

# Times out of Joint

## A Glance at Hamlet in Elsinore 1816 - 2016

*By Anne Sophie Refskou*

2016 was the year the world celebrated the 400th anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare. On 23 April – the day of the Bard’s supposed birth and death – great celebrations with pageantry and parades were mounted on a global scale, and of course no more so than in London and Stratford-upon-Avon, the two places which bred the playwright’s extraordinary imagination. In London President Obama guested Shakespeare’s Globe on the Southbank, where he was entertained with excerpts from the ‘Globe-to-Globe’ Hamlet production, newly returned after a tour of 197 countries. In Stratford-upon-Avon, a special birthday parade and several festive ceremonies took place at and around the town’s Shakespearean locations followed by a gala performance at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre.

One could not avoid hearing Shakespeare’s name that day, and at times it did feel as if we were all being force-fed Shakespearean jokes and quotations by actors, scholars, journalists – or anyone in possession of a stage or a camera – to the point of indigestion. However, now that 2016 has expired – a year which many have named an earthquake year for Western politics, economy and culture – and we hold our breath for 2017 to amend or aggravate things, it may be worth re-remembering the Bard’s birthday party. Not for the slightly excessive pageantry or the enormous horse-drawn birthday cake which was paraded through the quaint streets of his hometown, but for the ways in which the Shakespearean world stage, yet again, demonstrated its ability to inspire critical and timely reflection that day.

The gala performance at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon included a sketch on how to perform ‘To be, or not to be’, which saw some of Britain’s most famous Shakespearean actors (and Prince Charles) make a light-hearted, but unmistakeable, stab at anyone who might still imagine that leading Shakespearean parts can only be played by white males. It began with an exchange between black actor Paapa Essiedu, who was in fact playing Hamlet in an RSC production at the time, and comedian Tim Minchin. The pair were arguing about which word to stress in Hamlet’s most famous line, when Minchin castigated Essiedu for assuming that he (Minchin) would never be cast as Hamlet because of his hair colour: “say it, just say it: I will never play Hamlet in Stratford-upon-bloody-Avon, because I am ginger!”. Few minutes later they were joined by actress Harriet Walter, who has made a powerful point for gender-blind casting on the Shakespearean stage with her fine interpretations of Prospero, Brutus and Henry IV in Phyllida Lloyd’s all female Shakespeare trilogy for the Donmar Warehouse in 2016. To Minchin’s question as to whether she had ever played Hamlet, Walter replied with perfectly timed irony “Not yet!”, and she was backed up minutes later by Dame Judi Dench’s entrance and brilliant appropriation of Hamlet’s assertion of his identity: “This is I, Hamlet the Dame”.

In other words – and to quote from the concession speech by the first female American presidential candidate – the Shakespearean stage is a place where we might see the shattering of many ‘glass ceilings’, however high and hard. This has been a work in progress (and it is still far from complete), but thanks to artists like Harriet Walter and many others, it will undoubtedly continue. The video recording of the sketch quickly went viral and delighted audiences all over the world, and thus, on

his birthday 400 years after his death, many of those celebrating Shakespeare did so in the context and spirit of striving for equality and tolerance.

However, on 23 June, exactly two months later, the country that produced the world's most famous playwright decided to leave the European Union. And while the aftershocks of that decision were still keenly felt, the United States of America elected a president whose ascension to power many view in line with Hamlet's foreboding words "it is not, nor it cannot come to good". This article is not the place for a lengthy political analysis of whether these two cataclysmic events are partly the consequence of a liberal elite wilfully ignoring dissatisfied majorities. Nor will it be – I hope – an apocalyptic lament for a world which, in the words of Lear, "wilt come no more". However, the fact that Brexit and Trump happened in the great Shakespearean year of 2016 (and the fact that Shakespeare was extensively quoted and appropriated by the media coverage of both Brexit and the American election campaigns), does remind us of how often Shakespeare's presence on the global stage has been closely connected to global politics. At times, he has been held up as a nationalist symbol and subsumed into projects of cultural imperialism, but he has also come to represent a unifying force and an opportunity to further intercultural exchange and understanding. The example I will focus on in what follows only represents a tiny spot on a huge geographical, historical and ideological map, but it is nonetheless remarkable how that spot – Kronborg Castle in the small town of Elsinore in the small kingdom called Denmark – has witnessed and responded to international political crises and changes through Shakespeare for centuries.

In 2016 HamletScenen, the resident theatre at Kronborg Castle in Elsinore and host of the annual Shakespeare Festival at Hamlet's Castle, celebrated 200 years of Hamlet performances at this location, which is so strongly associated with Shakespeare's 'Danish' play.<sup>1</sup> Many of these performances represent pivotal moments in theatre history, such as the Old Vic's production starring Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, which visited Elsinore in 1937. However, in addition to having provided a setting for changing theatre traditions and conventions, Kronborg Castle, in its capacity as a Shakespearean performance location, is also a unique historical case-study of the relations and negotiations between politics and the arts. A brief glance at the two previous centenary celebrations at the castle, and some of the Hamlet performances that took place there immediately before and after World War II, offers a reflection of some major historical and political shifts, some of which might feel eerily present as the events of 2016 continue to unfold.

The first performance of Hamlet at Kronborg, which marked the castle's identification with Shakespeare's Elsinore in the play, was by a group of soldiers and amateur actors garrisoned at there. We have only sparse records about the production. Some believe Hamlet was played by lieutenant Nicolai Peter Nielsen (1795-1860), later to become an acclaimed professional actor, but what we do know is that the soldiers chose to celebrate the bicentenary of the death of an English playwright less than a decade after a bitter conflict with the England during the Napoleonic Wars. Despite having been recently defeated and bombed by the English, the Danes had begun to appreciate Shakespeare, largely thanks to the insistent attempts by the actor and translator, Peter Foersom (1777-1817), who played Hamlet at the Royal Danish Theatre in 1813. The bicentenary celebration

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1) Some of the material mentioned in this article comes from the exhibition *Hamlet at Elsinore 1816-2016* which I curated for HamletScenen as part of the World Shakespeare Congress and the Shakespeare400 Festival at King's College London in August, 2016. The exhibition was recently translated and extended for a run at Marienlyst Castle near Elsinore in November 2016, and will be included in the York Shakespeare Festival in May 2017. I am grateful to HamletScenen for this very fruitful collaboration and for the opportunity to discover the extraordinary archive material which they have preserved.

at Kronborg in 1816 was thus, among other things, an example of a very local celebration of an increasingly global Shakespeare, whose wider cultural value must have begun to be understood as detachable from his national origins.

100 years later it was time for the tercentenary celebration of Shakespeare's death in the middle of a world conflict. On 24 June 1916, prominent Danes of the day, including King Christian X and Queen Alexandra, gathered on the Kronborg battlements for a Hamlet performance by the Royal Danish Theatre. The programme also included a prologue written by Danish writer Helge Rode set to music by none other than the world-renowned composer Carl Nielsen. But the most striking element surviving from that day is the speech given at Kronborg by the literary critic and Shakespeare biographer, Georg Brandes. Officially Denmark was neutral during World War I, but the speech given by Brandes paid explicit homage to England as the nation that gave birth to Shakespeare. Brandes had published his internationally acclaimed William Shakespeare: A Critical Study in 1898, but in 1916 his speech on the playwright and on Hamlet was strongly influenced by living in what he characterized as "a time, sadly, of explosives". When speaking to the crowds at Kronborg, he told them that the present occasion was:

*A protest against those who, in this time of hardship and blood, underestimate the significance of the arts. Poetry at its greatest survives politicians and their destructive transformations of the world, just like the bronze medal survives the emperor who wears it.<sup>2</sup>*

Brandes' words would have gained renewed resonance two decades later, when a new world conflict was on its way and three performances took place at Kronborg which might have proved the endurance of art in the face of destructive politics, but not its full immunity or protection from them. As already mentioned, Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh visited Kronborg in 1937 and offered an occasion for some very cordial and diplomatic exchanges between Denmark and Britain, as exemplified by Danish prime minister Thorvald Stauning's welcome in the printed programme:

*This artistic exchange – especially with a country which has such a close relation to us as England – I consider a particularly appropriate form of collaboration, because it creates bonds between peoples and offers a possibility for further exchange, which is what Denmark wishes to have with all countries and nations in the interest of peace.<sup>3</sup>*

The following year's Hamlet production at Kronborg gave Stauning further opportunity to extend goodwill to all nations 'in the interest of peace', but this time treading perilous diplomatic waters. When negotiations for another British production fell through, the organisers of what was now intended to be an annual Hamlet performance at Kronborg quickly made an arrangement with the German actor and director of the Staatliches Schauspielhaus in Berlin, Gustaf Gründgens – to the delight of his powerful patron, Hermann Göring, who arrived in Elsinore on his private yacht and attended the performance. In addition to this, the printed programme for the production came to include a portrait photograph of the German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, which, in historical hindsight, must rank as one of the greatest crimes ever to happen to a theatre programme. Two years later Denmark – and Kronborg – was occupied by German forces.

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2) My translation.

3) My translation

The last Hamlet performance at Kronborg before the war broke out, however, was by John Gielgud, and again the printed programme reflects the political context in a poem by the prominent Danish author, critic and newspaper editor, Tom Kristensen. Kristensen's poem ends with the following welcome in English to the British players, appropriating Shakespeare's lines from Hamlet in what sounds like an anxious reflection of difficult times and decisions:

*Welcome, John Gielgud and your actors, welcome!  
Moreover that we much did long to see you,  
The need we have to use you did provoke  
our hasty sending. Something have you heard  
of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark's transformations  
and of the manifold interpretations  
which have confused us and confuse us still.  
Is he a Dane? A countryman of yours?  
A spirit of the modern doubt and weakness  
or active as a prince of the renaissance?  
A hero or a coward? Tell us that.*

After the war Hamlet performances at Kronborg returned, the first by the Norwegian National Theatre with Hans Jacob Nielsen as Hamlet in 1946. The Danish Prime Minister at the time, Knud Kristensen, welcomed the Norwegian players in the printed programme with words of sombre self-reflection and a sadly haunting answer to the questions asked by Kristensen before the war:

*The fact that Norwegian actors perform Hamlet at Kronborg this year is of particular and heartfelt value to the Danes. The fates of Denmark and Norway during the years of war were both similar and different. The determined fight for freedom by Norwegian patriots became a worthy example to be emulated by the Danes, and the bond between our peoples was strengthened by our common cause. The pensive nature of Hamlet – his varying moods and deliberations before taking action – is closer to the Danish national character than that of the Norwegians. During the war we often blamed ourselves for this our Hamlet-like character.<sup>4</sup>*

But within a few years a new spirit of optimism arrived in Elsinore personified by the nation which had come to Europe's aid, and which was to continue to help rebuild it. In 1949, thanks to the machine that set globalization flying, Kronborg for the first time welcomed an American Hamlet. Robert Breen played Hamlet in a production by the State Theater of Virginia, which was brought to Denmark as well as to American military bases in Germany by the United States Air Force. The foreword in the programme declares in celebratory tones that this is "the greatest distance a national company of players has journeyed to historic Elsinore, a distance which only a few years ago would have been measured in weeks of travel". The programme also contains a blessing of the enterprise by President Harry Truman himself and is permeated by optimism. The foreword ends with the following statement:

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4) My translation.

*The presence of an American company presenting Hamlet in the courtyard of hospitable Elsinore marks a heartening step in the world's progress toward a more complete international exchange of art and culture, and it is through such exchanges that lasting peace and understanding can be achieved.*

As well as reflecting the internationalist US politics, which for better and (certainly also) for worse have been so dominant on the world stage ever since, these words had a prophetic quality for the Shakespearean performances at Kronborg. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century Kronborg has hosted an increasingly international range of Shakespearean artists, including some of Germany's finest directors and companies, whose visits had very little – if anything at all – to do with the ghost of a nationalist past, but took place in the context and spirit of a European present. The intercultural exchanges through Shakespeare at Kronborg have become a very tangible reality, exemplifying the post-nationalist, borderless Europe, which many of us have come to take for granted. However, the events of 2016 have now shaken what has been so carefully built up, and are seen by many as the beginning of the end of internationalist ideals. The 1949 US production visited Elsinore few months after the end of the famous Berlin airlift, in which UK and US air forces provided West Berlin with food and fuel after land access had been blocked by Soviet forces. 1949 was also the year in which NATO was created, an organisation that is now deeply concerned about its future in view of US President Elect, Donald Trump's well-known critique of it. Trump's isolationist rhetoric – resonating with the voice of those who so fervently wish Britain to leave the EU – signals a new reality which it seems harder and harder to ignore: The day after the American election, BBC Newsnight saw the Pulitzer prize-winning writer Anne Applebaum strongly arguing that Europe and Britain now need to get used to the idea of the US as no longer “an absolutely reliable partner”.

Where does this new reality leave Shakespeare and his role as a cultural mediator? As Clarence Derwent, President of the Actors' Equity Association, puts it in his contribution to the programme for the 1949 US Hamlet at Kronborg: “Artists have an important role to play in the attainment of that idea which we all seek: the great goal of One World”. Shakespeare with his global status has been one of the most significant and applicable artists in the pursuit of that ‘great goal’, and he is doubly valuable because his work inherently resists servicing those who misuse their power. This was what the world celebrated in 2016, and, as 2017 begins, this remains a cause for hope.

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### **Anne Sophie Refskou**

Ph.D., is a Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at GSA, Department of Acting and Performance, University of Surrey, UK. She specializes in the study of Shakespeare in a global and intercultural context with an interest in new terms and methodologies, as well as political and diplomatic issues. She also works as an actor, dramaturg and script consultant.

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