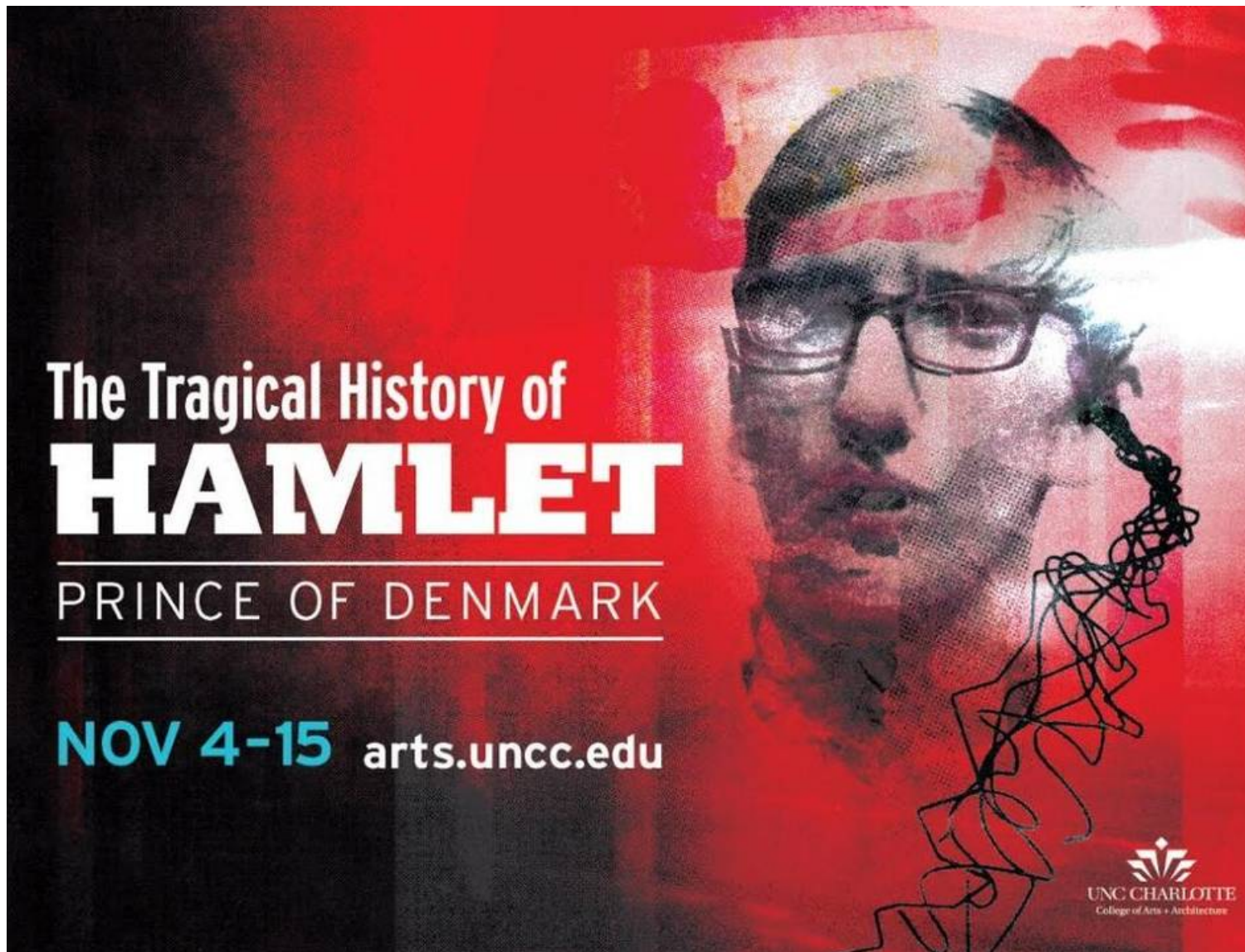


STATE OF THE ART NOVEMBER 4, 2015

First Quarto 'Hamlet': To be, or not to be the real Shakespeare?

HIGHLIGHTS

UNCC will do this obscure version as part of its six-year celebration of things Shakespearean



UP TO
XTRA **15% OFF**
READY REDUCED UP TO 60% OFF



SHOP NOW ▶

LET LOVE SHINE®
ZALES
THE DIAMOND STORE®



We tend to think of Shakespeare as someone who sat at a desk and burped out masterpieces – although, as the Broadway musical “Something Rotten” reminds us in the song “It’s Hard to Be the Bard,” that’s not the case.

But when we talk about his works, what are we talking about? A play the Swan of Avon carefully wrote down during the run of the show? A copy some actors made around that time, in case they needed to do the play again someday? A version remembered after the fact, however imperfectly?

What most of us mean is the First Folio, a collection of the plays that surfaced in 1623, seven years after he died. But there are earlier versions, and UNC Charlotte is doing the First Quarto “Hamlet” as part of its “36 in 6” project, which has been exploring most of his canon over six years. (It concludes next spring, around the 400th anniversary of his death.)

Original scholarship held that this quarto, known as Q1, appeared in 1603 as the first published version of the drama. It was followed by the Second Quarto in 1604, then disappeared until it was discovered in 1823 in an English manor house. It was written off for a while as a “bad quarto,” a pirated work not actually written by Shakespeare.

But Andrew Hartley, UNCC’s Robinson Distinguished Professor of Shakespeare in the Department of Theatre, believes “Q1 is almost certainly not an early draft so much as it is a text which reflects the way the play was probably performed (at least in some venues). The Q2 text may reflect something closer to a ‘reading’ text, being far too long for performance.

“It is likely that Q1, Q2 and (First Folio) all co-existed at the same time and represent different approaches to the material, not an evolution to a more perfect text.” He thinks the version UNCC is doing may work better for performance, and it certainly has changes: Gertrude takes Hamlet’s side late in the play against the King.

For readers familiar with the common version of the masterpiece, the Q1 text may seem plain. Compare the speeches of King Claudius at prayer, mulling over his sin of fratricide:

Q1: “O, these are sins that are unpardonable. Why, say thy sins were blacker than is jet, Yet may contrition make them as white as snow. Ay, but still to persevere in a sin, It is an act ’gainst the universal power. Most wretched man, stoop, bend thee to thy prayer. Ask grace of heaven to keep thee from despair.”

Version we know: “Try what repentance can. What can it not? Yet what can it, when one can not repent? O wretched state! O bosom black as death! O limèd soul that, struggling to be free, art more engaged! Help, angels. Make assay. Bow, stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel, be soft as sinews of the newborn babe.”

Now, that second guy is really sweating his fate.

Still, people who love Shakespeare enjoy knowing his first thoughts (if they are, indeed, HIS first thoughts.) So the UNCC show, which runs through Nov. 15 at the Lab Theater in Robinson Hall, will be an intriguing curiosity – even if famous speeches show up in unexpected places and in forms that don’t sound “right” to us.

An admirer once insisted to Ben Jonson that Shakespeare never blotted a line in writing his masterworks. “Would that he had blotted a thousand!” came the reply. The existence of these quartos, however exact they may or may not be, suggest that “Hamlet” and “Lear” did not pop out of his brain fully formed, and that rewriting may have made him the greatest writer in the English language.

P.S. If you’d like to hear from a scholar, Paul Menzer will host a free pre-show discussion Nov. 13. He directs the Mary Baldwin College MLitt/MFA Shakespeare and Performance graduate program and wrote “The Hamlets: Cues, Q’s, and Remembered Texts.”

Toppman: 704-358-5232



MORE STATE OF THE ART

YOU MAY LIKE

Sponsored Links by Taboola

The Best Method To Pay Off A Credit Card Revealed

NextAdvisor

Cable TV Is Dying. Here's What Comes Next

The Motley Fool

Why You Shouldn't Spend More Money on Your Razors

Dollar Shave Club

The Worst Shoes for Your Feet

WebMD

COMMENTS
