History Faux/Real: the 2006 *Ur-Hamlet*

Hamlet is perhaps one of the most often adapted texts by Shakespeare. Even if we consider the word “adaptation” to mean only those performances and productions that vary significantly from the language of the early modern printed sources (rather than every iteration as a standalone adaptation), there are hundreds if not thousands of such approaches to the play. The MIT Global Shakespeares online archive alone hosts dozens of variations of and on *Hamlet*. Yet despite the worldwide embrace of the play, it is one of our most queried, analyzed, studied, broken down, torn apart, re-worked, vex(t)ed texts. Every production—every adaptation—raises new questions. The 2006 *Ur-Hamlet* created by the Danish Nordic Theatre Laboratory/Odin Teatret (DNTL/OT) presents the origins and an adaptation of *Hamlet* in which many aspects of the story of Amleth the Dane are taken off the page and presented through the embodiment of the printed work and codex, music representing the medieval of Asia and Western Europe, and dance.

In the 2006 *Ur-Hamlet*, *Hamlet/Hamlet/Amleth* enters the stage in multiple guises, wherein he is depicted as a book and a man and a character and a ghost and a stereotype, among other things. As the audience sees the multiplicities of Hamlet, the DNTL/OT provides the outline of the action: “On the stage the audience sees the story of a refined royal court glittering from the gold of the Balinese costumes, in which love, intrigues and death are intertwined while Saxo Grammaticus illustrates their story in Latin. All around them, an entire world of immigrants, neglected, excluded, subterranean people move as rats.
They penetrate in silence and lurk in every space left free by the courtiers. But before long this double world in which each group ignores the other is penetrated by plague and contagion."

The goal of the theatre and this production in particular was stated as being to integrate cultural elements of East and West and show the universality of 1. *Hamlet* and 2. oppression of the Other. In an attempt to reverse common stereotypes, the creators designed a show for Western audiences that relocated *Amleth* to a fantasy pan-Asian court comprised of Balinese and Japanese actors and cultural elements. They cast Europeans as the “immigrants” spreading “plague,” and *Amleth* himself is a Brazilian Órxia, alone in the crowds. In doing so the creators called upon various representations of East and West and the medieval through the use of dramatic forms, physical movement, music, and dance. In doing so, they rejected traditional narratives of the medieval as depicted in written documents and testimony and instead sought a fluid reimagining of the past. Although the creators’ desire seems to have been a cultural and class-based switch of the too-often historic reality of white European hegemony and its oppression of non-whites, instead the play offers audiences an Indonesian upper class that is corrupt beneath its layers of gold; an *Amleth* who is played by one of the only black actors to appear and who is dehumanized through his forced play-acting as a dog and through the removal of his voice and its replacement with animalistic bird noises; and a presentation of the medieval East and West as, respectively, the epitome of louche savagery and the height of sophistication for their times. In trying to discard the hegemonies of the past as described in literature, the creators nonetheless reinscribed inequality and bias in an unwritten form.

The play uses the music of former British colonies and faux-medieval music that mimics Northern European liturgical music in addition to a number of musical pieces from and musical references to Asia, particularly the gamelan of Indonesia. This soundscape is intended to be part of “an exchange of cultural manifestations”
that suggests the view of Shakespeare from outside of the Anglophone world. The production was designed to bring together different acting traditions from across the world; in doing so, it also incorporated music from these cultures. The *Ur-Hamlet* uses Asian musics played by Asian and Western instruments to suggest the complexities of the story and employs faux-Northern European medieval music to emphasize its age, history, and origins. This music surrounds the Hamlet role and makes him both a “medieval” and “other” character; in addition, the citational musical environment of the play reifies and negates stereotypes of the medieval and its relevance in Shakespeare’s work. It emphasizes the chronological distance between the present and the early modern, but draws the early modern back even further by suggesting that the story of Amleth as told by Saxo went unchanged and undeveloped through Shakespeare to the present. It asks audiences to equate the medieval with the early modern and to regard both as so distant as to be completely Other. At the same time, it offers a view that the Amleth story contains chronological and geographical universals, and that the setting is malleable or even irrelevant.

The DNTL/OT production begins with a long recitation of a portion of Saxo Grammaticus’s *Amleth, Prince of Denmark*, first in Latin and then in English. In the 2006 performances, Saxo is played by a white woman wearing long robes and a baldpate, both of which signify “monk” in popular culture. Indeed, the first page of the script reads, “THE MONK SAXO DIGS INTO THE DARK AGES…..,” digging up bones, signifiers of the distant past.¹ The performance space is lit by torches and oil lamps, and the music is that of an Indonesian gamelan ensemble, which uses pitched percussion that is struck with mallets. Already the production, as part of formally setting the action, conjures up a popular “dark” view of the period and establishes it as foreign and exotic and barbaric. This concept, at least for white European audiences, is emphasized by the music that immediately follows.

Saxo’s entrance is heralded by what the scenario call a “butoh flute,” likely a shakuhachi, or traditional Japanese bamboo flute. As Saxo raises up Prince Amleth’s skull, a flashback showing King Horwendill (Old Hamlet)’s murder is played out through Balinese dance, accompanied by traditional gambuh gamelan (tuned percussion) music. (See video 1: Horwendill murder.) Vicious action is thus paired with medieval music from the East. Saxo—a Westerner—recounts this story for the audience in terms of a more primitive society; he himself is at a remove from it in his European monastery. This establishes two things: that Saxo’s story has been transplanted into a fictional world cobbled together using various distinct elements of different national and ethnic arts practices from the East; and that Saxo’s medievalism, as “dark” as it will be shown, is yet superior to that of the Other culture in question. Ultimately, with his scholasticism and the longevity of the written word, Saxo will outlast everyone. The use of authentic medieval music from Asia is in direct contrast with newly-created medieval-sounding music for Europe. The message this musicking brings is unclear: is Asian music required to be authentic because it is being appropriated here by white creators, albeit while being performed by Asian artists? Is it meant to suggest that all human origins are the same? Does it argue that the past of Asia is somehow more real or better preserved that than of the West, for which simulacra is appropriate? Are audiences to hear the production’s faux-medieval music as a signifier of the widespread construction of the medieval period by non-specialists?

The horrors of the Western medieval world are visited only on the court after further immorality has taken place: Feng has married Geruta, and Amleth has had sex with his foster-sister. At the wedding feast of two “plague rats,” a Noh actor appears as a priest, chanting and swinging a censor. His faux-medieval chant refocuses the audience’s attention to the chronological setting, and, as guests begin falling ill of the plague, its own hazards. (See video 2: Wedding.) Likewise, the period is further coded as one of chaos, disease, and political infiltration when the women of the European “plague rats” join
together in a Macedonia song with roots in distant history. Accompanied by Western brass instruments and drums, they lead an assault on the Asians in whose court they live. This communally performed music, with all voices together, suggests the rats’ greater abilities in self-governance, organization, and the perpetuation of a culture. (See video 3: Rat Song.) Does the use of ancient folk song here represent a non-elite authenticity of culture that is placed in opposition with the elite music of Western monasteries, which is represented by musical simulacra? Or do the creators employ the folk song because it resonates with the concept that some elements of culture survive over time because of their appeal to and performance by broader socio-economic spectra of peoples? If this song and the gamelan music are actual medieval works, then why is the medieval West assigned new music?

In contrast, when Amleth returns from killing Feng to establish his new rule, Balinese dancing and music is used to represent drunkenness and lack of cognitive abilities among the dissipated court members. Amleth, his movements drawn from candomblé, defeats them easily. Yet Amleth’s vocality is compromised from the start. The creators take Saxo’s story of the prince crowing like a cock to perform madness and instill it as the voice of Amleth throughout. Even at the end of the play, when he is asked to announce his new world rules for order, Amleth can only scream to each compass point while another actor sings the rules. The voices and figures of both are gradually engulfed by Balinese music and dance, and the establishment of a child king, in Balinese dress, suggests that European and New World enlightenment have done nothing to elevate the barbarity of the imagined pan-Asian court. Amleth dances a baris, a Balinese war dance, further suggesting the court’s violent and uncivilized nature.

Ultimately what we find in Ur-Hamlet are different kinds of variously real and fake medieval music used to portray the fake medieval in multiple, equally constructed and mediated cultures. I’m not arguing that productions should use “authentic” music; I’m not even suggesting that there is such thing as authenticity, not any more than
there is a single text for *Hamlet*. What does all of this fake medieval music really say about the *Ur-Hamlet* and how does that affect its messages about social issues in the European Union, historic and current racial and class-based inequities, and diversity?

1. It suggests that some medieval musical (and other) cultures were homogenous. Chant, as depicted here, represents all of medieval music and the music of culture in a white, male-dominated society. Traditional Balinese music, likewise, stands in for all medieval Indonesian (and most South Asian) musical culture. *Amleth* by himself is accompanied by Brazilian candomblé music. This is all too easily reduced to (chronologically from the beginning of the production):

   white medieval people are to chant as Asian medieval people are to gamelan as black medieval people are to candomblé.

Which leads me to think:

2. It reinforces—mostly—connections between elite status and music. Chant developed and was brought forth in the flourishing of the Catholic Church, and enormously wealthy institution. It was also the preserve of the educated and literate, and of families who gave children to monasteries and convents. In Java, gamelan ensembles dating from the 8th century are associated with royalty—as we see in *Ur-Hamlet*—and wealthy temples. The instruments themselves were made from precious metals, rare woods, and other valuable materials. Even Candomblé, which grew out of African beliefs brought to Brazil with enslaved laborers, has become a solidly middle-class religion, practiced by both Afro-Brazilians and whites. One could argue that this music is suitable for *Amleth* because it does take place at court, but the “plague rats” are musically signified by vernacular song, not chant or gamelan.

3. It confirms that for most people, the medieval as a whole—elite music notwithstanding—was a “dark
age.” By framing the Indonesian setting of the story of Amleth with the narration of the white, educated, literate Saxo, the creators default to presenting the story and its Asian characters, their culture, and their music as Other. It is foreign, exotic, and, as the inclusion of the baris dance shows, violent and coarse. The musicians playing modern western instruments are on a raised platform and well-lit and amped, and the singers performing chant and chant-like materials have mics. The gamelan and Brazilian music performers are on the ground, less well-lit, and their music is not provided with clarifying or broadcasting technology. The music of the West is literally illuminated above that of the East. Furthermore, most of the production is lit by torchlight: in such a visual atmosphere, what is most visible? Saxo’s gleaming white head. Indeed, it is difficult to make out the faces of the Balinese court and Amleth—even the white, European “plague rats” are more literally visible.

My reading of this piece is that it reifies positions of white privilege and Eurocentrism. Erik Exe Christofferson notes that much of the group’s work deals with “‘foreignness’ as a fundamental condition in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.” In their Ur-Hamlet, the idea of the medieval as foreign is present both in the plot and metadiegetically in the production. The program for the production notes that, “Diversity is the basic matter of theatre,” but the overall citational environment of cultures and music is one in which the medieval achievements of white Europeans are more equal than that of Others.