

The Silences of Collective Memory

Performance Review: *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, artistic direction and stage adaptation by Declan Donnellan, a production of “Marin Sorescu” National Theatre, Craiova, 2023¹

A premiere of *Hamlet* on the stage of the National Theatre in Craiova cannot be a mere triviality or a standalone product. On the contrary, it becomes a theatrical event through its very association with the history of the producing institution, whose precedents with the famous Shakespearean tragedy determine the maturity of the audience’s expectations, but also create the possibility of a resounding failure under the proportional pressure of these expectations. Consequently, it is difficult to analyze Declan Donnellan’s recent production and its impact on the public and critics without a contextual parenthesis explaining the aura of predestination for *this* production on *this* stage.

¹ **Text translated into Romanian:** George Volceanov, **Set Design:** Nick Ormerod, **Assistant Director:** Laurențiu Tudor, **Set Design assistant:** Adelina Galiceanu, **Music:** Tibor Cári, **Stage Combat – Fencing:** Antonie Mihail, **Sound:** George Udrea, Dan Feneșan, **Lights:** Dodu Ispas, Marian Tudorache, Alina Mitrache, **Technical direction:** Cristian Norel Petec / Sorin Gruia, **Prompter:** Adrian Țircă, **Producer:** Claudia Gorun, **Poster graphics:** Denisa Neațu, **Cast:** Hamlet (Vlad Udrescu), Claudius (Claudiu Mihail), Gertrude (Ramona Drăgulescu), Ofelia (Flavia Hojda, Theodora Bălan), Polonius (Raluca Păun), Laertes (Alex Stoicescu), Phantom (Eugen Titu), Rosencrantz (Cătălin Vieru), Guildenstern (Darko Huruială), Undertaker 1/Third actor in the play (Marian Politic), King in the play/Priest (Angel Rababoc), Queen in the play/Undertaker 2 (Costinela Ungureanu), Guard 1 (Mircea Mogoșeanu), Guard 2 (Mihnea Presura). **Photo credits:** “Marin Sorescu” National Theatre, Craiova.





Beyond the effect of the Shakespeare Festival, which 14 years ago had an edition dedicated exclusively to the Danish prince and his metaphysical tribulations, distilled through the visions of directors such as Thomas Ostermeier or Oskaras Koršunovas, the artistic profile of the (currently) “Marin Sorescu” National Theatre has been closely linked with *Hamlet* over the decades. Thus, as a result of some fortunate coincidences, the full text of *Hamlet* was first performed in Romania here, with Ion Manolescu in the main role. Here, too, Vlad Mugur staged the first post-war Romanian *Hamlet* in 1958, and Tompa Gábor directed the first Romanian *Hamlet* after the Revolution, in 1997, featuring Adrian Pintea, whose performance remains legendary in Romanian theatre history.

However, Declan Donnellan is one of the most important European directors of the moment, and his collaboration with designer Nick Ormerod, with whom he founded the Cheek by Jowl company – already a familiar presence in the Craiova landscape, having inaugurated the first edition of the Shakespeare Festival with a famous *As You Like It* – provides an additional guarantee of quality. Thus, the premiere at the end of February this year was born at the intersection of Romanian and European theatrical history, becoming immediately an event of great national significance.



Given these circumstances, the anticipation surrounding the new production is understandable, as well as the audience's intuition that the final product will be surprising. However, the often austere simplicity of the production perfectly aligns with the well-established style of the creative duo, so the true innovation lies in the dramaturgical treatment applied to the text, in creating an atmosphere more from what is absent than from what is explicitly shown. And among the major absences marking the universe of the Craiova performance, that of Horatio is so striking and oppressive that it immediately enters into an unexpected dialectic with the apparent sobriety and conciseness of the staging.

There is already a tacit resignation to the fate many contemporary directors condemn, for instance, Fortinbras, preferring to substitute the gravity of political death in Shakespeare's final act by effectively eliminating the Norwegian prince. However, Horatio embodies hope, a source of vitality that, instead of relativizing the actual tragedy, elevates it to eternity. His existence guarantees the fulfillment of the primordial word, which creates life and even extends it beyond death. Without this character, we enter an

atheist paradigm, where man's disappearance is final, leaving no concrete traces. Thus, at first glance, Donnellan's choice is marked by pessimism, if not even nihilism to a large extent. Nevertheless, the show is actually optimistic in essence, and Horatio's absence does not leave a noticeable void. In fact, it becomes almost immediately apparent that we, the audience, are called to replace Hamlet's friend, and we are, in essence, a collective version of him.



As mentioned, the meaning of this production gradually unfolds, not so much through what remains of the Shakespearean play but through how it has been processed, cut, and stitched together. Therefore, there is a fluidity in the transitions from one scene to another, like a chain of thoughts generating each other, without pauses or breaks in rhythm. Consequently, we can speculate not only that we are Horatio but also that we are witnessing a mnemonic reconstruction, the story itself already consumed at the moment of its scenic performance. Thus, nuances fade, events lose their specific color, and the action seems to accelerate towards the denouement, suggesting the instability of memory, unable to preserve the details of the recorded facts.

The story Horatio tells, which we collectively remember, is incomplete, essentialized, and stylized, yet it erupts in unexpected colors when evoking traumatic moments. Perhaps for this reason, against a monochrome and cold background, Hamlet plays his madness in bright red.

As in other Donnellan productions, dramatic tension is heightened by the proximity between actors and spectators, the latter being seated on stands on either side of the playing space, which is thus reduced, narrowed, and devoid of broader perspectives. Everything happens frontally; there are no shadows or backstage intrigues, as we can only remember what we have seen. The props are minimal, and Denmark stretches along a corridor covered with a white paper runner. On either side of this diminished world are black metal stools, which later become another plane of existence, a sterile afterlife populated by neutral dead.

The characters are dressed in office costumes that depersonalize them, exhibiting the studied rigidity and attitude of corporate employees welcoming the company's new leadership with feigned enthusiasm. Despite this convention, the plot is not transposed into contemporary times or a recognizable everyday zone that would give the entire directorial approach a didactic note. On the contrary, we are permanently in an uncertain, undetermined space and time.

Initially, the corridor on which the family drama unfolds forces the actors into repetitive movements with unclear goals, perhaps even tiring for the viewers. Later, after the encounter with the ghost and Hamlet's resolution to expose the usurper king, the stage movement adjusts, mathematically following the rhythm of the text.

Overall, the show does not offer remarkable individual interpretations, does not highlight the specific color of each actor, but also avoids stridencies or lapses into grotesque. The coherence of the ensemble is more important here than the potential of the individual, with two major exceptions: Vlad Udrescu as Hamlet and Raluca Păun as Polonius – two symbolic pillars of a nation on the brink of disintegration. The prince embodies the compromised monarchy, and the obsequious counselor represents the inefficient state apparatus, a cog turning in vain towards its own destruction. Hamlet's "madness" begins with the mocking of feminine frailty through a scornful

exaggeration of traditional feminine markers, in an admirable parodic travesty. Polonius's femininity, on the other hand, is imperceptible, and the fact that a woman plays him is irrelevant beyond the actress's ability to construct her character with such precise lines – repulsive, well-intentioned, energetic in his sycophancy. Unlike Claudius, he was never a great villain, just a minor one, hence much more representative of the world about to disappear.



There are, as mentioned, scenes where colors seem to reclaim the space; for example, the actors' scene and the gravediggers' scene, two essential moments foretelling the end of an order that has exhausted its vital energy. Fortinbras is absent again, but the victory of the outside world is signified, on one hand, by the triumphant and disruptive entrance of the actors, and on the other by the chromatic protest of the gravediggers – a metaphor for internal disintegration.

The conclusion “The rest is silence!” is pronounced before the final fight, which is silent, carefully choreographed, and extracted from the text. Here lies that apparent optimism that Horatio’s absence does not diminish but rather enhances. The king, queen, and Hamlet seem to have a reconciliation after death, in a moment of heartbreaking tenderness. Yet, if we are Horatio, and the story and its memory belong to us, we can only accept that this moment is a mere projection of imagination, meant to fill a gap in memory, a scene that the silent witness from this side of the grave never truly saw.

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