CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The drama of questions and the mystery of Hamlet

> How can woman put herself into the text – into the world and into history?
>
> Helène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 1975[1]

The first Hamlet on film was a woman, Sarah Bernhardt (1900). Probably the first Hamlet on radio was a woman, Eve Donne (1923). The 'observed of all observers', the 'glass of fashion and the mould of form', the 'hoop through which every actor must jump' according to Max Beerbohm, Hamlet is also the role that has since the late eighteenth century most inspired tragic actresses to challenge expectations and cross gender lines. Several of the most brilliant performances of the part in our time have been by women, and the issue of Hamlet's 'femininity' has fascinated artists in all media. Crossing boundaries, contesting convention, disrupting or reflecting the dominant sexual politics, this regendering of Hamlet has involved repeated investigations into the nature of subjectivity, articulacy, and action – investigations with radically different consequences depending on the cultural situation. It has been an extraordinary history, but until recently, with the re-evaluation of such unconventional actresses as Charlotte Charke, Charlotte Cushman, Asta Nielsen and Eva Le Gallienne, it was largely ignored. Why, at certain points, was it thought appropriate for women to play this role, and why were many other artists, male and female, fascinated by them? To establish some parameters we begin with a German actress, a French painter, and an amateur American critic who each in different ways and for different reasons explored what has been seen as the femininity of Hamlet.

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Performance: Hamlet 2000

Hamlet raises all the questions that human beings ask throughout their lives . . . Today, in a world in which science and politics want to make us believe

that all questions can be answered, our instincts tell us that this is all wrong . . . What will this 'Hamlet 2000' be like? What will be his questions to the world, on the eve of the new millennium?[2]

Angela Winkler, one of Germany's leading actresses, played Hamlet at the Hanover Schauspielhaus as part of the millennial Expo 2000. Best known internationally for her role in the film *The Lost Honour of Katherina Blum* (1975) as an innocent bystander embroiled in state terror, she won Germany's Best Actress award as Hamlet. The director was Peter Zadek. '*Hamlet 2000*' was tied into the politics of Germany and Europe after the Wall; few performances have carried such symbolic weight. It was a Berlin Schaubühne production but it was co-financed by Expo 2000 and the Avignon Festival, rehearsed in Strasbourg, premiered in Vienna in 1999, and climaxed its Berlin run that December, the week the world's leaders assembled in the reunified city to mark the rebuilding of the Reichstag.[3] In response to the end of a brutal century, Angela Winkler made Hamlet an embodiment of bruised hope. If Hamlet always shows 'the very age and body of the time his true form and feature' (and many saw the advice to the Players as the key to her contained realism), after such an age of violence must not the 'form and feature' of consciousness itself, which Hamlet has for so long represented, be refigured? Zadek said he sensed 'instinctively' that at that moment a woman must ask 'the questions', and the androgyny of Winkler's Hamlet had collective resonance.

Angela Winkler was fifty-five, the same age as Bernhardt when she played Hamlet a century earlier. 'I didn't set out to play a man', Winkler said, 'I don't find that interesting.'[4] Rather, she saw theatre as 'a different way of living' – 'It's very important for me that the work corresponds to a precise moment in my life.' She had four children and rationed herself ('I couldn't act all the time. I had to have pauses, to be with my family') and in the 1990s she chose to collaborate with particular directors on major projects. 'Why did Zadek want a woman to play Hamlet?' she was asked: 'Why did he choose me? I don't know. I never ask directors to explain.' She had had no driving interest in *Hamlet* ('I'd only seen the play once, in 1977, I hadn't read it, and I've never played Shakespeare') but its difficulty attracted her ('If it's not a struggle, I don't accept') and there were private echoes. Late in World War II Winkler's father was shot and assumed dead on the Russian Front; when she was six like a ghost he returned to Germany. As we shall see, any effective performance of Hamlet, by man or woman, resonates with autobiography. Angela Winkler made Hamlet emotionally raw and

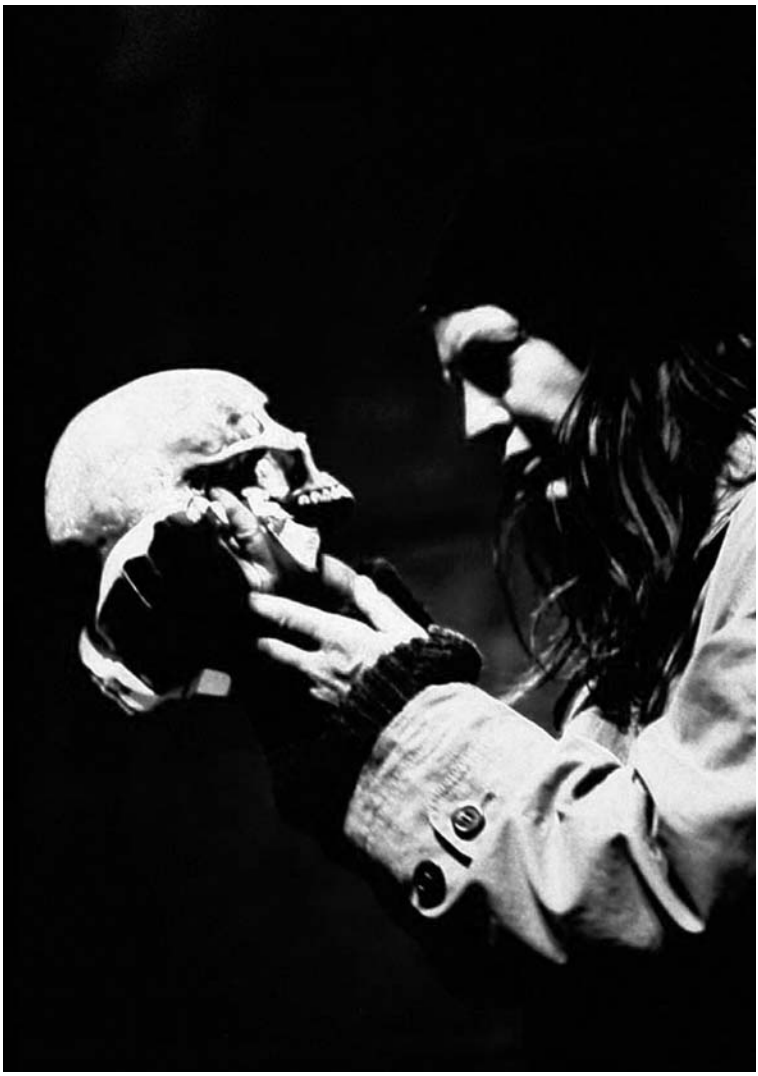

Figure 1 Angela Winkler as Hamlet, Berlin 1999; director: Peter Zadek. (*Photo*: Roswitha Hecke).

unprotected, consumed by an insatiable hunger for truth, observing history with amazement (see Figure 1).

Somewhere near 'the end of history' on an empty windswept stage, a modern soldier wrapped in leather and furs kept watch (NATO's bombing

of Belgrade began during rehearsals). In an age of grand architectural statements like the new Reichstag, Elsinore was a metal box, a giant version of the portakabins® seen on building sites everywhere. Its blank impermanence made European critics think of migrant workers, refugees, and the construction of false realities: 'What symbolizes postmodern randomness better?'[5] As nervous guards clicked their rifles, the container opened, and to murmurs of ecclesiastical music from a distant time of belief, the Ghost emerged rattling bells and beads and toting a ring-binder ledger of sins. It ignored the soldiers and locked itself back in: there was no dialogue between numb present and grotesque past. Then a business-suited new Court emerged from the box for a photocall; Claudius' white uniform unified elements from East and West Germany. Otto Sadler made him a canny working-class politician who easily solved the Norway problem and smiled, complacent as Clinton, Blair and Schröder in the post-ideological age. Women's condition however had not altered – Ophelia was a timid doll and Gertrude a scarlet woman forever in red. Elizabeth Plessen's translation interlaced Schlegel's Romantic rhetoric with everyday idioms and the acting veered between the conversational and caricature. Dressed in 1940s fashions, Ophelia and her fighter-pilot brother were what Claudius and Gertrude might once have been: time slipped; people coexisted with their own past; *Hamlet* was haunted by memories from Germany's postwar reconstruction and from Angela Winkler's life.

Hamlet arrived late, in black tunic and hose, disrupting everything and taking all the culture's contradictions and suppressed anxieties into his/her self. Winkler pushed through to the front, slammed down a kitchen chair and sat taut and sullen, unable to stay still, shaking her long dark hair, fingers drumming. Everyone tried to ignore her till she laughed out loud to hear of Laertes' escape. Gertrude came over from the party but Hamlet could hardly speak: 'I know not seems . . .' The production made nothing of Winkler's gender, nor did she 'play a man': rather, as Michael Billington observed, 'she absorbs Hamlet's emotions into her own personality' and crucially, like Sarah Bernhardt, she played a child. Hamlet became pre-gendered – 'the problem child', Roland Koberg said, 'at a dinner party, whose behaviour is disturbed . . . And all simultaneously stare, perplexed, and shy away because they cannot deal with it.' Claudius delivered a pep-talk. In *Hamlet* – and this was one reason why the role beckoned many actresses – there is no division between history and the private sphere.

Winkler was one of many actresses who played Hamlet in the 1990s. In Stockholm (1996) and Cincinnati (1997), the character was made female (Princess Hamlet) while in other cases (e.g. London, 1992) there was a thorough male impersonation. The experience varied from country to country. For example specific languages are more or less gendered so there were no personal pronouns to define Leea Klemola's Finnish punk Hamlet (1995) as either 'he' or 'she': Hamlet was '*han*'. Cultural contexts varied, sometimes unpredictably. In Giles Block's 1995 Japanese production (Shochiku Theatre, Tokyo) Hamlet was Rei Asami, from the all-female Takorasaka company who were reversing the centuries-old *onnagata* tradition of all-male casting. Takorasaka implicitly critiqued a society that had clung to conventions of gender representation from a distant age; yet a group of actresses had staged *Hamlet* in Japan as early as 1907 and the kabuki-trained actress Yaeko Mizutani played Hamlet successfully in 1933 and 1935. Block's 1995 production was less revolutionary than it sounded and, he said, 'As soon as rehearsals started everyone forgot about the sex of the person, she was like any other performer, playing Hamlet.'[6] All cross-cast *Hamlet*s involve decisions regarding the nature of gender – biologically or culturally determined? learned, improvised or imposed? – and may universalise the character or focus on *difference*. But what most female Hamlets have in common is that they are catalysts – inassimilable figures alien to the norms around them. The paradoxes and dissident intensities of Hamlet's beliefs and language become sharper through the figure of an actress/prince whose very presence exposes artifice – the theatrical conventions we might otherwise not question, the political banalities masking Elsinore's lies, and the structures of power and gender that normally trap women in *Hamlet* in the roles of Mother, Virgin and Whore. The female Hamlet is a walking, speaking alienation effect. Angela Winkler confronted the fact that Hamlet embodies contradiction.

In public Winkler was scarcely audible, but alone with the audience tempestuous energy burst through. She punched the air ('Hercules!'), hit her shoe thinking of Gertrude's new ones, jumped into the audience to explain incest ('My father's brother!'), but retreated to the lonely stage and blew her nose on her sleeve. Horatio delighted her with magic tricks but she confided in the spectators, almost naively: 'It is not nor it cannot come to good.' Winkler made the famous pronouncements seem simple, even trite ('Frailty thy name is woman,' 'To be or not to be, that is the question') but new and astonishing to Hamlet, who was so intrigued by the 'vicious mole of nature' that s/he nearly missed the Ghost.

Winkler showed that each individual encounters life and death as if for the first time, and the fact that women cannot normally speak this text in public intensified the effect: she gave Hamlet a compulsive need for knowledge, and articulation. Reviewers spoke of *The Little Prince* and *Peter Pan*. As Koberg noted, everyone suppressed their past except Winkler's Hamlet, who 'believes in the past, corresponds with it . . . Hamlet has the longest memory and the shortest life'.

We shall see that when gender is put in question, so is genre. Farce and tragedy overlapped: Winkler pulled a gun on Marcellus and Horatio to comic effect; seeing the Ghost on its knees in shame – 'Strange, tattered, half-shaman half fool,' (Kolberg) – Hamlet gave it a chair, but it fell off. 'My uncle?' expressed amazement. Winkler was volatile: 'Oh but there is, Horatio!' was a mature explosion of rage, but then she banged on the stage ('Swear!') like a six-year-old whose father had returned from the dead, and told Horatio in all simplicity that there are lots of things in heaven and earth. At the 2000 Edinburgh Festival some British reviewers complained that Zadek was identifying femininity with immaturity, but this ignored Winkler's force and intellect. There was a profound visible disparity between her *performance* – variously a disturbed adolescent, a college rebel, and Pippi Longstocking – and her *physical self*. There were superficial similarities, for example, to Rebecca Hall's Hamlet (Soho Theatre Company 1997) in a production aimed at London teenagers that addressed questions of alienation and self-harm among adolescent girls (Hall yelled the soliloquies as if confiding in her pals at a disco) but Winkler's Hamlet was multi-dimensional: lost child and experienced woman, past and present overlaid. In action she created a restless, ebullient figure of 'childlike radiance', yet photographs showed her mature features and haunted eyes. She created a post-Brechtian collage of clashing but truthful emotional moments: 'Not male, not female, not boyish, . . . simply a person, who happens to be an actress', said *Le Pais*, and *Le Monde* added: 'A child, neither girl nor boy.'[7] But to be a child in this smug Denmark was to be the one person observing life as an outsider – that is, *truthfully* – 'cold reality seen through the eyes of a child'. Winkler made *Hamlet* about individuation, the forging of a consciousness over three hours and a lifetime.

Her encounter with Polonius was uniquely pointed. He was played by Ulrich Wildgrüber, who had been Zadek's Hamlet in 1977 in an iconoclastic but outrageously pre-feminist production where Gertrude was half-naked with painted breasts, Ophelia was a sex-toy, and women played Claudius' parasites (Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern).

Now Wildgrüber's fat, scant of breath, myopic and flustered Polonius was the male Hamlet tradition gone rotten – 'a large pompous duck flapping his wings inconsequentially, darting his beady eyes left and right to emphasise his regurgitation of chewed-over nostrums and commonplaces'.[8] He gabbled and interrupted himself, frustrated by his inability to find the *mot juste*, distracted by his own false gestures. He shrieked when crossed. Written into the man's body was 'disastrous uncertainty' (Koberg), the loss of the postwar generation's promise. (Wildgrüber died during the run.) Twenty years on, Hamlet was in Claudius' pay, but Winkler and Katherina Blum had not lapsed – 'The face is unaffected, betrays no age'[9] – and the radical spirit – greasy-haired and dishevelled, laughing at third-hand 'words, words, words' – was younger than ever.

So Angela Winkler's Hamlet negotiated her identity in relation to gross middle-aged men: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were faded chorus boys dancing to 'Singing in the Rain' and the Players were bored, camp exhibitionists whose show featured onstage sex and a murderer who spewed on his audience. Their Voice Beautiful star ruined the Hecuba speech, but Hamlet's heartfelt version crystallised a young person's first discovery that art might transfigure pain. In 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I' Winkler used her rich natural voice for the first time. The actor acts out true 'dreams', she stressed, and raking the fully-lit auditorium with her eyes, 'addressing flaming words clearly and directly to the public'[10], she challenged them to consider their relationship to this play: what was Hecuba to *them*? Then she was back in infancy, scuffing the floor and confiding what she'd heard about Theatre – that it touches the guilty. . . . She ran out. It was the first of two intervals, and before each break Hamlet confronted the audience of this expensive 'festival production'. Faced with Elsinore's bland meritocracy, German critics admitted 'these are people like you and I, petty plotters, inconspicuous and interchangeable'.[11] When Winkler rushed back, she was murmuring 'To be or not to be'. She spoke the soliloquies directly but drifted into introspection; her unprotected face was 'an open book'.[12] With the last lines ('. . . lose the name of action,') Hamlet understood the appalling complexity of existence for the first time and lapsed into shocked isolation.

For the psychologist Nancy Chodorow, the 'masculine sense of self' is separate, the 'feminine sense of self remains connected to others in the world'.[13] Hamlet's struggle for individuation occupied both grounds. Noticing Ophelia, Winkler smiled at their comic disparateness – Ophelia was a prim 1950s *debutante* clutching a handbag, Hamlet now resembled a drowned rat – but identified a potential ally. In all productions where

an actress plays Hamlet, the clashes with Ophelia and Gertrude gain importance; even if there has been a suspension of disbelief, it now becomes impossible to ignore the leading artist's gender. The Nunnery and Closet scenes comment on choice and female identity in a patriarchal world. All Hamlets are surrounded by models of masculinity, from the Ghost to Fortinbras, Laertes, Horatio and even Claudius, but this Hamlet's psyche incorporated fragments of Ophelia and Gertrude too. Annet Renneberg's Ophelia, trapped in a time-warp of domestic conformity, shocked by Hamlet's slovenly disrespect, returned the gifts robotically and horrified Hamlet, who had never before experienced rejection, only false grins. Winkler ripped the letters to pieces and hurled the scraps in Ophelia's face; all Hamlet's pain erupted – '*Dummkopf!!*' – and was misdirected at her: Hamlet emptied Ophelia's handbag on the floor and drew a knife on her in a scene of great physical violence, but at the end the young people's shared tragedy was shocking. Both actresses crawled on the floor as Ophelia spoke her soliloquy, 'Blasted with ecstasy', and Hamlet scrabbled wretchedly for the letters. Not only did the politicians ignore Ophelia's pain, they actually planned Hamlet's removal with Winkler at their feet: a child was not worth lying to, nor a woman. Hamlet was totally alienated, even from the Self ('Now I am alone!'), but as she gathered the last letters Winkler spoke 'Speak the speech . . .' half to herself: 'Suit the action to the word . . . obey the modesty of nature.' Can art offer answers? The decadent play-within-the-play was a travesty of Shakespeare, but alongside it Angela Winkler's reanimated *travesti*, the tradition of female-to-male cross-dressing, presenting it as an exploration of identity, not the jaded replication of roles.

The Prayer scene focused the production's dialectic onto Winkler's Hamlet and Sadler's King. Hamlet writhed as she imagined Claudius' torment, he mocked his own glib prayers; it was disturbing to register Hamlet's naivety against his cynical intimacy with corruption. A total pragmatist, he used whatever means a situation required – kindness, diplomacy, religious mantras, murder – while Gertrude inhabited a fantasy world. Eve Mattes was Zadek's Queen in 1977; two decades later she showed her still clinging to the sensual illusion that luxury meant fulfilment. Frustrated, unable to articulate anything but adoration for the dead and hatred for the living, Hamlet beat and dragged her across the floor; but when the Ghost entered, Gertrude put on 1940s dance music and swayed to it, and the dead man joined her, escaping into nostalgia too. Mother and child sat close in exhausted silence, and Winkler became gentler. What followed was unexpected. Claudius invaded the bedroom,

Hamlet hid under the bed, the pain of psychological separation unresolved; but s/he re-emerged to confront the King, and grew up. Claudius sank on the mattress, convinced life was a sty where only violence worked ('No-one is monstrous. Everyone is wretched. They are all fatalists' [*Le Monde*]) but Angela Winkler stepped in front of the stage curtain in a beret and leather jacket, an image of the Baader-Meinhof era. Costumes had subtly taken Winkler from her 1940s childhood to the 70s and her own identification with the cinema of conscience. 'What is a man/If his chief good and marker of his time/Be but to sleep and feed?': surveying the audience on their little patch of EU ground, Hamlet transcended the immediate moment for the first time, and committed to action.

William Hazlitt wrote, 'It is we who are Hamlet.' Women who take the role pose recurrent questions. Is Hamlet a 'universal' figure whose dilemmas everyone shares, male or female? Is Hamlet a 'feminine' character whose words invite a woman's voice? What is the relationship between Shakespeare's all-male theatre and the conventions that have succeeded it? How may the sexual and state politics of an English Renaissance play relate to the time and place of its re-enactment? *Hamlet 2000* for example was typical of its period in its inventive treatment of Ophelia and the fact that in madness – here signified by the loss of one glove, shocking in this coded world – she became a second Hamlet. Winkler shaped the production even in her absence: she unleashed energy. Ophelia's hair went awry, she played off the kitchen chair like Winkler, stalked Gertrude, and when Claudius shook her she shook him back. But unlike Hamlet she empathised with Gertrude, wept for her, stared inside the older woman's handbag and saw nightmares there. Laertes blamed his sister for his shame, hitting her viciously till she let out frightening birdlike cries. She ripped her flowers and scattered them as Hamlet had the letters. Then Gertrude described Ophelia's death *to the audience*, beginning her own awkward journey in Winkler's footsteps, from female Sign to female Subject.[14]

The graveyard scene laid social corruption bare. Hamlet and Horatio stood on the roof of the steel container while down below gravedigger-clowns in masked fumigation suits waded through mountains of rubbish and found human remains. Some read this as a scene of ecological disaster, a mass exhumation after ethnic cleansing, or the excavation of Germany's secrets.[15] Winkler covered her mouth against the stench and descended, forcing Horatio – the increasingly terrified Intellectual – to follow the woman's lead. The rest tried to deny reality, so perversely

this became the only spectacular scene: the container opened, revealing a shrine and the royal party in Victorian mourning. Ophelia's coffin was metal; she was toxic. The clowns robbed graves and men played tug-of-war with her corpse. Laertes and Hamlet collapsed, victims who had forgotten their real enemies.

Winkler's Prince always retained something of the child – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had to die because they broke the rules – but the play's final movement began with a farcical *anagnorisis*: when Osric entered he was Polonius in a long blond wig, one last degenerate recycling of 'Hamlet 1977'. The 'fall of a sparrow' speech was calm and happy; Hamlet could see through masks now, yet was not tainted. Winkler embraced Laertes. To quote Heilig, she made Hamlet 'addicted to life', a feeling intelligence who 'hangs on to life by every fibre of the senses . . . The world has disappointed Hamlet beyond measure, more than the heart can bear' but 'the heart remains the most reliable, the only interlocutor'.[16] In a tatty jumper, Winkler fought the duel like a talented novice with infectious humour. *Hamlet* is theatre's greatest meditation on death, and Zadek's production opposed four perspectives. Gertrude drank the poison as an instinctive act of rebellion. Laertes died bitterly. Claudius, the absolute materialist, studied a tiny fatal scratch on his forearm, chuckling at its absurdity. Only Hamlet, though regretful, accepted death. Winkler arranged herself carefully on her kitchen chair, there was a comic interruption when Osric announced Fortinbras, and suddenly mid-sentence Hamlet was dead. Whatever answers to 'The Questions' s/he had learnt, they were not for spectators: 'The rest is silence.' To drums, Fortinbras entered in a greatcoat and helmet. It was Ophelia. But Ophelia turned hectoring tyrant – Zadek short-circuited any feminist reading or sense of collectivity. The humanity of Angela Winkler's Hamlet was unique.

Reviewers across Europe were lyrical in their attempt to define Winkler's achievement. Gerhard Stadelmaier argued that the twentieth century's Hamlets had stood for partial visions – the intellectual, the Oedipal, the existential – but 'now this century is almost ended' so on this emptied millennial stage Winkler's Prince 'for the first time bears the memories of not just one sector, but of the whole world'. Hamlet's androgyny meant amplitude, and for Michael Billington 'What Winkler brings out – in a way that no man I have ever seen quite has – is Hamlet's enormous capacity for love, a capacity that is constantly baffled and frustrated.'[17] Stadelmaier honoured her 'beautiful seriousness': 'Hamlet's death is a miracle, a smile in sleep . . . [Winkler] burns out like a holy