

## SEEING SHAKESPEARE

## **MACBETH**

(at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2009)

I've always enjoyed reading *Macbeth*  
but I've never till now seen a production I liked

this actor, Peter Macon, performs Macbeth  
like a hawk glides on an updraft

he lets the words and his character's will carry him  
to places in the soul we'd rather not know about  
but we let this actor take us there because

as Carol points out

this is, for all the blood spilt  
and the corpses buried at the edge of the stage

this is a feminine interpretation

this Lady Macbeth, played by Robin Goodrin Nordli  
is a woman seeking to become special, just a gal with a dream

not evil but misguided, who goes mad

when she realizes what she's done – and Macbeth loves her  
and himself enough to catch the updraft when it arrives

hawks are predators after all no matter how decorative in the sky

these actors given air by this director, Gale Edwards, gave us cruelty  
for love and now I doubt I'll ever understand the flight of a hawk in any other way

## **UPON WATCHING THE 2010 HAMLET IN ASHLAND, OR**

they got the wedding *kransekage* right  
the cone shaped stack of marzipan-filled cake rings  
with little Danish paper flags stuck into them  
and, yes, some of those costumes you could see  
on the streets of Elsinore today  
(and I think I spotted the Danish  
anti-nuclear power decal on his guitar case  
when Laertes trundled off to France)

the players from the city formed  
a hip-hop troupe and Hamlet himself  
seemed, yes, (that word) seemed  
in Dan Donohue's rendering  
to be a rap-influenced white poet infatuated  
with long vowels  
(the things they learn down there in Wittenberg!)  
perhaps to suggest to his mother that matter hints at mater  
or just to make hip slant rhymes  
leaving all nobility of mind behind from the start  
so no loss when he died (It made sense that this Hamlet  
would entrust his story to this doltish eternal student, Horatio  
who'd seemingly no philosophy but to dress as a tramp)

he had to die this boy, we wanted him to die  
this youth, this eternal youth (*a flab*)  
they might have called him in Danish, a rogue) who just did things  
in mannered but by no means manly ways  
there was no life in him, no animating principle  
only the shell of behaviour

unlike Ophelia as rendered by Susannah Flood  
an intelligent, self-possessed young woman  
in a world where such possession cannot be had  
(and so out of joint with Laertes and Polonius  
but then no one gets to choose their family)  
who was being forced so deeply into nothingness  
that she had to drown herself in a halfhearted current  
with stones in her pocket to ensure success

(Flood was the one to show us how  
unconsoled despair may ruin more than a mind)

I half hoped she would pop up in some other dimension  
(even as a ghost) where we could see a play about her  
and maybe Claudius as rendered by Jeffrey King, a player  
who also (in a better a better kind of seeming) seemed able  
to make choices that portray the flow of the kinds of emotions  
(in this case ambition's gushing well and the always  
too late and useless regret) and views of the world a man like him  
– or in the case of Flood's Ophelia – a young woman like her  
could be living through. It is not a matter of what the actor feels  
(though that may be a shortcut in preparation  
with the caveat that in this tradition the job  
of the actor is more to keenly observe  
and reproduce than it is to self-express)

it is a matter of whether they can (also) portray  
a persuasive possibility of such a person in such and such  
a situation where such and such and such become  
indistinguishable suches and we all – performers and audiences -  
end up having our cake and eating it too

## **THOMAS OSTERMEIER'S HAMLET AT KRONBORG CASTLE**

I sinned against one of Europe's theatre gods this evening  
leaving his show halfway through and now I fear the consequences  
what must I do to propitiate? How can I ever again be seen as a connoisseur  
who's best pleased when things are hard to understand. But the simple fact is  
I was driven by boredom. I could no longer sit and attend to - not  
nothing, there was all too much of something

I got my 345 Danish Kroner's worth though in the first few minutes  
Hamlet's videography at the top projected onto a curtain of see-through  
strands as he moved behind it and recorded himself and the five others  
in character, followed by the funeral of old Hamlet when the gravedigger  
in a Karl Valentin-esque routine ended up in the grave along with the casket  
more than once all the while another actor provided bathetic rain via garden hose  
and Gertrude waited for a scoopful of earth to throw in. These lazzi turned  
the set's vast steel box of dirt into a sandbox for an evening of fun with death

that all stopped as we went to the drunken wedding reception  
belching with bursts of hysterical histrionic rage  
here was the first instance of contempt mixed with pleasure, that corroding  
cocktail, dissolvent of souls. But that was it. We never got further. The rest was  
repetition. What Ostermeier seems to have seen in the play is true  
death may reasonably be preferred to being  
under the influence of bullshot

by the time Ophelia with her little-girl voice entered to reveal  
Hamlet's supposed secret love sickness I began my descent  
down the bleachers and so from me the rest must be silence

## **THE BBC/RSC HAMLET ON VIDEO**

the splendour of the RSC Hamlet as recast by the BBC  
is that David Tennant occupies the role in a state of anguish  
he shows us from the beginning that his world is spinning  
in a whorl of sorrow from his loss and disbelief in love

all trust gone that grace subtends the universe or that people can be true. This impels Hamlet to seek the truth and Ophelia to succumb when her scaffold of memorized ideals gives way nothing will or can make sense to her - not even the meaning of flowers. Claudius has driven all but lust for power from the land and now pretense maintains the shine of a world order polished to reflect back one's own desires - that and the fact that everyone spies on everyone else - nothing else can stand as guide until lies are swept away. But the truth and honesty of a strongman may not lead to a more desirable state and so the story must be told and retold, recast for how out of joint the time of our time happens to be

## **JULIUS CAESAR**

(at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2011)

the cast worked well together  
Vilma Silva thrived with her Caesar  
and the director grasped her task  
though Brutus destroyed the play  
through no fault of his own

he just happened to be an able actor  
in the wrong part (perhaps as Brutus  
was a honest rebel in the wrong  
conspiracy) his trucker gait (nothing  
against truckers) and his tattooed arm  
probably powerful in some other play  
put this role beyond his reach

casting is *the* secret process, sometimes  
conspiratorial, sometimes accidental, because  
what seemed daring when talked through  
and even still promising a week or two  
later only reveals itself as a mistake  
when it becomes clear that what played  
like a newness, a surprising take in rehearsals  
where everyone is in on the game  
disappoints an audience who can't figure out  
what on earth you were grasping at

## **MEASURE FOR MEASURE**

(at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2011)

a female mariachi band, Las Colibri  
sweet, sweet hummingbirds singing  
songs of work, death row and lost love  
along with an innocent-looking wisp of a girl  
not a sexy novice, bring us to that miserable  
confluence of political power, sex and religion  
along with all the pretense, righteousness  
sleaziness and exploitation that live there

having admired Bill Rauch's directorial skill  
and intelligence in the past, while not having  
felt spoken to - though many others have  
or, so I understand from overheard conversations  
among other patrons of OSF around town  
the members' lounge, restaurants, Starbucks  
and restroom lines- this time I was taken in  
by his lush and colorful commitment to diversity  
of styles of life and art, the necessity of mercy  
and a good laugh

- P.K. Brask

**P. K. Brask** has written poetry, drama, short stories, translations and essays. His work has been published in a variety of journals such as *Consciousness*, *Literature and the Arts*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, *Descant*, *Event*, and *Poetica*, as well as in a number of books. He is Professor of Theatre at the University of Winnipeg.