played and so called a halt to the performance in a compulsive and frightened manner: 'Look whe'er he has not turned his colour, and has tears in 's eyes. Prithee no more' (2.2.499-500). Polonius seemed perplexed when the Player emerged from his role seemingly unscathed, pleased with himself and applauded by his troupe.

The 2003 Bell Production of *Hamlet* exploited the way in which this scene models various versions of what Worthen calls 'theatrical seeing'. Hamlet recognises and later expresses perplexity at the enigmatic relationship between performer and character:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
That from her working all his visage waned,  
Tears in his eyes, distraction in 's aspect,  
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
With forms to his conceit? (2.2.528-34)

Yet it can hardly escape the audience's attention that the actor who is playing Hamlet is at that moment doing no less. Ford's performance of this speech reinforced the parallel between the Player's and his own facility. In rehearsing this scene Bell worked closely with Ford, paying attention to the cyclic rhythms of 'winding up and crashing' within this speech. As an

exercise, Bell directed Ford to 'make it about movement' and to 'exaggerate the polarities of the speech' by alternating between 'dragging' and 'stretching' and 'running' while speaking it.<sup>14</sup> In performance the effect was multi-layered. At one level the character, Hamlet, was grappling with the enigmatic idea of dramatic transformation. At another level the actor, Ford, was effecting transformation. Goaded by the changing tempo of his speech, he proved himself as capable as the First Player of a mercurial transfiguration.

**Pork Chop Productions' *Hamlet*<sup>15</sup>  
Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, 2001**

Like the Bell production, Pork Chop Productions' *Hamlet* of 2001 registered and exploited metatheatrical possibilities of the play. The actors continually gave the impression that they were playing: both playing a game with each other and playing as performers. The aesthetic of the production was directed at a youthful audience. Its energy and fast pace were facilitated by the absence of clear divisions between audience and performing space. Much of the action took place in aisles beside and behind the audience. The formality of the conventional scene-change sequence was challenged by a radically fluid grammar of stage movement. Rapid cross-fades were used to 'turn on' and 'turn off' different parts of the space. Characters could step out of one scene and immediately into the next. Often, characters from previous scenes remained behind in shadow. As well as being economical, these overlapped scene transitions, allowed for meaningful resonance between consecutive scenes. During the entire scene of Hamlet greeting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius and Claudius could be seen in the shadows, sitting at a large table and sipping their drinks. As a consequence of this scene overlap, Hamlet arrived at the realisation that his friends were in fact 'sent for' against the sinister backdrop image of Claudius and Polonius's machinations.

The entire performance was framed by a device which drew attention to its status as performance and implied a recognisably contemporary form of audience/performer relationship. At the beginning of the performance, with the house lights up, a young man in jeans and a long brown leather jacket, a bag slung over his shoulder, dashed down onto the stage and took a moment to look around him. This produced giggles of uncertainty and a gradual hush

across the audience. He then moved up onto the downstage left platform and stood at a set of turntables, switching on a desk lamp as the theatre lights dimmed. He put on a set of headphones, pulled some records from his bag, put them on the turntables and began mixing a heavy electronic beat with gothic pipe-organ sounds. Concentrating until he was satisfied with what he had set in motion and moving to the beat he then raised his arms to the audience in peerless DJ style, receiving laughter and applause for his feat of 'cool'. A recognisably popular and contemporary mode of connection was immediately established between the performer and his audience. At this point, another man dressed in military fatigues, beret, and holding a pistol charged down the stairs yelling to the DJ: 'Where is this sight?', to which the DJ responded

What is it you would see?  
If aught of woe or wonder, cease your search....  
And let me speak to th'yet unknowing world  
How these things came about. So shall you hear  
Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,  
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,  
Of deaths put on by cunning and false cause,  
And in the upshot, purposes mistook  
Fallen on th'inventors' heads. All this can I  
Truly deliver. (5.2. 306-7, 323-9)

By cutting and shuffling the script, Horatio anointed himself the modern day storyteller, the repository of the play's events, and the mixer of its music. Moreover he made a self-conscious claim to the worth and reliability of his tale: '*All this can I / Truly deliver*' (italics mine). To this claim the uniformed figure, now revealed to be Fortinbras, replied, 'Let us haste to hear it, / And call the noblest to the audience' (5.2.330-1). Fortinbras thereby completed the inventive opening sequence or prologue that set up a direct, meaningful connection between a modern day type of story maker and his audience.

The deliberate emphasis on performance, and performance of stories, was furthered by the First Player's rendition of Aeneas's Tale to Dido, which diverged radically from the conventional playing of the scene. An airy

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electronic music - hitherto unused - ushered in a dim light on the downstage left platform to reveal a young man with a shaved head wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and running shoes, and adjusting a microphone stand. (This was the same platform on which Horatio had mixed his music and on which Hamlet had been recently abandoned after his encounter with the Ghost.) On the black wall behind the performer a large red skull motif was still visible: at once an enduring icon of mortality and an image resembling a contemporary skate design.

Having adjusted the microphone the performer signalled to Horatio who stood, once again, at the mixing desk. Hamlet (Jeremy Sims) sat in the dark beside Horatio. These forms would have been immediately recognisable to younger audience members as preparations for performance in a bar or club. The performer - Aya Larkin from the Sydney band 'Skunkhour' - may also have been familiar. Larkin performed Aeneas's Tale to Dido as performance poetry set to music. The piece began with Pyrrhus's state of paralysis:

So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,  
And, like a neutral to his will and matter,  
Did nothing.  
But as we often see against some storm  
A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still,  
The bold wind speechless, and the orb below  
As hush as death, anon the dreadful thunder  
Doth rend the region .... (2.2.460-7)

The 'silence in the heavens' was evoked by the quiet delivery of the lines and the eerily faint sounds of the electronic music. On the word 'thunder', the volume of the music increased and the performer was bathed in red light - making the skull behind him prominent and casting his shadow, large, against the wall.

The performer introduced Hecuba - 'But who, O who had seen the mobbled Queen' (2.2.482) - with a marked intensity of grief in his voice. A distinctive funk beat was initiated which, from this point on, functioned as a leitmotif for Hecuba. As the Tale came to a close, the performer crouched, cupping the microphone in his hands and repeating the high-pitched and

mournful appeal: 'Do you see her?' The intense commitment of the storyteller to his story was reflected in his capacity to transform, to sculpt his posture and his voice to the demands of the narrative. This innovative treatment of the Hecuba scene comprised a stylistic deviation from conventional interpretations yet captured the essence of the Hecuba moment - a moment where both the fiction and the power of performance can be simultaneously acknowledged.

Sims also found ways of challenging the traditional dynamics of the play and the theatre space in his performance of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy. 'To be or not to be' is a phrase that has been inscribed over time with the tenor of lofty philosophical musing. It is a fragment of Shakespeare with which almost every English speaker is familiar. In contemporary spoken English the phrase is such a common cultural possession that it is hard to imagine what it was to hear it for the first time or what kind of meaningful impact it may have carried. As Terence Hawkes aptly observes of the play as a whole, 'In our society, in which *Hamlet* is embedded in the ideology in a variety of roles, the play has, for complex social and historical reasons, always already begun. And onto its beginning we have always already imprinted a knowledge of its course of action and its ending.'<sup>16</sup>

Sims's treatment of the famous soliloquy, rather than trying once again to re-invent its significance, reflected an arch awareness of its common currency and thereby gave it back to the audience in a new way. After interval, Sims came down through the lit auditorium, distributing cushions on the steps in preparation for the next scene sequence that included 'The Mousetrap'. He paused halfway and, beating the iambic stress pattern in the air like a conductor, said to the audience 'To be or not to ...', to which the audience appended 'be!' with audible delight, followed by laughter. The audience's attention was fastened on Sims as the house lights dimmed and he descended to the stage to continue his speech. Having established a particular kind of casual energy Sims proceeded to set up the stage for the next scene as he spoke. He took a corner of the large draped red cloth, and hooked it to a pulley on which it was hoisted to achieve the effect of apron space in front of a stage curtain. He spoke the speech in an energetic and demonstrative way as he worked, challenging its typical status as an abstract philosophical

musing. To punctuate the lines, 'to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing, end them' (3.1.61-2), he mimed pulling a gun from his jacket and shooting himself in the head. 'To grunt and sweat under a weary life' (3.1.79) was likewise animated with a shoveling gesture. This demonstrative and self-conscious style employed by Sims cleverly acknowledged the inherently histrionic quality of the speech, while giving it a clear and specific physical sense.

**Company B's *Hamlet*  
Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, 1994**

In their article 'Elsinore at Belvoir Street: Neil Armfield talks about *Hamlet*', John Golder and Richard Madelaine unearth a deep cognizance of metatheatre in Company B's 1994 *Hamlet*. As well as documenting a conversation with Armfield and his assistant director, Greg McLean, Golder and Madelaine re-trace comments made in previous interviews and by reviewers of the production:

A love of actors and the act of theatre are key metaphors in *Hamlet*, Armfield believes, because they elicit a recognition that the play is so much about a person's desire to act with absolute conviction, and the acting analogy is germane to it.

[Armfield] likened Hamlet himself to the 'method' actor trying to find the moment of pure inspiration where the body and mind join; one intuitive moment of truth where action is not calculated but 'natural' and 'felt'.<sup>17</sup>

These comments reflect a consciousness of the play's intricate games of self-reference that resulted in an intelligent and highly articulate approach to its production, and an extremely powerful and intricately nuanced performance.

Like the Pork Chop *Hamlet*, this production had Horatio (Geoffrey Rush) open the play as storyteller. However, the full cast was also assembled on stage, reflecting an important principle of this production. It was not seeking to trick its audience about the means of theatre: 'Armfield's *Hamlet*

began with the full cast assembled on stage. Geoffrey Rush as Horatio came forward to deliver lines transposed from the final scene, together with lines from the play-within-the-play. This device established Shakespeare's world as uncertain, dangerous and violent: what this company of actors will enact for us is a disturbing miscellany of "carnal, bloody and unnatural acts ... accidental judgements ... deaths put on by cunning and false cause".<sup>18</sup> Greg McLean expressed how this narrative moment of 'trying to find a language to tell the story' had resonance for the rest of the performance: 'We are struggling to find the spine of the language that we are inventing to tell the story with, and that is the actual key: we know the story essentially, but it is exactly that Brechtian idea of "here we are as actors, the magic that you see will be just us".'<sup>19</sup>

While the function of the actors was made plain from the prologue, the physical means of this production were also pared back to a bare minimum. Rather than attempting to create an alternative reality or fully convincing illusion of 'another' place, this production embraced the characteristics of its actual physical setting. Upstairs Belvoir is the home of Company B and as such is imbued with a certain imaginative heritage. Armfield exploited the extent to which this venue, without extensive set construction, is an evocative space. He expressed this aesthetic in the simplest terms: 'I don't really agree with the notion of setting the plays anywhere in particular. When asked that question about *Hamlet* I tend to say that it was set on the stage.'<sup>20</sup>

The main set feature was a vivid red Persian carpet that was rolled up, unrolled, moved on and off stage, and re-oriented on the floor by the actors themselves. In her review for the *Sydney Morning Herald* Angela Bennie went so far as to ascribe to it a cryptic quality, calling it a 'silent, blood-coloured but bloodless witness to the moving patterns of people and events that swirl around it'. She applauds the moment in performance when as Hamlet, '[Richard] Roxburgh in his fire has swept it up off the stage and hurled it around him like a cloak, its patterns cascading down his sides and across his body'.<sup>21</sup> The carpet was a simple, malleable and yet intensely evocative piece of set design. The paradoxical wealth and economy of the carpet epitomizes Armfield's notion of the link between transparency of means and the power of storytelling. The interview with Madelaine and Golder provides evidence that this consistent preferment of clarity and

simplicity pervaded production practices. A specific instance is recounted in the evolution of the Ghost.

The initial concept for portrayal of the Ghost was to project a filmed image of the Ghost in armour onto the wall. There would be no actual physical presence. However, as rehearsals proceeded, this technologically sophisticated version was abandoned in favour of a much simpler one described by Armfield: 'I asked Ralph [Cotterill] to do it and it was so powerful as a scene between the two actors that it seemed that, no matter how effective the technology might be, if you only have Hamlet on stage something's going to be missing, and so it was really from here that I became more convinced in my heart that Ralph should be doing it.'<sup>22</sup> Ralph Cotterill's doubling as the Ghost and the First Player carried a revelatory dramatic force with the simplest of means. Rather than attempting to evoke a sense of the supernatural through effects, as the Bell and Pork Chop productions did, this production reinforced the fragility of the Ghost. Wearing nothing but a thin white gown he emerged from one side of the playing space and spoke while, with a hunched and halting gait, completing a tight arc around Hamlet to exit from the other side of the stage. All the while his eyes were fixed on Hamlet, creating a mesmerizing intensity between the two actors.

Even more haunting than the Ghost in this production, however, was the ghost of the Ghost appearing before Hamlet and the audience in the form of the First Player. The Ghost's plain human presence on stage and Ralph Cotterill's doubling in the roles permitted an unprecedented resonance between this scene and the parallel narrative of Aeneas's Tale to Dido. As the First Player, performing the Tale, Cotterill traced an identical trajectory to the Ghost's, circling Hamlet in a tight arc as he rendered the story. Consequently, the Player's power over Hamlet, and over the audience watching Hamlet watch the Player, had an utterly harrowing effect. The poses and postures of the Player's performance minutely recalled those of the Ghost. A powerful precision of dramatic narrative characterized this moment and many others throughout the performance - as if the bare stage itself had become imaginatively engraved with the pathways and postures of the storytelling. The First Player's apparent ignorance of the power his story wielded was eerie, as was the moment when, looking at the Player, one saw the Ghost,

and so gained access to the theatre of Hamlet's mind. The audience was herein permitted extraordinary intimacy with the subjective - otherwise seemingly paranoid - vision that Hamlet later articulates: 'How all occasions do inform against me / And spur my dull revenge' (4.4.9.21-2).

From this discussion of three productions, it becomes evident that metatheatrical moments in *Hamlet* contribute to the play's complex discourse on play by invoking the manifold and interrelated meanings of the word 'play'. Aeneas' Tale to Dido is at once a game, a performance, and figuratively, a space designed to accommodate a 'moving part' - the actor. Metatheatre as a form of self-referentiality might more normally be considered the province of post-modern cultural production. In *Hamlet* though, as in many of Shakespeare's plays, metatheatre functions to provide space for the 'moving parts' integral to drama. Metatheatre creates this space of play by provoking acknowledgement of the unique and temporally bound nature of each performance of the play. Paradoxically, metatheatre within Shakespeare's play-text invites constant re-evaluation of what it is to perform with force here and now. If imported or outdated notions of forceful performance are relied upon, the production will buckle upon itself at this scene and become a sentimental tableau. Conversely, if the First Player does possess the power to compel, drama itself is vindicated and possible meanings of the play are vitalized in a new theatrical moment of being. *Hamlet*, therefore, is a play that toys with the intrinsic contemporaneity of the genuinely dramatic moment. In this vein, it is at least possible that the metatheatre in *Hamlet* is largely responsible for *Hamlet's* remarkable popularity in Australia. Perhaps it is not the space *Hamlet* colonizes in our cultural imaginations but the spaces it opens up, that keep it playing.

#### NOTES

- 1 John Golder and Richard Madelaine, 'Elsinore at Belvoir Street: Neil Armfield talks about *Hamlet*', *Australasian Drama Studies* 26 (1995), 60.
- 2 William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* in *The*

*Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1997), 2.2.413-14. All subsequent references to the play are taken from this edition.

- 3 A useful adjunct to this notion of the 'danger of play' is the compelling case made by Andrew Gurr for fear, rather than conventional stage aesthetics, as a motivating factor behind the 'anti-realist' and metatheatrical devices employed by Shakespeare and contemporary dramatists. Gurr contends that their period, particularly the early 1590s, was characterised by very real social and religious concerns about the evils of deception associated with stage-playing. These concerns, Gurr argues, culminated in a need to make 'illusions self-evidently illusory'. Andrew Gurr, 'Metatheatre and the Fear of Playing', in *Studies in Renaissance Literature Vol.5: Neo-Historicism*, ed. Robin Headlam Wells, Glenn Burgess, and Rowland Wymer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), p. 91.
- 4 Howard Felperin claims that 'Hamlet's discourse on the art of theatre is the nearest thing we have to a statement of Shakespeare's own aims and principles as a dramatist', and moreover that 'Hamlet's speech is predominantly a plea for the new doctrine of dramatic illusionism and falls into line with the special pleadings of such Elizabethan classicists as Sidney and Jonson' ('O'erdoing Termagant: An Approach to Shakespearean Mimesis', *Yale Review* 63 (1974), 372-3). To the contrary, Pauline Kiernan, in her chapter on Shakespeare's repudiation of mimesis, offers the following synopsis of recent scholarship: 'It is a commonplace of *Hamlet* criticism that the Prince's advice to the Players is completely at odds with his creator's practice' (*Shakespeare's Theory of Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 126). In support of this summary Kiernan cites Roy W. Battenhouse, 'The Significance of Hamlet's Advice to the Players', in *The Drama of the Renaissance: Essays for Leicester Bradner*, ed. Elmer M. Blistein (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970), pp. 3-26, and Robert Weimann, 'Mimesis in Hamlet', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 275-91.
- 5 Numerous critics treat 'The Murder of Gonzago' / 'The Mousetrap' in *Hamlet*. Michael Orange's study of metadrama and theatrical idiom in Hamlet states that 'These central scenes are the locus of *Hamlet's* assimilation into itself of a detailed, professional knowledge of theatre' (*Hamlet: A Cry of Players*, *Sydney Studies in English* 30 (1985), 8.) Likewise, Judd D. Hubert investigates the recourse to theatrical devices, most notably Hamlet's use of *The Mousetrap*, as a means of testing truth in *Hamlet (Metatheatre: The Example of Shakespeare)* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 103).

- 6 The most famous treatment of Hamlet's 'antic disposition' as a part of an actual psychological profile is that by Sigmund Freud. Freud uses Hamlet as an instance of how 'in every epoch of history those who have had something to say but could not say it without peril have eagerly assumed a fool's cap'. Freud then goes on to draw a metaphorical parallel between the function of the Prince as a 'madman' and the function of dreams in 'concealing the true circumstances under a cloak of wit and unintelligibility' (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (1953; repr. London: Allen and Unwin, 1971), p. 444. This view of Hamlet as a plausible and purposeful psychological unity is splintered by the post-modern recognition of a rift between signifier and signified. In this vein Robert Weimann observes that 'Although motivated from within the needs of the self-contained play, Hamlet's madness constantly serves to subvert the representational logic of his own role in the play: in a strictly representational context, Hamlet's antic disposition arouses rather than allays suspicion. ... Madness as a 'method' of mimesis dissolves important links between the representer and the represented, and can only partially sustain a logical or psychological motivation' ('Mimesis in *Hamlet*', p. 285).
- 7 W. B. Worthen, 'The Weight of Antony: Staging 'Character' in *Antony and Cleopatra*', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 26 (1986), 298.
- 8 In her book *Shakespeare's Theory of Drama*, Pauline Kiernan investigates this dynamic comprehensively. The immediate comment is distilled from the following: 'When we are reminded that we are sitting in a theatre and have been, in the words of one contemporary spectator at *Julius Caesar*, "ravished" by events on stage, it merely reinforces the power of the fiction to coerce our belief - in the fiction' (p. 120).
- 9 *Shakespeare's Theory of Drama*, p. 96.
- 10 Weimann, 'Mimesis in *Hamlet*', pp. 285, 282, 288.
- 11 James C. Bulman traces 'the emergence of stage-centred criticism from traditional literary study' to J. L. Styan's work *The Shakespeare Revolution* (1977): *Shakespeare, Theory and Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 1.
- 12 During rehearsals for *Hamlet*, discussion of the identity of the Players included repetition of the phrase 'shabby and down at heel, but with a sense of grandeur' (Rehearsal notes by the present author, 22 January 2003). Names circulated while discussing the aesthetic of the dumb show and *The Murder of Gonzago* were 'Berlin Cabaret', 'Kurt Weill', 'Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers'. In a discussion of how actors' public and social identity had changed during the last century, Bille Brown and John Bell contributed their reminiscence of the time when an 'actor wore a suit and tie to rehearsals and

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- a dinner suit to radio broadcasts'. (Rehearsal notes, 20 January 2003).
- 13 The text used for the Bell production omits the five lines prior to Polonius's interjection.
- 14 Rehearsal notes, 24 January 2003.
- 15 I am indebted to the Department of Performance Studies, University of Sydney, and particularly to Dr. Laura Ginters and Mr Russell Emerson, for their help in accessing archival video footage of rehearsals and performances of this production.
- 16 Terence Hawkes, '*Telmah*', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, p. 312.
- 17 *Weekend Australian*, 11-12 June 1994, and *Director's Notes*, program, quoted in '*Elsinore at Belvoir Street*', 59.
- 18 Golder and Madelaine, '*Elsinore at Belvoir Street*', 56.
- 19 Golder and Madelaine, '*Elsinore at Belvoir Street*', 73.
- 20 Golder and Madelaine, '*Elsinore at Belvoir Street*', 60.
- 21 Angela Bennie, 'A tortured Macbeth; a glorious Hamlet', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 June 1994.
- 22 Golder and Madelaine, '*Elsinore at Belvoir Street*', 79.

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