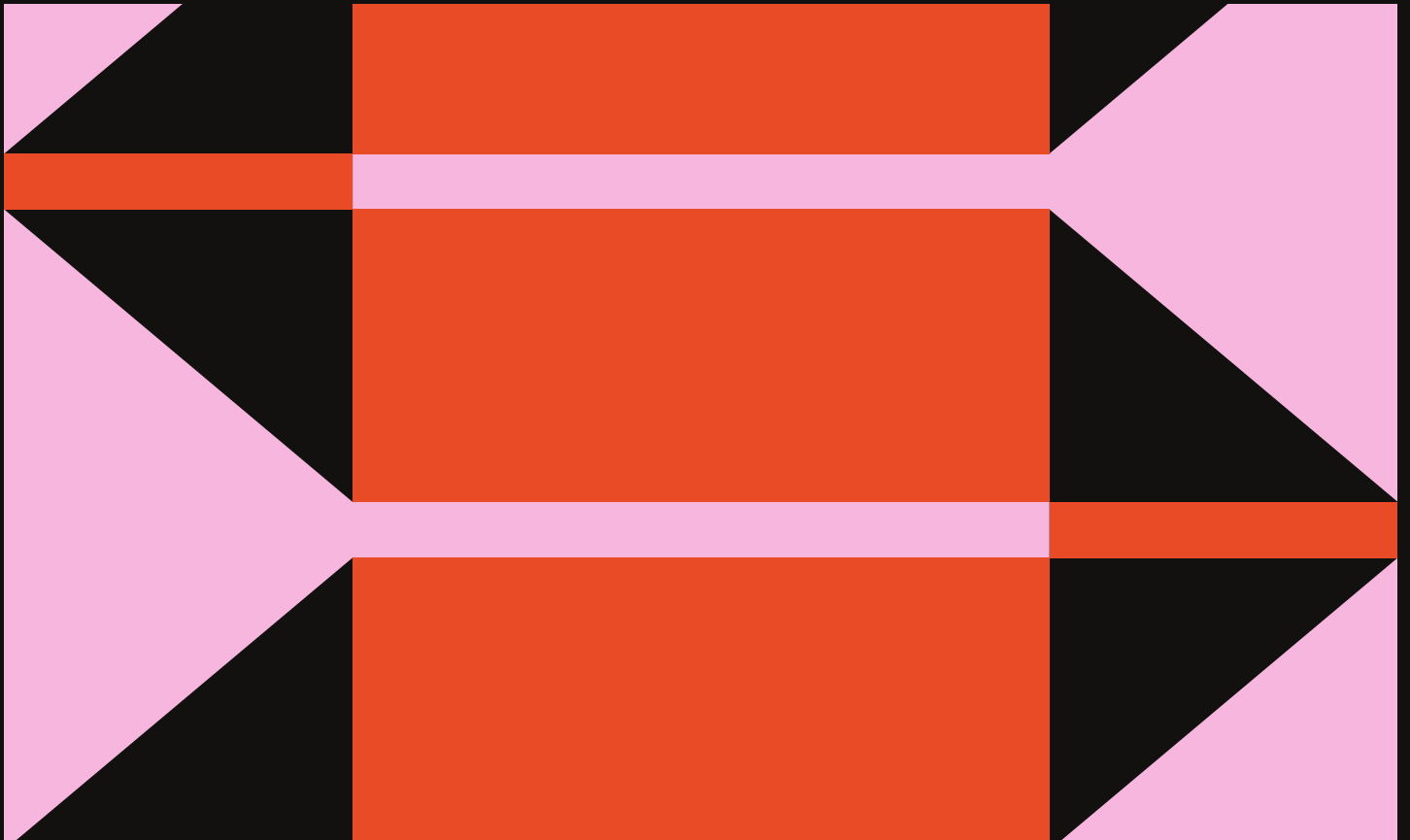


LAURA KUJAWA  
PRODUCTION  
REVIEW

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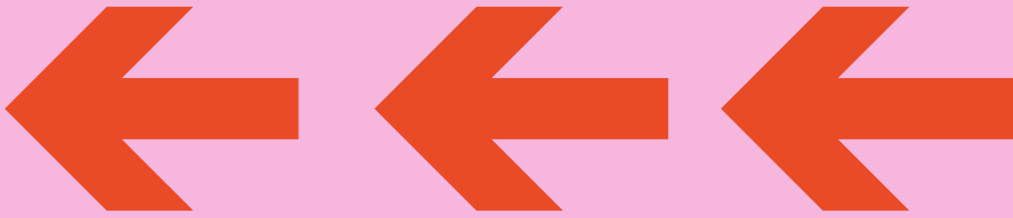
# Peter Hall 1965



In Peter Hall's 1965 youth appealing Hamlet, the 24-year-old David Warner played the title role as a student prince, disillusioned with the world around him.

A BEATNIK, ANGSTY HAMLET

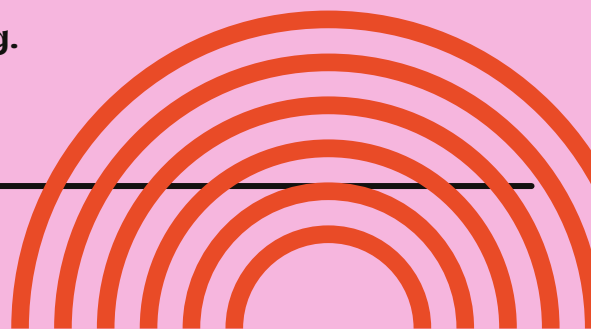
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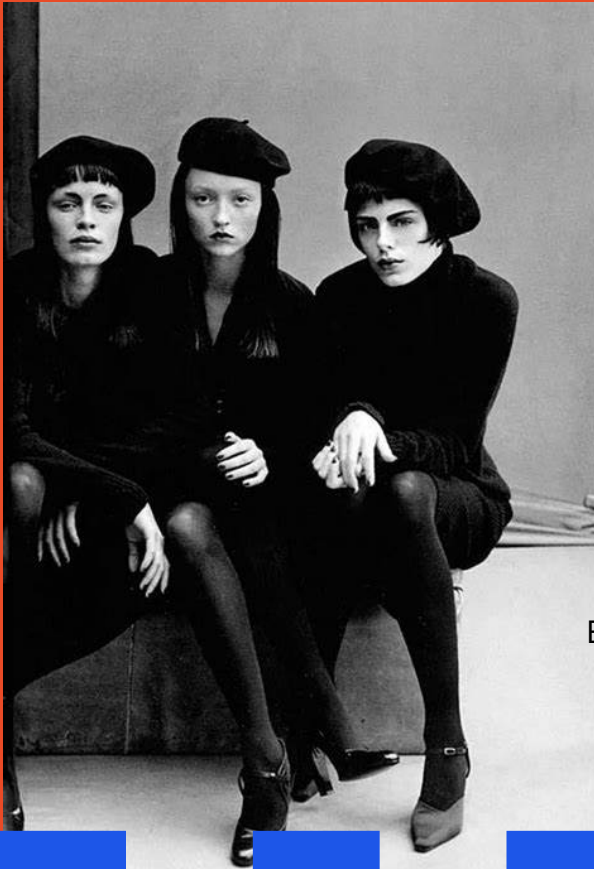
# key overview

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- The costumes were designed by Ann Curtis who influenced the designs of Rembrandt's art style with Elizabethan silhouettes for most of Elsinore's court. Hamlet wore a university student style moth bitten corduroy jacket and a long red scarf, Ophelia initially in a Beatnik style then later a white dress, and Gertrude was in tight corsets and a large wig.
  - The set was austere and cold with ebony black walls and a gleaming marble floor making Elsinore feel prisonlike and inescapable.
  - The ghost was 10ft high and flew about the stage and embracing his son.
  - The director Hall was highly inspired by Beatnik culture at the time, meaning Hamlet had an angsty and younger feel to his performance which greatly attracted the younger audience
  - Hall focused on the theme of disillusionment and creating an apathy for the commitment to politics within the court
  - Ophelia was significantly stronger and more rebellious at the beginning of the play then fell into an unsettling madness.
  - Polonius was cunning and shrewd rather than comical.
  - Hamlet died laughing.
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# BEATNIK SUBCULTURE OF THE 1960S CONTEXT



Beatnik culture in England during the 1960s was influenced by the Beat Generation movement originating in the United States. It was characterized by a rejection of mainstream societal norms, an embrace of non-conformity, and a focus on individual freedom and expression. Beatniks in England often congregated in urban areas like London's Soho district, frequenting coffeehouses, jazz clubs, and poetry readings. They were known for their distinctive fashion, which included black turtlenecks, berets, and sunglasses, as well as their interest in avant-garde art, jazz music, and experimental literature. Beatnik culture in England played a significant role in shaping the countercultural movements of the 1960s, contributing to the emergence of the British underground scene and influencing subsequent youth subcultures.

In this light Warner's portrayal of Hamlet seemed to embody the alienation and anti-establishment rebelliousness of 1960s youth who flocked to his performance. As Tony Church, who played Polonius, remarked, "They recognised themselves in David. He was one of them and they felt he was a hero speaking to them."





# INTERPRETATION OF HAMLET

## YOUTHFUL AND MODERN

In 1965 Peter Hall cast 24 year old David Warner to play his Hamlet, the youngest actor to have ever taken the role at the RSC. Hall was keen to attract a youthful audience to the production, and did so by presenting Hamlet as a contemporary youth, disillusioned by the world around him. The look of Hamlet was quite significant. He was scruffy in his appearance and attire, wearing a moth eaten black gown and red scarf which created a much more relaxed and rebellious appearance for Hamlet, especially in comparison to the highly formal and gothic costumes from previous productions.

Hall was inspired by and drew reference from the Beatnik counter culture which was growing in popularity among young people in England at the time. 'Frail, bedecked with a long scarf and acquired pop-star status as an epitome of 1960s youth.'

Michael Billington, writing in Guardian, 6 August 2008

## A FLUID, EXPRESSIVE HAMLET

Patrick Stewart described Warner's 1965 performance in a 2023 Guardian article stating "I had never conceived or imagined a performance like David's. He was so human, so sensitive, yet impetuous. Even when speaking the speeches I knew by heart I felt he was improvising them, simply responding to his feelings and circumstances" Warner spoke the verse conversationally creating a fluid and accessible tone to the narrative of the play- which helped include younger audience members who were unfamiliar with Shakespearean verse. Interestingly, several critics complained that Warner "mumbled" some of his lines, however arguably this contributed to his fluid and believable delivery. Warner emphasized this more relaxed and expressive Hamlet through his body language on stage, frequently slouching about the stage. Critic David Lister in The Independent, 23 December 1992 cited that "... David Warner in 1965, whose tortured student with college scarf was described by Ronald Bryden [theatre critic and drama professor] as getting 'more of humanity into the part than any previous Hamlet I've seen'..." Overall the result of this interpretation was an incredibly fluid and expressive Hamlet which attracted and intrigued audiences at the time.

## REBELLIOUS AND SARDONIC

In this particular production, the court of Elsinore was particularly oppressive contributing to the sense that Hamlet was very much trapped in the prison-like Denmark, allowing him to become gradually more sardonic and bitter as the play unfolds. Warner's demeanour was rebellious and surly with a baffled grating voice seeming both at war with himself as well as the prisonlike Denmark, unable to urge himself into action. He appeared most rebellious and energetic in speech to the Players, his Hamlets highly exaggerated antic disposition and his bantering with Osric. His duel scene in Act 5 reflected this and felt particularly dangerous and tense. In keeping with his prevailing irony, Warner's Hamlet died with a sardonic laugh and a look of gleeful triumph.





# OPHELIA

A STRONG AND BEATNIK  
OPHELIA

In this production of Hamlet the aspect of Jackson's performance that stood out was her portrayal of Ophelia as a more assertive and independent character. Rather than depicting Ophelia solely as a passive victim of circumstance, Jackson imbued her with a sense of agency and strength.

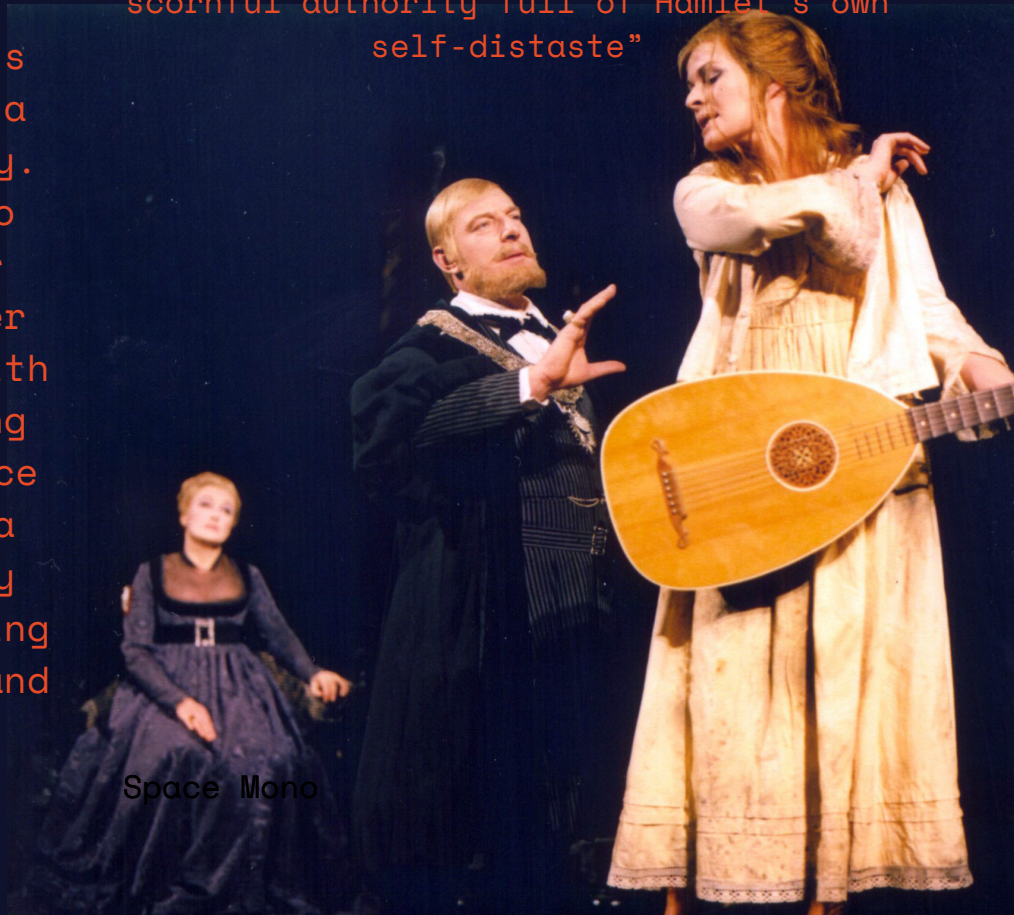
This rebellious interpretation was particularly impactful in a period when women's roles in theater often adhered to more conventional stereotypes.

Additionally, Jackson's Ophelia was marked by a raw emotional intensity. She delved deeply into the character's inner turmoil, portraying her descent into madness with a visceral and haunting quality. Her performance was characterized by a sense of vulnerability and defiance, challenging audience expectations and eliciting a powerful response

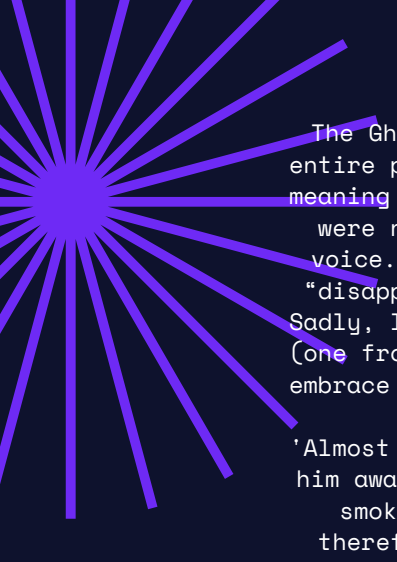


Glenda Jackson's young Ophelia received no comfort whatsoever from Polonius or Claudius in this adaption and acted as a pawn in their political game. At the beginning of the play she presented herself as a woman of tense strength, but slowly under the intense pressure, isolation and abuse from the court her self control snapped. In her mad scenes she wandered across the stage barefoot, with her hair down, singing and playing the lute. One of her particularly unsettling moments was when she lay on the floor glaring and pointing into the audience as if demanding answers for who was responsible for her mental collapse.

Critic Penelope Gilliatt wrote "She makes Ophelia exceptional and electric, with an intelligence that harasses the court and a scornful authority full of Hamlet's own self-distaste"



# THE GHOST



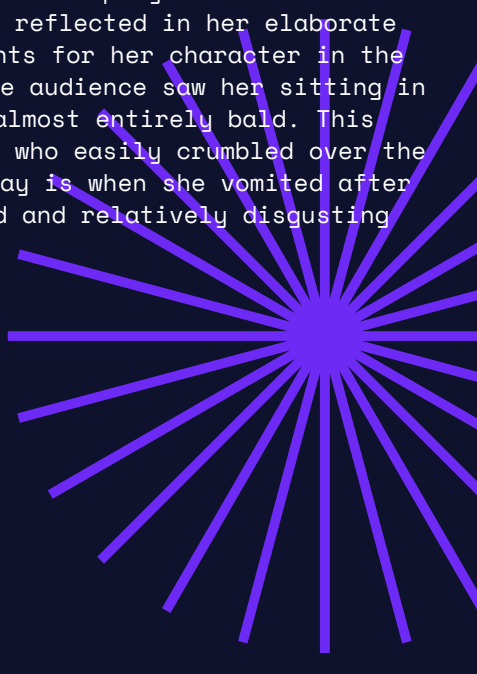
The Ghost in this production was arguably one of the most memorable characters of the entire play. The character stood at roughly 10 ft high and was attached to hidden wheels meaning it could glide and sway out of shadows and across the stage. Two to three actors were needed inside to operate it, one steering and the others operating the arms and voice. Due to its huge size, three duplicates were made allowing the Ghost to quickly “disappear” and then reappear at different ends of the stage to unsettle the audience. Sadly, I couldn’t find any footage of this but after listening to several audio accounts (one from the set coordinator for the play) one of the key moments from The Ghost was an embrace scene in which the Ghost hugs Hamlet during their meet on the battlements in Act 1. This is mentioned by Alan O’Brien, Sunday Telegraph, 22 August 1965 ‘Almost all directors are embarrassed by this skittish spook [Ghost] and attempt to hide him away behind the battlements. Here he becomes a giant Sicilian marionette, breathing smoke and rolling along on invisible wheels. Hamlet’s dependence on his father is therefore conveyed in striking tableau when even the more-than-six-foot David Warner shrinks to child-size in those monstrous arms.’ Notably, the Ghost lurks behind Gertrude’s bed during the Closet scene.

## GERTRUDE

Elizabeth Sprigg’s Gertrude was particularly shallow in this production seemed to play a woman terrified by the pressure of events she couldn’t comprehend. Her shallow nature was reflected in her elaborate formal renaissance wear and her large voluminous wig. One of the key moments for her character in the play was her closet scene in which, when the stage lit up for the scene, the audience saw her sitting in front of her mirror without makeup or her wig and shockingly appearing almost entirely bald. This presented Gertrude as a significantly more vulnerable and shallow character who easily crumbled over the course of the play. One of the most graphic moments for Gertrude in the play is when she vomited after the effects of the poison in her final moments, giving her an undignified and relatively disgusting death.

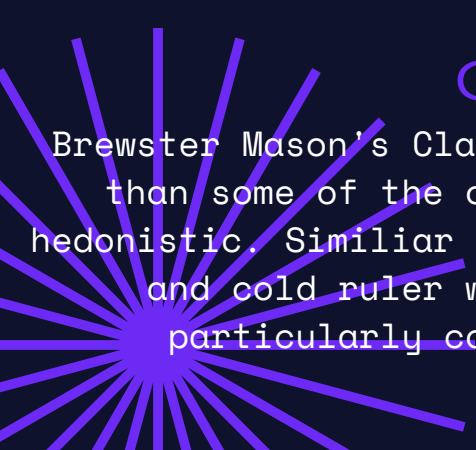


## POLONIUS



Polonius appears as cunning and Machiavellian in this production ruthlessly using Ophelia as a tool to climb the social hierarchy. He plays less of a comical role in the production and more of a shrewd but aging diplomat.

## CLAUDIUS



Brewster Mason’s Claudius is a royal statesmen, refined and less bawdy than some of the other productions where he appears gluttonous or hedonistic. Similar to Polonius, Claudius appears as more of a ruthless and cold ruler who is responsible for detaining Hamlet in the particularly cold and desolate Elsinore of this production.



