

British Theatre Guide

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Hamlet Hail to the Thief

William Shakespeare, adapted by Christine Jones with Steven Hoggett
Royal Shakespeare Company and Factory International
Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon
4–28 June 2025

This is a *Hamlet* such as I have never seen or experienced before, and against all expectations, this electric, boundary-busting show blew me away.

Directors Steven Hoggett and Christine Jones have stripped down the text to about half its usual length, with interjections of live music from Radiohead's totemic album *Hail to the Thief*.

There are some resonances with the album's lyrics, touching on mendacity and abandonment, but mainly they use using Radiohead's pulsating, explosive, insistent, metallic music to fill in the gaps and to give greater psychological depth to the characters, with a bit of shock therapy along the way.

Stage direction, Jess Williams's high octane choreography and music, from musicians and singers spaced around the recording studio set, work together brilliantly, as when Claudius and Gertrude party heedlessly, or Hamlet and his Ophelia act out the unspoken part of their intimacy as young lovers might do on the dance floor.

Mystery and menace dominate from the outset, as swirling mist envelopes a hanging scaffold of faceless, grey suits, above which Hamlet's father emerges as a smoky presence with a terrifying, crackling, booming voice.

Such effects of sound and staging might seem, in describing them, like distractions, but in fact they enhance the drama, rendering greater clarity to the narrative as a whole.

The originality of the production should not, however, overshadow a brilliant performance in the title role by Samuel Blenkin. This a slip of a lad is so distraught with grief, so already angry with life to discard his Ophelia, and to find a morbid delight in his plot to catch a king. In the "To be, or not to be" monologue, one shares his pain as he feels his way to find himself.

Ami Tredrea's Ophelia is no shrinking violet, but a young woman who has the spirit to repay Hamlet's crude dismissal with a slap across the face.

Paul Hilton brings a lofty, brittle arrogance to the role of the devious Claudius. In the pared-down role of Queen Gertrude, Claudia Harrison, best known for playing Princess Anne in *The Crown*, is a picture of divided loyalties, and Tom Peters presents a Polonius who, while being a punctilious bore, remains a concerned father who knows the way of the world.

The play runs for around 100 minutes, without an interval, and with little chance to draw one's breath, and offers great entertainment even for those for whom Radiohead is a foreign territory.

Reviewer: [Colin Davison](#)