

The Guardian - Hamlet review – Benedict Cumberbatch is the sanest of Danes

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Cumberbatch is a strikingly eloquent Hamlet in an evening of fitful illumination



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‘The control is a marvel, and a limitation’: Benedict Cumberbatch as Hamlet at the Barbican. Photograph: Johan Persson/PA

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I don't think I have ever seen a more rational Hamlet. When Benedict Cumberbatch tots up his bodkins, whips, fardels and slings in "To be or not to be", he might be enlisting the audience's support in a debate about assisted dying. Each possibility is laid out with complete clarity and assessed. Like a first-rate barrister in training, he nips around his mind to argue against himself.

Anyone who has seen Cumberbatch on stage over the past decade knows he is as quick and varied in the theatre as he is enclosed and enigmatic on the small screen. It is 10 years since he was a startlingly youthful Tesman in Hedda Gabler. He has since been languorous in Rattigan, exact in Ionescu and playfully monstrous in Frankenstein. Now it turns out that he also has an elastic ease with Shakespearean verse. He can shift an emphasis – "You *were* sent for..." – or drop in a 21st-century intonation without missing a beat or skewing the sense. He always transmits a meaning. He is never in the least bit mad.

This control is a marvel, and a limitation. Cumberbatch is arresting but not disturbing. The mightiest Hamlets are on the edge of a chasm, in danger of being engulfed. By madness in the case of Mark Rylance and Michael Sheen. By overwhelming grief and intellectual perplexity in the case of Simon Russell Beale. By massive political upheaval in the case of the 1964 Russian film. Cumberbatch may be beset, petulant and skittish but he never sounds as if he is might disintegrate.

The big soliloquies become a way of Hamlet's reasoning himself out of difficulty. "To be or not to be" is more of a "to do or not to do". The speech is now delivered well into the action, though a little earlier than usual. I would have been curious to see it open the play, as it did throughout most of the previews. It might have given the production an extra touch on the tiller, and helped to make director Lyndsey Turner's whirling ideas coalesce.

Es Devlin's set is so sumptuous, intricate and declamatory that it runs the risk of becoming an alternative show

As it is, this is an evening of fitful illumination. Es Devlin's design is a tremendous look: so freighted with detail, glorious colour and bold strokes that audience members start making notes for interior decoration. The walls of a country house are covered in an extraordinary shadow-filled blue – neither marine nor sky nor turquoise nor navy. Alongside an enormous chandelier, massive bunches of desiccated flowers hang from the ceiling, as they do from the gilded staircase. Ancestral portraits scowl on the walls. Stags' heads jut from the gloom of a far-off room. After a rousing blizzard of grit at the end of the first half, the palace is covered in what looks like a slag heap: hard luck on those who have to clamber up it in heels.



Anastasia Hille, “a beautiful Gertrude: febrile but restrained’. Photograph: Johan Persson

This set is so sumptuous, intricate and declamatory that it runs the risk of becoming an alternative show, of competing with the action rather than steering you into it. Yet every now and then it enables a revelatory touch by Turner. Sian Brooke’s Ophelia, convincingly fragile but disappointingly thin-voiced, is seen slowly labouring up that grit hill towards her death. Anastasia Hille’s Gertrude watches her and, suddenly realising the danger, struggles after her. Too late. Hille is a beautiful Gertrude: febrile but restrained. She makes her own sense of the detailed description of Ophelia’s drowning. This can be problematic: why didn’t she throw her a lifebelt? In Hille’s mouth the memory becomes a way of recovering a life, and of driving herself mad. She trembles like a silver birch.

Gigantic cinematic effects – strobe lighting, slow motion – often diminish rather than magnify impact. The duel scene is skimmed, wobbling by in a blur of rolling limbs. Yet the same techniques yield an intense episode early on. Cumberbatch sits, in Christ position, at a table lit like an old master Last Supper. He springs on to the table (a risky manoeuvre but he pulls it off) to deliver “O that this too too solid flesh would melt”. As he does so, those around him rise and leave, moving as if through water, so gently that their own bodies seem to be dissolving.

The pre-opening hullabaloo of this production was mainly about Cumberbatch. More of it should have been about Turner. There are infuriating moments here: why does Hamlet have to strut around like a toy soldier when feigning madness? Why has she let some tinny acting through? Yet there is also tremendous drive from this young director. What a piece of work is a woman.