

CRAID

HAMLET IN THE GOLDEN VALE

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WORDS BY EVAN MUSGRAVE.

I have a dirty secret. I've gone almost five years after a four year English lit degree without ever properly touching Hamlet. It's a little bit like an art history graduate mentioning they haven't quite got around to considering Les Demoiselles D'Avignon. It also gives me all the more reason to feel exhilarated by the prospect of meeting a cast and crew who've come across the Atlantic pond to unleash a whole load of Hamlet right here in the Irish countryside. Just as this American troupe have come to explore our rural environment, to seek inspiration from the history of our land, I've arrived to finally plunge myself into the world of this great text. And so, I find myself in south Tipperary, arriving at a lonesome castle towering above the undulating scenery of the Golden Vale.



Although most of the assembled group are new to this part of the world, they seem at home in these surroundings. With Associate Producer Mark Logan at hand for the practical demands of working here and to teach the gang the ways of the Irish, as well as the owner of the castle, Cecil Farrar - always gracious, always eager to divulge more local history - the cast and crew are well resourced.



Behind The Scenes

The break down: two weeks of shooting, one feature film, a virtual reality short film production, and two nights of immersive theatre performances.

Though this be madness, there be a method in it...

Half a year of preparatory work to be precise. As the film director, Dan Hasse explains to me, there's room for about two takes for every piece of filmed acting. It may sound overly ambitious, perhaps faintly absurd, but talking with the actors - all drawn from the world of the New York stage - gives one a sense of their genuine thirst for live performance.



Photo by KATY LUECK.

[Roll the Bones](#), the rapidly-developing company leading this triple threat of theatrical treats, comes not just from this celebrated artistic environment, but from the risk-taking, cutting edges of the scene. The company, founded in 2013 by Taylor Myers and Rosalie Lowe, formed from a group working on Punchdrunk's landmark immersive production, *Sleep No More*, and is stewarded here by Myers, who in addition to being theatrical director, has also taken on the challenge of playing Hamlet.

Over the past few years, Roll the Bones has taken on their own immersive productions, breathing new life into Chekhov and Agatha Christie classics in unorthodox locations around New York. Witnessing *Hamlet in the Golden Vale* gives one a sense of something even more special brewing.

The group working here in the castle emerged from various different routes, resulting in a collaboration of 20 artists.

Originally intended to be a one-time performance only among actors, the project grew legs, developing into a full-length feature film, and, through Executive Producer and Production Designer Benjamin Wygonik's initiative, ended up transforming all the way into an additional VR short in partnership with The National Theatre (UK).

Other members came into the project through backgrounds such as [Shakespeare in The Square](#) - where experienced hands, Hasse and Yuriy Pavlish cut their Shakespearean teeth - Katy Lueck, a

celebrated filmmaker and artist and producer/actor Constantine Malahias added greater gravitas to the project, and the rest of the group formed organically through admiring each other's work both on and behind stage.



The More You Wander...

And collectively they're taking on Hamlet, essentially the biggest play of all time. What better reason to kick myself up the arse and actually grapple with the text. In the end, I had my arse kicked for me, for not only was I about to encounter Hamlet properly for the first time, I was about to experience immersive theatre for the first time as well!

I'm back at the castle a few days later for the immersive experience and I'm getting that Christmas Eve anticipation. Peach flirts with orange in the broad sky above the Vale.

A lone violinist tops off the rustic mood while the audience gathers in place. Our host steps out of the castle to give a short introduction to the performance, concluding with the invitational phrase, "the more you wander, the more you will see".



After the opening scene I set out to explore the grounds. An absolute beginner as an audience member in this environment, I'm hungry to become immersed, but I'm not quite sure how to go about it. Before I have time to consider, Laertes (played by Pavlish) has given me a wink and I'm drawn to following his stride, off down the road and into the deepening dusk of the countryside.

How do I find France, I'm asked. I hesitate, unsure quite how to go about answering that. Then it clicks. I'm already a walking, talking part of the play. We shoot the breeze. I ask him if he thinks Claudius will make a good king, and posit that the younger Hamlet seems a tad, how shall we say... stressed... in his Elsinore environs right at the minute. He opens up and admits that his sister, Ophelia, has the eyes for the Prince. No, you don't say. Well that is just scandalous isn't it. He offers some whiskey in a tin cup. The conversation intensifies.

Within a play named after its protagonist - one of the most iconic personalities in all of literature - I'm seated in a field nipping on hooch at length with one of the secondary characters. I feel both firmly inside and outside the play - in the sense of missing some of the well-known scenes, while also experiencing a unique glimpse into the expanded world of the tale. Indeed, this seems one of the crucial aspects of immersive theatre: when experiencing any scene, there is the knowledge that something else important is happening at the same time. This is far from something to lament. It makes what one is witnessing in the moment all the more significant and memorable. Whatever is lost in omniscience as an audience member via a vis conventional theatre is more than made up for in terms of intimacy and physicality.



“Heightening the audience’s sense of agency” is the stated creed of Roll the Bones. It's far from a snappy tag line, it's a palpable reality in the work seen here.

Each room is a different experience, each scene difficult to figure out how long or where it will end up. From seeing Claudius (Pat Dwyer) vexed in thought swilling a glass of whiskey, to happening upon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s (dually-played by Malahias) oh so awkward arrival, the senses are piqued in every which direction.

Beyond The Tapestry

Continuing my meandering pursuit, I spy a few people hovering around a clearly anxious Gertrude (Beth Ann Hopkins) as she reads from a book. Intrigued, compelled by a pretty simple “haven't been in this room yet” sensation, I slink in and set up a nice perch in an alcove near Gertrude but out of the view of the other audience members. Suddenly Polonius (Jonathan Hopkins) bursts in.

Tension, tension, tension.



He runs behind a tapestry upon hearing Hamlet (Myers) storming down the spiral staircase, gasping for breath like a racehorse. Then it hits me. Zounds!

This is the scene! Before I can begin to take it in, Gertrude has spun around, Hamlet is bouncing around the room in his singular deranged yet incisive fashion. Leaping out of the chair, bodies and accusations swirling around the room, Gertrude ends up sitting in the alcove, knee-to-knee alongside me, her son apoplectic in front of her. Noise behind the curtains. Stabbing. The scene gathers intensity; the balance of emotions wind in a great big torque... and for an indistinct period of time the full force of immersive theatre smacks me in the face like repeated slaps of a dueler's glove. Another ghostly apparition. More physicality. All this is happening facing into the alcove, my awkward seat being unintentionally the best view in the house. And then a blink-and-you'll-miss-it kiss on the lips from Gertrude. Holy smokes! No more than a foot from my own face. Only after the characters have left the room I realise I'm clenching the tin cup Laertes gave to me with all my might. Gripping theatre, in all senses of the word.

I file out of the room in somewhat of a stupor, instantly aware that I've just experienced the most special theatrical moment of my life, something that will forever hold a cherished position in my mind, something I fully intend to leave fizzing around in my head for the foreseeable future.



Engaging with this enduring text, inhabiting the world of this Danish royal court performed by Americans situated in Ireland, is a profound communication across centuries and across continents.

During the whole experience - both behind the scenes and part of the scenes - I was struck not only by the performance itself, not simply by the intense buzz of witnessing the text in the explosive format of immersive theatre, but the infinite wonder of the narrative arts itself.

When performed so well, there seems to be hardly another story that can better encapsulate our desire for greater knowledge of the mysteries of the human condition. To wrap up by paraphrasing heavily and butchering Oscar Wilde via my butchering of Shakespeare, we are all passing through nature into eternity, but some pieces of art make that journey all the more dazzlingly special.

Exeunt.

