



# HAMLET IN THE IMPERATIVE !

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## INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIER PY

***Hamlet in the Imperative!*, in the Ceccano garden, is a unique event in a unique location. How do you see the garden within the Festival d'Avignon?**

**Olivier Py:** Let's give credit where credit is due! I have a great admiration for what Alain Badiou wrote based on Plato's *Republic* for the first series in the garden of the Ceccano library. I soon understood that through the unique form of the free-entry series, the Festival d'Avignon could find a different audience and fulfill its democratic mission, by creating a bridge between artists and audiences. One could say that the Ceccano series has become a ritual, a daily philosophical event, which allows us to tackle current subjects with new artists every year.

**Is your intent with *Hamlet in the Imperative!* to present an "enriched *Hamlet*?"**

I had so far refused to do the series: how could I be director of the Festival d'Avignon and be in the garden of the Ceccano library every day at noon? Then there was this project of working on *Hamlet*: I'd always thought that, if I were to come back to *Hamlet* one day, it would be in a long form which would allow me to include the existing commentary about William Shakespeare's play. I went on this great adventure that is *Hamlet in the Imperative!* with amateurs, with students from the École régionale d'acteurs de Cannes et de Marseille, with actors I often work with, and with two former members of the workshops I led in the Avignon – Le Pontet prison, and who appeared in *Antigone* and *Macbeth*.

**After so many years working in the theatre, what is your relationship to this play?**

I've always had a powerful connection to *Hamlet*. I first directed Ambroise Thomas's opera, a beautiful betrayal from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then, to my surprise, the inmates of the Avignon – Le Pontet prison asked to perform *Hamlet*. For them, I went through this difficult exercise: re-reading the play, synthesising it, working on a bare-bones translation to make a compact version of it. I then led two workshops with young actors, including those of 1<sup>er</sup> Acte, a programme to help young artists and promote diversity. I first began translating Shakespeare fifteen years ago, with *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet*. I couldn't have started with *Hamlet* right away for a very simple reason: the play is twice as long as *King Lear*. It's never performed in its entirety. *Hamlet* is a monster. It deserves its four and a half hours onstage.

**You give it ten, and talk about the original editions, with its three versions, and of the endless commentary it has elicited.**

It's slow, patient work. Ten years of stubborn passion. I had this dream of writing an encyclopedia of the commentary on *Hamlet*. But even though I've limited myself to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it's still huge! The book published by Actes Sud is like a map of this journey. If an academic were to write such an encyclopedia, it would take them their whole life! In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, thinkers started to pay attention to William Shakespeare through this play; a century later, they used it as a foundation for Romanticism in its various forms. Then came the 20<sup>th</sup> century where, incredibly, all the great thinkers—philosophers, but also psychoanalysts, sociologists, linguists, jurists, historiologists—felt compelled, at some point in their career, to write about their reading of *Hamlet*. We can look at those comments and write a history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. No other play has had such a fate, or lines such as "To be or not to be" or "Time is out of joints." Those two lines alone deserve an episode each.

### **In spite of the extensive commentary about them, those lines remain an enigma...**

That might be the reason why every period, every sphere of thinking, every hermeneutics, have been able to and have had to make them theirs. My source is the this commentary, which means reading Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt, a jurist who became a Nazi and who wrote incredible things about *Hamlet*... Then you have the “Hamletologists”, in particular John Dover Wilson and Georg Brandes. There’s also Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze... The other source is the original text. Or rather, the original texts. There are at least three different versions: two *quarto* and a *folio*, which were published together in some scholarly editions. They’re full of intellectual and poetic treasures and have never been performed, when *Hamlet* is the most performed play in the world! I focused on one critical aspect in particular: *Hamlet* and Western thought. I didn’t choose to focus on a specific time period, it happened on its own. I wanted to follow the play’s chronology: a spectator who attends all ten episodes will have seen the play in my translation in its entirety—with sometimes comparisons to other translations. Each episode focuses on one of *Hamlet*’s main themes. I do upset the chronology a little by dedicated the first episode to “To be or not to be,” even though it’s not the first line of the play. And now for the twist: there’s an earlier version of the famous line. I call on those who might be able to enlighten us about the most famous line in the most famous play be the most famous playwright, which no one really knows the meaning of!

### **Your experience of *Hamlet* is also that of a translation.**

I love the many French translations of William Shakespeare, even the “most unfaithful” ones. Voltaire’s really is, and it tells you a lot about him. The same is true of the translation by Victor Hugo’s son, or by 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors. Each of them is a product of its time. In our series, we sometimes compare them to each other. I did mine, too, without discarding the others; delving into the original text took me years. The diversity of those French translations is highlighted in the episode “Time is out of joints.” It focuses in part on Yves Bonnefoy’s translation, which translates the line literally. While the English don’t see it as an important line, Jacques Derrida saw its translation by Yves Bonnefoy as key, and even wrote a book about it! See how far it goes! One more thing: I wanted the show to remain playful. Like this episode, with its Proustian title, *Procrastination*: there is, at the heart of *Hamlet*, an enigma that’s even bigger than the others: why, when Hamlet is in a position to kill the king, does he not do it?

### **With this translation, and with your study of the play’s possible meanings, do you feel like you were able to tame “the Hamlet beast,” even a little?**

It’s untamable, because it’s constantly mutating. It has this ability that all masterpieces have to adapt to their time. We’ve had a romantic, decadent *Hamlet*, fighting dictatorships (in the Eastern Bloc, the play was performed in spite of censorship), an introspective *Hamlet* (more Western and American, a perfect illustration of Sigmund Freud’s theory), a post-Auschwitz *Hamlet* (a witness to the collapse of humanism), a *Hamlet* who doubts the power of language (during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century)... In a near future, we might see a *Hamlet* concerned with threats to our ecosystem, or aware that posthumanity might replace humanity, or concerned that the ongoing cultural collapse might end up destroying our psyche. I also want this series to be a sort of open challenge to academics and researchers, so that one day they can create an exhaustive encyclopedia of all the commentary about *Hamlet*. It would be an essential way to show the incredible gift William Shakespeare gave humanity with his work in general, and with *Hamlet* in particular.

Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet in April 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach