

THE HORSES OF HAMLET

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Illustrations by the Author

A NEW and elaborate production of *Hamlet* has just opened at the Vakhtangov Theatre in Soviet Moscow, with a new kind of ghost: not a gauze phantom, or a green light, or an offstage voice: Hamlet himself masquerades as his father's ghost, in his father's armor.

The Russians are fond of Shakespeare, and produce him incessantly. With true Bolshevik admiration, difficult for outsiders to comprehend, they read avidly the lines of this great poet who glorified feudalism, and as they read they interpret according to the gospel of Marx. And how shall they interpret this somber and subtle Prince Hamlet whose vacillations are Marxian heresy? "To be or not to be" is no longer a legitimate question in the U.S.S.R.; it has, so to speak, been liquidated.

The Vakhtangov Theatre is one of the best in Moscow, with a modernistic interior, a stage as large as that of the Metropolitan Opera, and a handsome, well-dressed audience, an audience that in Russia might well be called elegant. The Vakhtangov *Hamlet* may very likely be the most lavish one ever presented—four and a half hours of elaborate settings, gorgeous costumes and exciting music. Produced under the general direction of N. P. Akimov, hitherto known only as a scenic designer, the play was a year in preparation, rehearsal and study. The U.S.S.R. is having a most difficult time financially, but it spares no expense in its theatres; Broadway productions in the most prosperous times never had such resources.

The Russian theatre of today looks back to generations of social death-struggle; it faces a coming period even more dangerous. Its Shakespearean productions are not after-dinner tidbits. Sharp and shrewd, it restores to its Shakespearean plays the old peasant vitality out of which they grew, and which has long been lost.

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The genuine boisterousness of this *Hamlet*, the rough clowning, the sly sarcasm, would have pleased Shakespeare. A little more wryly, he might approve the handling of his script. There are no lack of bold transpositions, insertions and omissions. He might remember, perhaps, how unceremoniously he treated the older plays from which he derived his own masterpieces.

The Vakhtangov production opens with two soldiers huddled close to a campfire. Almost the whole stage-depth is stepped down



below the nearer part of the stage; Horatio approaches out of the night as if out of the miles of distance. But at once the Vakhtangov *Hamlet* and the *Hamlet* of the folios part close company, greeting each other only now and then. Horatio—presented by Kozlovsky as a bookish young man in black robe and spectacles—knows the purpose of the ghostly masquerade: it is to inaugurate a “whispering campaign” against Claudius, the usurper. Horatio also knows where the voice in the cellarage comes from; it is his own voice muffled in a butter-tub. After thus unsettling Denmark, he and Hamlet—a short, thickset Hamlet played by Gorunov—go back to scientific research, and philosophize over Yorick’s skull, somewhere in the first act instead of in the last. There is no grave-digging scene.

The players scene is done twice, first as a rehearsal onstage; the players’ actual performance before the king and queen, takes place offstage, followed by the hurried exit down a vast flight

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of steps, of Hamlet's mother and step-father, fleeing out of the castle as if poisoned.

Constantly the action presses beyond the court to the whole community, broadening into city-wide panoramas as crowded as the canvases of Pieter Brueghel. Typical is a scene in the market place where Hamlet, to delude his enemies, goes publicly mad, clad in a nightgown, wearing a saucepan on his head, and holding a carrot.

The corruption of the Danish court becomes a fertile source of inspiration, and its chief exponent, the ancient Polonius—played by Shchukin—is everywhere at once sniffing like an inquisitor at Hamlet's scientific occupations. Somewhat far-fetched but very effective theatrically is the scene of the reception of the two fatuous rogues, Rosenkranz and Guildenstern: it takes place in an artist's studio, where the monkeyish king—played by Simonov—is being painted in regalia, a painless process for him, as his cloak and ermine are hung on a stand while pages hold in place his crown, globe and sceptre.



Fertility of direction, relish for broad action, constitute the strength and weakness of the Russian theatre, and nowhere more evidently than in this production. A number of the characters make their entrances and exits on horseback during the outdoor scenes;

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aside from drawing startled oh's and ah's from the spectators, this stunt serves no purpose but to pull the play sharply out of focus. The horses, some real, some papier-maché, are employed mostly in a papier-maché stag hunt that has nothing whatever to do with Hamlet, except that his interview with Ophelia has been placed arbitrarily in a forest.

Ophelia—as interpreted by Vagrina—is no frail nymph, but a buxom young lady not likely to die easily of unrequited love. She takes to drink instead, is carried on the shoulders of her numerous admirers, and drowns while still in her cups, after one of those Bacchanals without which no Russian play seems to think itself complete.

The final fencing-bout is a public tournament performed before a large number of "extras", half of them papier-maché; after the bout these dummies are quite visibly carried offstage. This is a second ruinous stunt: only a consistently fantastic production, or one hilarious to the point of burlesque, could bear the weight of such stylization.

The curtain goes down on a play that is provocatively brilliant, opulent and muddled. Muddled it certainly is, with new directions, new essays, in the course of which the big outline of the play is lost. The Hamlet of this production is a guileful youth who does a lot of thinking, but he thinks on his feet, he is not at all sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought; he gives the "to be or not to be" soliloquy smoothly, sitting on a tavern table, flagon in hand. To be sure, Hamlet might easily be a husky young Dane. But only a superb Marxian picture of feudal court intrigue could match such a protagonist, and with it there would have to be a corresponding expansion of Hamlet to the size of Lenin as a young man. To reduce Hamlet, as this production does, to an ambitious princeling, leaves no room for tragedy; but even here the direction has not been consistent: the Prince of Denmark remains a skeptical, moody figure.

It would have been simpler, as a matter of fact, to present Hamlet for what he is at his simplest—a facile, cerebral and purposeless aristocrat.

With so many horses to sit on, this *Hamlet* falls to the ground. Sitting there it may draw comfort from the thought that perhaps never in history has *Hamlet* received a production

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worthy of its script; but that perhaps no other production has been so arresting, so fertile in thought and theatre from start to finish.

Some of the scenes are not easy to forget: the ghost like a white raven with plumes like those on a hearse, croaking from the top of the tower. Hamlet in mourning, pompously arrayed in a veil and high stovepipe hat and followed by an orchestra. The mad prince in his nightgown in the market place. The king sitting for his portrait in the manner of Louis XIV. . . . Such scenes as these are huge blocks cut from some future construction of *Hamlet* in the grand style of the Soviet.

