

## Shakespeare

### A Bad Death

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#### How the Zimbabwean audience responds to death in *Hamlet*

So there are many different tribes in Zimbabwe and the Shona people are the largest. And their beliefs about death are very, very specific. A bad death is described as something that has happened to the deceased that someone else with evil intent or other intent – well, evil intent – has done to cause that death. And in *Hamlet* you have a king who has been killed by his brother so that the brother can take over the kingdom. And that is a bad death because no one has a right in Shona culture to take another person's life. And it's particularly a bad death because until that has been set right, until this person has actually been punished for what he has done, the other person cannot rest well. And actually in *Hamlet* the ghost does say he cannot rest in peace until his death has been revenged. In Shona culture it's just the same. So that the dead person cannot become an ancestor if there's unfinished business which is that the person who's made him die has to be punished. And one of the things I find fascinating about Hamlet is how he's viewed as someone who takes too long to do what he does. Because I think he takes just the right amount of time because about a third of us, a third of Zimbabweans live outside of Zimbabwe because of many different reasons. And so we often find young men coming back home at the death of a parent, at the death of a grandmother, because they study elsewhere, we work elsewhere. We rely on being outside of Zimbabwe to make a living and to contribute to our families. So when you come back it is highly inappropriate to do anything too quickly because you need to know what has been happening when you were not there. Certainly that's my experience, you know, going back to Zimbabwe and having to find out exactly how my father died. And this has happened to me. You know, what happened, hearing the story of what happened. And who was there. And what then happened and how can I as a son start to put things together. So to pay off those people perhaps who looked after him or to do the work around his death. So I think when Hamlet comes back to Denmark and sees the ghost of the father and then he has to really think, I mean he has to be methodical about what happened, what exactly happened. He has to try and understand it before he does anything else. And so the fact that in the Western world his taking of the time is viewed as a problem – in fact I've had many actors say, 'Why doesn't Hamlet just kill his uncle?' – and my thought as a Zimbabwean person, as a person, is to say he has to find out what happened. And in *Hamlet* of course the way he finds out and how he finds out and when he finds out, and then how he then goes about setting things right is what makes the play so beautiful I think. And I think I have the particular view of it because of my background and where I come from.

## Performing *Hamlet* in Zimbabwe and South Africa

So we performed *Hamlet* in Zimbabwe but we also performed it in South Africa. And I think in Zimbabwe they were so enchanted by the fact that we began the show with a funeral procession which was not specific to any character. But because we wanted to talk about death.

So we started off with a very, very famous folk song which is sung at funerals. So we put everyone in the zone, in the mood to think about death. And as the character of Hamlet started sort of going through the process of finding out what happened to his father, the audience were slowly beginning to see the reality of what is at stake. So they began to really see how evil, if you like, Claudius is. And so the audience were responding to all of these little Shona culture things that we had inputted into the production. When Hamlet was questioning his mother in the bedroom the audience were just open-mouthed. They agreed, they go, 'Ah ha, mmm,' you know. Those sounds that they make: 'Mm um oh'. Just a sense of shock that you get with the Shona audience: 'Ah,' and, you know, I was playing Gertrude and Hamlet is saying to her, 'And you used this bed, this bed'. And the audience just go 'Oh,' because they suddenly see it. And that's the genius of *Hamlet* because if you don't see the horror of what's happened you don't understand it.