

Cumberbatch is an incredible Hamlet: review

Hamlet: National Theatre Live



Hamlet (Benedict Cumberbatch) and Gertrude (Anastasia Hille) in the National Theatre production of the Shakespeare play. It was seen in movie theatres around the world on Oct. 15 with encore presentations to follow. (JOHAN PERSSON)

Written by William Shakespeare. Directed by Lyndsey Turner. Repeats Nov. 7, 8, 9, 11 at various Cineplex theatres around the GTA. NTLive.com or cineplex.com

Now there's a way to see Benedict Cumberbatch deliver, "To be or not to be" without missing rent or defeating nearly insurmountable odds to get scarce tickets. This way also lets you eat popcorn at the same time.

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On Thursday night, *Hamlet* made its cinema debut in movie theatres across the GTA and beyond as part of the National Theatre's NT Live series, which broadcasts their stage productions to movie theatres around the world.

It broke a record, with more than more than 225,000 viewers watching on more than 1,400 screens in 25 countries, the largest global audience for a National Theatre Live broadcast.

This *Hamlet* has been the fastest-selling show in British theatre history. It's on at London's Barbican Theatre only until the end of the month, but the box office emptied out back in August and the only remaining tickets are available by lottery only.

So Torontonians are in good stead to catch the U.K.'s hottest production with several "encore" screenings of Thursday's live stream in November (check out cineplex.com to find out where it's playing near you).

As a theatre critic, typing the words "playing near you" feels incredibly foreign. Touring Canadian plays nationally is already a very expensive and underfunded piece of the industry, and it's hard enough to get local theatregoers to see what's on in their community. Now we have the star power and big budgets of the U.K. to compete with.

And while the Stratford Festival is filming and screening its Shakespeare productions, how "live" can a static film screen really be? As a critic, let me say there's an element of audience and performers being in a room together that a film cannot pull off in the same way.

But as a fan, the NT Live version of *Hamlet* was pure fun. The Cineplex Yonge Dundas auditorium was packed and buzzing with fans of either the play or the star or both; it doesn't matter which.

Lyndsey Turner's production has received mixed reviews because of its irreverence toward the text, cutting and mixing it up in surprising, sometimes confusing ways. There's also some inexplicable condescension toward the play's leading man for being in Hollywood movies and because many women happen to find him attractive.

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Cumberbatch is an incredible Hamlet; he has an alienating, semi-Sherlockian intelligence but is guided entirely by his emotions. The play opens with a grief-stricken Hamlet looking through photo albums and listening to "Nature Boy." The record is switched off as Horatio (a tattooed Leo Bill) enters, cutting it off right before the famous last line: "The greatest thing you'll ever learn / Is just to love and be loved in return."

Hamlet, in Turner's production, is very much a strange, enchanted boy: dressing like a toy soldier and feigning madness by playing in a child-sized castle. He's the "Nature Boy" that never learned the lesson about love to make him truly wise.

There's also a stronger maternal presence in Gertrude (Anastasia Hille), especially in regards to Ophelia (Sian Brooke). When Gertrude discovers that her once future daughter-in-law has given up her passion of photography and destroyed her camera (which feels like a thankful attempt by Turner to give Ophelia some personality), Gertrude realizes Ophelia's life is in danger and chases after her. It's one of the play's most harrowing sequences.

Designer Es Devlin's set translates very well to the big screen; dark and intimidating, the Danish palace feels like you're lost in the woods (it takes that idea more literally in the second act). The camera manipulates the stage in unthinkable ways, convincing the audience that the set morphs and descends into different areas as if by magic. Katrina Lindsay's costumes are also worthy of their close-ups, especially in the opening wedding scene.

And as for the text, it's safe to say that viewers in the audience who had never seen or read the play before – and there definitely were some – didn't mind in the least.

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