

British Theatre Guide

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Hamlet

William Shakespeare

Leeds Playhouse

Leeds Playhouse, Pop-Up Theatre

1–30 March 2019

There is a long-running tradition of female Hamlets dating all the way back to Sarah Siddons in the late 18th century, and in recent years [Maxine Peake](#), [Michelle Terry](#) and Ruth Negga among others have all played the melancholy Dane. For the most part, these performers have played the part as a man or explored the character's androgyny, but in Amy Leach's excellent new production Hamlet is resolutely female.

There will always be purists who reject the idea of re-gendering Shakespeare, but Amy Leach's excellent production proves that this approach can bear wondrous fruit. By casting Tessa Parr in the title role, Leach opens up a range of fresh ideas and nuances. The misogynistic bile that issues from Hamlet when he is at his lowest ebb ("Frailty, thy name is woman", "Get thee to a nunnery") takes on a new complexion when spoken by a woman, and the parental concern over Hamlet's romance with Ophelia gains a troubling new dimension.

I've seen numerous productions of *Hamlet* onstage, and none of them has every truly captured the brilliance of the play I read at school. Too often, the play in performance comes over as ponderous, unwieldy and—in the worst instances—dull. Similarly, I've seen plenty of performances in which the actors appear to value iambic pentameter more highly than emotion or psychological depth.

Leach's production—the finest *Hamlet* I've ever seen in the theatre—avoids all these pitfalls.

Ordinarily, a production of *Hamlet* will last around four hours, but Leach has wisely chosen to trim the fat off the play, resulting in a lean, nimble production that runs just over 150 minutes. These edits will annoy some, but all of the key moments that we know and love from the play have been preserved. This *Hamlet* is focused, fast-paced and genuinely thrilling.

Like the running time, Hayley Grindle's two-tiered set is similarly stripped back. Security cameras, perched above the stage, remind us of the play's abiding preoccupation with surveillance. Joshua Carr's beautiful, often cinematic lighting, results in a series of stunning tableaux. Alexandra Faye Braithwaite's vivid soundscape also adds enormously to the production's sense of foreboding.

Since September last year, the Leeds Playhouse has staged a series of top-notch productions ([Road](#), [Europe](#), [A Christmas Carol](#)) featuring the same ensemble company. It's been a pleasure watching them take on a variety of roles, and they all do great work here.

Tessa Parr is extraordinary in the title role, embodying the vast range of emotions that make Hamlet the most chameleonic figure in world drama. In a wordless prologue (a delightful addition from Leach), we get a rare glimpse of the way she was before her father's murder and her obvious affection for Ophelia (Simona Bitmate) makes her violent renunciation of their relationship later on

even more heartbreaking. Crucially, Parr unequivocally captures Hamlet's overwhelming sense of grief.

The other members of the cast are each given their moments to shine. Joe Alessi is a slimy, conniving Claudius and Jo Mousley skilfully captures Gertrude's conflicted allegiances. Dan Parr's strong-willed Laertes contrasts nicely with Simona Bitmate's wounded, desolate Ophelia. The latter's descent into madness (which can be excruciating in the wrong hands) brought tears to my eyes. Robert Pickavance gives a jocular turn as the gravedigger and Susan Twist puts a fresh spin on the part of Polonius, who so often comes across as a foolish old duffer.

Like Robert Icke's masterful production of *Hamlet*, which was televised on the BBC last year, Leach has blown the cobwebs off this 400-year-old masterpiece to remind us just how electrifying live Shakespeare can be.

Reviewer: [James Ballands](#)