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Photo: Peter Ewen

Watching and Being Watched: Hamlet in Semi-Public Space

by Christina Catanese

[Theatre Philadelphia](#) and thINKingDANCE continue our partnership, begun in 2018, bringing coverage and new perspectives to Philadelphia's vibrant theatre scene.

The vast concrete expanses of Penn's Landing, including the Independence Seaport Museum, have long been, arguably, one of Philadelphia's least welcoming public spaces for pedestrians. The [Brutalist architecture](#), confusing navigation, and lack of connectivity from the rest of the city by Interstate 95 all contribute to a general state of unease and isolation—all of which resonate with the salient themes of Hamlet, Shakespeare's classic tragedy. A free production put on with "virtually no money" and "the barest of stipends" for the actors, says director Dan Hodge as he makes the introduction, provides an enjoyable take on the classic in a space where most Philadelphians have likely never been.

This scrappy, edited, minimalist production (starring Robert DaPonte in the title role) is staged in the museum's Riverview Lookout, a space with floor to ceiling windows looking out at a 180-degree view of the Delaware River, bordering pedestrian walkways, and Camden. From where I sit on the stage right side, my primary view includes the small harbor adjacent to the Museum and the Moshulu boat, whose lights pleasingly reflect off the water's moving surface.

The audience is arranged in three sides of a rectangle, with the stage being simply the room's concrete floor. There are no wings, which requires the cast to remain in character even when offstage. Entrances and exits from the four corners are completely visible and therefore more drawn out, adding to the play's overall ominous atmosphere. In this intimate set-up with perhaps 60 total seats and no house lights to dim, the audience is also on view. The costuming's contemporary attire—royals in business suits, defiant Hamlet in a black hoodie—gives a relatable feel. Occasional ambient music and sound fill the space at strategic dramatic moments from the balcony that encircles the room's high ceilings.

The space is used effectively, but for the most part the audience is left to make meaning and connections between the play and the place. The only time I notice that the production specifically acknowledges the space is when Hamlet gestures with both arms wide at the river through the windows ("this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory"), and toward the high ceilings of the room ("this most excellent canopy, the air...this brave o'erhanging firmament"). There are times when I hope that the production will connect more intentionally to the watery site. For example, Ophelia's death by drowning happens offstage in the text, but to me, there is unrealized potential for an interesting use of the proximity to the river. The space ultimately exists as a backdrop, used well but not as movingly as I had hoped.

However, I relish the location's blurry boundary between public and private space. The production is physically isolated from the promenade just outside, but the large windows bring what is happening outside dreamily in, and the play subtly out. People walking outside come in and out of view. In the context of the play, in which Hamlet's father's ghost appears to him, these people feel apparition-like, with scraps of their lives briefly intermingling with ours. On this 60-degree evening in January, I see couples walking arm in arm, maintenance staff on golf carts, families frolicking, individuals out for a run. Some give a passing glance through the windows, likely wondering what the earnest and enthusiastic actors were up to indoors, while others seem not to notice.

One of my favorite moments is in Act III's play within a play, in which Hamlet confirms his uncle's guilt in killing his father to usurp the throne. The cast of the play completes the square with the audience, lining up along the windows to watch Hodge portraying all the roles of the mini-production. Just outside the window and over the shoulder of Ophelia, I note a couple who has stopped to watch the play—he stands behind her with hands around her waist, while she holds up her phone to capture the drama. All of us—the audience, the cast, the couple outside—are caught up together in a momentary web of watching, being watched, being watched watching, as Hodge acts out this microcosm of the play's betrayal and greed. After a few minutes, the play within a play ends, the couple moves on, the cast goes back to being actors rather than an audience. It is the kind of tiny, magic moment that can't be planned for (and that maybe no one else in the audience noticed), but that makes site-specific performance so exciting.

In his welcoming remarks, Hodge noted, "In high school, they teach us that in Shakespeare's day, people believed that ghosts and witches were closer to us than we do now," but he questioned that idea. Watching the small dramas of urban life briefly pass by outside while seeing this timeless drama onstage, I mull over how like spirits we can be to each other as we coexist as citizens, mashed up together in these close, urban conditions.

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[Hamlet at the Seaport Museum](#), directed by Dan Hodge, Independence Seaport Museum, January 10-19.

By Christina Catanese
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