

HAMLET FROM THE BLOC: 1990 AND 2010

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ABSTRACT

The Romanian Bulandra Theatre's *Hamlet* visit to London, in 1990, was a much awaited event—by the critics, the diaspora and the wider British public. It finally talked to the world about the long history of communist repression, fear and dissidence and about the recent bloody overthrow of the infamous Ceaușescu only months after the fall of the Berlin Wall. As lead actor Ion Caramitru declared when talking about the production's run in mid-1980s Romania, “we were doing more than staging a production of *Hamlet*, we were preserving the conscience of our people” (*The Standard*, 9 August 1990). While perceived to have lost its immediacy at home, only while touring abroad could this production, which opened in 1985 (after three years of battling with the censors), perform its scripted task: “to hold the mirror up to [present] nature” (3.2.20)¹ anew. In London in 1990, this “new Prince from the Bloc” did not portray “a mangled introvert but a vigorous, passionately committed” Hamlet; more importantly, he was a dissident in post-Revolution Romania: been and gone vice-president, Ion Caramitru/Hamlet and this production in 1990 were warning about the “new dictatorship” in a “terrible vision of the future”—as Caramitru put it in his interview with Robert Twedwr Moss (*The Standard*, 9 August 1990). This production's vision, its lasting impact, its link with the London National Theatre and its former director Richard Eyre, all informed the production of *Hamlet* directed by Nicholas Hytner for the London NT in 2010. This article sets out to cross-examine what worked inside the Bloc in the mid-1980s but did no longer work on either side of the recently fallen Berlin Wall; equally, it examines the specific Eastern (European) tropes Hytner employed in 2010, in what appeared to be the first overtly political *Hamlet* for a decade in the UK. Finally, the paper aims to argue that by citing and sighting the Eastern Bloc as a trope, the 2010 UK production, too, by “indirection directions found,” namely that *Hamlet*, “the play written about a surveillance state: a totalitarian monarchy with a high developed spy network”—as Hytner put it in an interview (*Hamlet Programme*)—was critical(ly) about present political regimes and agendas.

KEYWORDS: *Hamlet*, surveillance, Eastern Bloc, Ion Caramitru, Nicholas Hytner, Bulandra Theatre, the London National Theatre.

¹ All quotations from *Hamlet* are from the Norton *Shakespeare* edition of 2008 and will be referenced parenthetically in the text.