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How Actor Paapa Essiedu Turned the Tragedy Classic “Hamlet” Into a Comical Dramedy

Anyone knows that the story “Hamlet” is one of tragedy and drama. A story so well-known, some might not challenge the structure of the syntax. However, when Paapa Essiedu was selected to play the titular character in the 2016 rendition by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), he brought something new and refreshing to not only the role, but the entire production: humor. In writing, Hamlet is an incredibly witty character. He knows how to strike while the iron is hot. However, Hamlet’s humorous diction comes from a place of darkness. In notable moments throughout the play, Essiedu’s Hamlet uses a variation of voices and physical comedy to draw laughter from the audience.

When speaking one-on-one with Ophelia’s father, Polonius, Essiedu’s comedic timing has the audience laughing about eight different times in a scene just over two minutes long. The “funny moment” most recognized from this scene (in writing) is when Hamlet calls Polonius a fishmonger. Essiedu drives this home and then some. When inquiring with Polonius whether he has a daughter, Hamlet gets cheeky with the father. He bends back, pointing at Polonius with a most saucy grin. He warns Polonius, “Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a / blessing, but, as your daughter may conceive, / Friend, look to 't” (Shakespeare. 2.2.201-203). Polonius, confused at his words, doesn't judge him too harshly; understanding that he, too, was crazy in love in his youth. Instead, Polonius decides to inquire further, keeping conversation.

Polonius asks Hamlet what he reads, to which Hamlet responds, “Words, words, words” (Shakespeare. 2.2.210). Essiedu plays a lot with this scene. He shuffles his feet and shows the open book to Polonius, all with a chuckle and a quirky tone in his voice. While explaining to Polonius that he reads the “satirical rogue” (Shakespeare. 2.2.214) about old men with wrinkled faces and lack of wit, Essiedu comes back with the physical comedy here when saying the lines, “I / hold it not honesty to have it thus set down” (Shakespeare. 2.2.219-220). These words are accompanied by a physical double entendre. Essiedu swivels his hips, puts the book in front of his groin and continues through with a pelvic thrust.

Hamlet then walks backward saying, “For / yourself, sir, should be old as I am, if like a crab, / you could go backward,” (Shakespeare. 2.2.220-222) and does so while shimmying backwards, a smile on his face. Hamlet then runs up a ladder and spray paints a crown and his first initial onto the painting of his mother and his uncle. Polonius, an honorable servant to the king, Claudius, is shocked at Hamlet's actions. Essiedu, again takes comedic liberties here. Approaching Polonius, Hamlet shakes the can of spray paint in his face, pretending to then spray him too. This small, yet laughable gesture has Polonius running back for cover.

This depiction of Hamlet allows the audience to see both his dry humor and moodiness, which at times can meld into his craze. In act III scene 1, Hamlet is painting a sign calling the king, his uncle, a serpent. It is here that Ophelia finds him and wishes to give back to him some belongings which he had given her some time ago. He rejects. Essiedu does this scene flawlessly by bringing in the moodiness of a young man who has just been broken up with—which in itself is chuckle-worthy. “No, not I. I never gave you aught,” (Shakespeare. 3.1.105) he says. The facial expression and tone that Essiedu uses here is to undermine Ophelia, telling her that she wasn’t worth anything to him to give anything to her in the first place. The words exit his mouth with

such attitude and bitterness. This gives the audience something to relate to and find connection in young heartbreak.

As their interaction continues, the disdain between the former couple is palpable. This is where Hamlet's humor starts to break down and grows into more of a hysteria. He tells Ophelia that even if she marries, he can still taint her reputation. "Get thee to a / nunnery, farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs marry, / marry a fool," (Shakespeare. 3.1.148-150) he cries. His usual playful laughter then becomes frightening to Ophelia. In this scene, Essiedu is able to build upon his playful and lighthearted nature and turn it into the much darker, much needed version of Hamlet.

Act III scene IV isn't a scene recognized for being lighthearted, yet Essiedu brings his little touches here and there, breaking up the drama. When Hamlet is arguing with his mother and shoots the intruder he expects to be his traitor uncle, he pulls back the sheet to find it is in fact Polonius. In a gesture unscripted, Essiedu just stands there looking at his mother dumbfounded, pointing downward at the man he hoped had been someone else. He looks down on Polonius, yelling at him for being an intruding fool. He then walks away coolly with an unbothered and unruffled, "Farewell" (Shakespeare. 3.4.38). He then returns to Polonius' dead body, lifts him slightly to manually nod his head, mockingly. After another explosive argument with his mother and becoming remorseful over his killing of Ophelia's father, Hamlet then wraps up Polonius to drag him away. "I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room," (Shakespeare. 3.4.235) Essiedu's Hamlet says awkwardly as he begins to drag the body away. "Good night, Mother," (Shakespeare. 3.4.240) he calls out with a childlike finesse. "Essiedu is martini-dry after killing Polonius... and the comedy isn't laced with bone-chilling dread. Essiedu has the wit, charisma and passion to carry the night," (Pressley) said an article by the Washington Post. Even in one of the most tragic scenes of the play, Essiedu picks his moments of dry humor he sees fit.

Towards the end of the performance when Hamlet and Laertes play, Hamlet strikes Laertes with a hit and Laertes calls out, “I do confess ’t” (Shakespeare. 5.2.311). The king then exclaims, “Our son shall win” (Shakespeare. 5.2.312). Hamlet, embodied by Essiedu then does a victory dance by sticking out his tongue, thrusting his hips and shuffling forward. By way of this victory dance, the actor does a great job of bringing the production into modern day and bringing back some of that lightheartedness. Hamlet then rises in laughter at his second round victory. He goes to his mothers side so she can wipe his face. Hamlet, now cockier than ever, says to Laertes, “I pray you, pass with your best violence,” (Shakespeare. 5.2.326) while laughing in the direction of his love interest’s brother. Gertrude then gives Hamlet a love tap on the arm as if to say, ‘play nice.’ Hamlet returns to the duel floor weak with laughter, only to be humbled. Again, Essiedu breathes new life into a saturated role. In a 2016 review, The Guardian writer Michael Billington said this about the young performer: “The prime fact about Essiedu, however, is that he is an intensely likeable Hamlet. He is young, quick-witted and, even in his rootless uncertainty, sportive...” (Billington).

Essiedu is just one piece of the “Hamlet” cog that livens this portrayal with laughter, although he is arguably the biggest piece of that puzzle. “Hamlet” is a story as old as time, and while some may think it no longer relevant, this is a story without an expiration date. All while new adaptations like that of the 2016 RSC continue to be spun. The ability to play up Shakespeare’s quick and comical voice of Hamlet the character isn’t an easy feat. It takes understanding of the language and accurate translations for what the phrasing means today. Because of his level of comprehension he brings to the role, Essiedu is able to take those comedic liberties and insert them in the right places to mix up the dramatic timing, adding more of a humorous element to the voice of the production. Whether it was in small moments of facial

expressions or in grand gestures of hearty laughter, Essiedu's Hamlet pivots the narrative of tragedy and drama and adds in the genre of comedy arguably more than it's ever been added before.

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