

Nothing rotten here

This 'Hamlet' is a stage triumph — on your local screen. By **Rosie Fiore**

National Theatre Live: *Hamlet*
★★★★★

FILMED theatre? Oo-er. Anyone who has sat through a grainy DVD of a school production might be forgiven for approaching the idea with caution. But then along came National Theatre Live. It is, astonishingly, as good as, if not better than, actually being in the audience at the play.

You move in on the action, and have the luxury of close-ups and reaction shots, experiencing all the best elements of film. But you're also watching it live, immersed in the gasps and laughter of the audience around you. You get all this in your local movie house at a fraction of the price of the theatre ticket — assuming you could fly to London and get a ticket anyway, which, in the case of the Barbican's production of *Hamlet*, you can't.

Hamlet was the fastest selling show in the history of London theatre — the 100 000 seats for the 12-week run sold out in minutes, a year before it opened — such was the

star power of Benedict Cumberbatch. When the NT Live performance went out in the UK on October 15, 87% of British cinemas devoted at least one screen to showing it and 225 000 people watched the play together that night.

From the opening moments, it's clear that this is no conventional *Hamlet*: we do not begin with the soldiers on the ramparts and the ghost of Hamlet's father. Instead, we come upon Hamlet himself, brooding over a record player, until he is joined by Horatio, in a transplanted chunk of Act One, Scene Two. Cumberbatch and Leo Bill as Horatio look, appropriately, like a pair of scruffy students.

When we move on to the banquet scene with Claudius (Ciarán Hinds) in full pompous flow, we see the whole set, a deep blue mansion, hung with ornate portraits. In the second half, the stage is covered in debris and rubble, a powerful visual metaphor for the mounting chaos.

The costumes are eclectic — Hinds and Anastasia Hille as Gertrude are dressed in formal Ed-



WHO CALLS ME VILLAIN: Benedict Cumberbatch in the title role in the Barbican Theatre production of 'Hamlet'
Picture: JOHAN PERSSON

wardian costume, while Ophelia (Sian Brooke) wears an odd selection of 20th century casual clothes. Later in the play, Cumberbatch sports a scarlet military jacket over a Bowie T-shirt. It's as if the cast got to raid a dressing-up box and choose whatever they felt best expressed their characters.

The performances were also a mixed bag — Hille gives an assured, chilly Gertrude, but I wasn't convinced there was a burning passion between her and Claudius. Jim Norton's bumbling Polonius and Matthew Steer and Rudi Dharmalingam as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bring levity and comedy. Brooke's frail Ophelia didn't impress in the opening scenes, but as the play progressed and madness

overtook her, she was extraordinarily believable. But, unsurprisingly, the play belongs to just one man.

"Am I a coward?" Hamlet muses in one of the early soliloquies. Like every line, it has issued from the mouths of countless Danish princes, in styles from the tortured to the declamatory. Yet when Cumberbatch says it, it pops out of his mouth as if it has just occurred to him. Indeed, this characterises his whole performance.

He moves from moment to moment, experiencing each event in the play as if for the first time, responding with naked emotion, and with such masterful understanding of the text that he sweeps us along, making even the most complex speeches easily comprehensible. It

is, quite simply, the freshest, and the best *Hamlet* I have ever seen.

Believe me, I'm not saying this because I'm a dedicated Cumberbatch — I'm not. I think he's a fine actor, but before this performance, I've found him samey — it all looks just a bit *Sherlock*. But this boyish prince, who bounds around the stage with seemingly inexhaustible energy, is something to behold. **LS**

• 'Hamlet' will screen at Cinema Nouveau in Cape Town, Joburg, Pretoria and Durban on November 7, 11 and 12 at 7.30pm and on November 8 at 2.30pm. Also at The Fugard Bioscope on January 10 at 11am. cinemanouveau.co.za and thefugard.com.



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Left to right
Dance: Themba Mbuli
Jazz: Siya Makuzeni
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