

**AT THE DANISH COURT**  
**(with Romeo, Bleeding Macbeth and Hamlet's Sister)**

by Paul Bailey

Two things were certain: I was going to play Hamlet and I was going to die young. The second of these eventualities I would leave to chance, but the first required preparation. In the summer of 1952, at various times of the day and night, I studied with a thoroughness that still astonishes me. I learned every line of *Hamlet* by heart.

People have done madder things, I assured myself as I committed the words of Reynaldo, the Sailor, the Players and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to memory. Learning *Hamlet* was no more idiotic than climbing a mountain or swimming the English Channel. The play was *there*, after all, as huge and challenging, in its way, as any Everest. The difference was that I would be conquering it in an upstairs room, in a terraced house in Battersea, in secret.

I spent weeks and weeks in and out of Elsinore, a self invited guest at the Danish court. 'I'm not going to tell you again that your supper's on the table,' announced my mother, banging on the door. 'I don't know what the street must think,' she remarked when I emerged, book in hand. 'All that spouting every evening.'

'Let them think what they want,' I answered. 'They're welcome to their thoughts.'

'You're making us a laughing stock with your eternal bloody Shakespeare.'

To Emily, who lived on the ground floor with her husband and two daughters, Shakespeare was Shakespoke. 'Your boy lives for his Shakespoke,' she said to my mother. 'Yes, and I wish he didn't,' was the response.

'There goes Bleeding Macbeth,' Emily would say whenever I began to spout. Why she chose Macbeth, and why she had him bleeding, I never discovered. 'Oh, my God, it's Bleeding Macbeth having one of his turns,' I heard her call up the stairs once. 'Give the poor sod a dagger and tell him where to stick it.'

I was indifferent to such taunts, as I was to those of the neighbourhood children. 'Romeo, Romeo, wherefore are you, Romeo,' they shouted after me. I walked on, muttering lines that weren't Romeo's. 'What've you gone and done with Juliet? Put a bun in her oven, have you, you dirty tosser?'

With Gertrude in mind, I asked my mother if she ever considered marrying another man. 'Don't be so wicked,' she snapped.

'What's wicked about it?'

It was wicked because it insulted my father's memory. 'I won't find his like twice in a lifetime,' she said. 'However hard I look – which I shan't be doing, while there's breath in my body.'

I think it was Michael's idea to write a play with Hamlet's sister as the principal character. Michael was one of my close friends. My mother approved of him because he had once congratulated her on the way she made tea, which was more than her son ever had. We enjoyed acting together: he was Queen Anne to my Duchess of Marlborough, and Mrs Elton in what the adaptor had left of *Emma*.

We called our verse drama *Hamela*. We wrote three or four scenes before the effort of finding rhymes caused us to admit defeat. Our *Hamela* was a lively, commonsensical girl, who regarded Hamlet as an absolute drip. It was her opinion that their father's death was really nothing to brood over. On the battlements at dawn, she admonished him thus:

Now that the cock's up,  
Just pull your socks up...

Our plans for *Hamela* included a passionate affair with Ophelia, whose madness was thereby averted. The girls were not to meet, though, and *Hamela* was never to knock her brother unconscious with a dildo – that dazzling *coup de théâtre* with which *Hamela* was supposed to end.

Some snatches of *Hamlet* have stayed with me – the soliloquies, Polonius's advice to Laertes, the gravedigger's talk of Yorick, among others. When I finally appeared in the tragedy I had spent a mad summer learning, I was given nothing to say. I was cast as a humble courtier, required only to bow and scrape, to move the furniture, and to listen.

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