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Behind the Scenes:*Cal Shakes Director Finds New Take on Classic for Season's Final Performance*

By Lou Fancher



Mia Tagano as the Player Queen, Danny Scheie as the Player King, and the cast of Hamlet in California Shakes Theater's production of Hamlet, directed by Liesl Tommy. Photos Kevin Berne

"I had to do it, because we don't want to be in the theater for over four hours!" she laughs. "But I thought, Who am I to cut this? When I was in school, I learned how to deliver Shakespeare's text. It shaped how I approached language in every play that I do."

Eventually, when she let go of the burdens and simply responded to it, the play opened up - only to reveal another struggle. "There are dated words, like 'bodkin.' It's important that the audience knows it means 'dagger,' but dagger isn't the same and it affects the scansion [the metric patterns in a line of poetry], so you have to find a proper substitute," she worries.

Compromise and worry are not a part of the actors Tommy has cast. "The actor playing Hamlet (LeRoy McClain), I've worked with before," she says. "I would never dare embark on this play without someone who wasn't a parallel thinker with me. He came into the first reading profoundly prepared, which is what you need."

Calling the rest of the company, which includes actors Zainab Jah as Ophelia, Nick Gabriel as Horatio and Julie Eccles as Gertrude, "incredibly skilled," Tommy says, "I looked around and realized I could do exactly what I envisioned."

As a director, Tommy considers a play to be a conversation with an audience and draws inspiration from her environment and the community.

"As an artist, I have to respond to the play as honestly and personally as I can. I don't cater to age, or economic demographic, but I take into consideration the city or area," she explains. "I decided not to make it period and to not put it in a castle. It's set in a large mansion, [embedded] in a hill. Where do you think I got that?"

The outdoor Orinda amphitheater is thrilling Tommy. "It speaks to me of ancient drama," she says. "There's nothing I love more than hearing a skillful actor deliver poetry that lands in a beautiful place."

Three primal elements also attracted Tommy to the play. "Violence: I enjoy exploring it onstage just because it's such a part of every conversation a civil society engages in. Grief: I am always interesting in how we deal with death, pain, loss. And magical realism: the beauty and romance of theatricality," she concludes.

When she hits "director's block," or just the end of a long rehearsal day, Tommy takes walks, admires Bay Area homeowners' gardens, or indulges in her secret vice. "I watch Reality television," she confesses. "Project Runway, Top Chef, National Geographic; anything without a story, without script analysis."

Embracing both Shakespeare and pop culture, Tommy carries on the grand traditions of The Bard in a dichotomous life, traveling easily "from the ridiculous to the sublime."

Hamlet, presented by California Shakespeare Theater, runs through October 14 at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (off Highway 24), Orinda. For information, call (510) 548-9666 or visit www.calshakes.org.

Born in apartheid South Africa, raised in America from her teenage years into young adulthood and traveling the globe ever since, Liesl Tommy is haunted by her other self - which makes her the ideal candidate for directing Cal Shakes' season closer: William Shakespeare's Hamlet, running September 19 through October 14.

"One of the shocking things is to experience freedom, then have it taken away. I was aware of what I didn't have, but that other people do have. A part of myself always felt like I was less in a place. There was a refrain of this other place I'd left behind," she says.

Hamlet's brooding politics, tortured memories and dark family tragedy has transfixed audiences, directors and academics in both theater and film. Cal Shakes last presented Director Karin Coonrod's Hamlet in 2000 and mounted the work in 1978, 1982, and 1993.

Determined to find her own take on the masterpiece, Tommy avoided looking at other productions and consulted a former college professor. He told her to forget about finding the play's "definitive version" and instead, to seek a Hamlet that sprang from her personal history and perspective.

Still, the cutting, the process of selecting which lines in a script will be excised, was intimidating.



Mia Tagano as Ensemble, Danny Scheie as Osric, Jessica Kitchens as Ensemble, Julie Eccles as Gertrude, and LeRoy McClain as Hamlet in California Shakespeare Theater's production of Hamlet, directed by Liesl Tommy.

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[back](#)

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