

London Theater Review: Benedict Cumberbatch in ‘Hamlet’

By [MATT TRUEMAN](#)



CREDIT: JOHAN PERSSON

With: Barry Aird, Eddie Arnold, Leo Bill, Siân Brooke, Nigel Carrington, Ruairi Conaghan, Benedict Cumberbatch, Rudi Dharmalingam, Colin Haigh, Paul Ham, Diveen Henry, Anastasia Hille, Ciarán Hinds, Kobna Holdbrook-Smith, Karl Johnson, Jim Norton, Amaka Okafor, Dan Parr, Jan Shepherd, Morag Siller, Matthew Steer, Sergio Vares, Dwane Walcott.

Thought you knew “Hamlet”? Think again. Benedict Cumberbatch’s prince might have triggered a media frenzy, but make no mistake, this is director Lyndsey Turner’s production — and it’s a radical reinvention with real political intent, even if it’s too complex to fully cohere. Its star defers to his director’s vision, probably to his own personal detriment: his Hamlet is many things at once, more a collection of characteristics than a credible character, but he finds his purpose as he goes on — as does the production. This is a Hamlet for a world on the edge: a warning from history, and a plea for new ideas from a new generation.

Cumberbatch begins as the Hamlet we know and expect: Hamlet the icon, hidden away in his room, dressed in black and brooding over his father’s death. (In early previews, he opened with “To be or not to be...”) He sits on the floor, staring into the distance, as Nat King Cole croons “Nature Boy” on vinyl, almost daring us to impose its pat moral — just to love yadda yadda — onto Shakespeare’s play.

Don’t succumb to that, whatever you do. Turner pushes against any such simplicity with a stark, self-aware edit of the play — Hamlet starts with “Who’s there” only for Leo Bill’s Horatio to enter — that restores the Norwegian subplot more or less in full, while Cumberbatch himself gradually casts off the shell of Hamlet as depressed, vengeful stepson for something much more significant and politically potent.

His Hamlet stands in for a generation, one that’s stuck in adolescence and shirking all responsibility. He spends the first half fragmenting and, by the interval, he’s dressed in several costumes at once: a student’s trainers, a soldier’s trousers, a David Bowie T-shirt and a tailcoat daubed with the word “KING.” He’s a living, breathing identity crisis, scholarly one moment, silly the next and always, always self-absorbed. It’s often said that no one actor can hit all of Hamlet’s contradictions. For Cumberbatch it’s a juggling act, one trait at a time, not Hamlet as a whole. Cumberbatch is composite.

His Elsinore, meanwhile, is a fairytale kingdom. Es Devlin's grand, widescreen design, lit like sumptuous cinematography by Jane Cox, is a palatial stately home with military portraits and antique arms on the walls. Children's toys and leather books gather dust under the stairs. Silver branches and mounted stags adorn a vast wedding banquet. Hamlet sticks out, black blazer against white ceremonials, a student in a military state. Forbidden from returning to university, he sinks into a soliloquy and then throws a strop. His "madness" is actually mockery: marching on in a Napoleonic-era British Army uniform with a scornful salute to Ciarán Hinds' upright Claudius.

It's an infantile rebellion. Denmark's at war, and its kids are pathetically self-obsessed. Siân Brooke's Ophelia runs into a WWII-style bunker to pester Jim Norton's Polonius for romantic advice. Hamlet plays silly buggers in a giant children's castle, then lugs on a model theater for a quaint, toothless "Mousetrap" with a cast of players like hippies and squatters. It's as if Hamlet's repeating the revolutions of the past — a futile, adolescent gesture that gets precisely nowhere.

The world, meanwhile, teeters on the brink. With Fortinbras re-arming, war is imminent and Devlin brings it crashing into Elsinore. A bomb blast rips the place apart. Huge mud banks burst through the doors. Suddenly, a prettified, dispassionate production gets a genuine kick — arguably too little, too late. The symbols of the first half turn into visceral actions. Kobna Holdbrook-Smith's Laertes runs in screaming hoarsely, gun-drawn. Brooke's Ophelia sings with spine-tingling frailty. Anastia Hille's Gertrude runs this way and that.

Cumberbatch's pivotal epiphany comes on the battlefield, surrounded by Fortinbras' soldiers in their grey greatcoats: "I see the imminent deaths of 20,000 men," mourns Hamlet. Instantly, this petulant prince grows up and gets serious. This is a production with a firm grasp of mortality, and Karl Johnson's deadpan Gravedigger (doubled with Daddy Hamlet) is the best in donkeys' years: dark, droll and Beckettian. He croons into a femur and lobs skulls like bowling balls. It's the first time this theatergoer has felt Hamlet find a fellow traveler in the mud, not just a fool in a hole.

All this changes Hamlet's return to Elsinore entirely: Such is the threat of Fortinbras's forces that the play's politics dwarf any domestic drama. Hamlet arrives with fresh purpose, with bigger fish to fry than Claudius, only to be cut down too early. Cumberbatch manages to make Hamlet messianic, a savior for a lost generation, before Laertes does him in, almost unexpectedly. It's the most beautifully anticlimactic duel, a moment of mayhem that ends with four bodies strewn about the floor. It leaves a vacuum for Fortinbras and the rest is most definitely not silence. "Bid the soldiers shoot."

It's a fierce interpretation that doesn't do itself or its audience any favors. An overload of symbolism stifles the actors, Cumberbatch included, and until the final act, you simply don't care about anyone on the stage. However, there's genuine integrity here and Turner practices her preaching. A production that asks us not to repeat history asks us to watch as if for the first time. Turner's cast play the text slowly and deliberately, letting every line land like "To be or not to be." Here's a chance to find new meanings and, just maybe, new answers.



London Theater Review: Benedict Cumberbatch in 'Hamlet'

Barbican Centre, London; 1156 seats; £85 (\$132) top. Opened, Aug 25, 2015 reviewed Aug 25, 2015. Running time: 3 HOURS.

PRODUCTION: A Sonia Friedman production of a play in two acts by William Shakespeare.

CREATIVE: Directed by Lyndsey Turner. [Set, Es Devlin](#); Costume, Katrina Lindsay; Video, Luke Halls; lighting, Jane Cox; music, Jon Hopkins; sound, Christopher Shutt; movement, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Fights, Bret Yount.

CAST: Barry Aird, Eddie Arnold, Leo Bill, Siân Brooke, Nigel Carrington, Ruairi Conaghan, Benedict Cumberbatch, Rudi Dharmalingam, Colin Haigh, Paul Ham, Diveen Henry, Anastasia Hille, Ciarán Hinds, Kobna Holdbrook-Smith, Karl Johnson, Jim Norton, Amaka Okafor, Dan Parr, Jan Shepherd, Morag Siller, Matthew Steer, Sergio Vares, Dwane Walcott.