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To Love or Not to Be: Janek Ledecký's *Musical Hamlet* and Shakespeare Negotiations in Korea

Janek Ledecký's Musical Hamlet is a significant addition to Shakespeare's musicology that deserves scholarly attention. This Czech-originated musical, which ran worldwide from 1999 to 2012, is a rare version of the play that successfully accommodates the tragic in a commercial musical form. This article examines the birth of Musical Hamlet as tragic melodrama in relation to the rise of the mega-musical. After a brief description of how it is adapted into a tragic romance, it considers Shakespeare's relation to popular culture, particularly in the South Korean context, examining the production, marketing and reception of Musical Hamlet in Seoul. The four revivals of Musical Hamlet in Korea record a process of careful negotiations between Shakespeare and the theatre market to produce a middlebrow cultural entertainment. Shakespeare's dwindling share in the negotiations demonstrates the dominance of late capitalist nobrow over residual high art in the cultural geography of South Korea. Yeeyon Im is Associate Professor of English at Yeungnam University in South Korea, where she teaches Shakespeare and drama. She has also translated the plays of Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe into Korean scene.

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The idea of turning Shakespeare's iconic play *Hamlet* into a musical may certainly prove a tempting proposition, yet its scope is a difficult one. Although Shakespeare is a big brand name in the global theatre market, the 'high seriousness' of the famous tragedy and the light spirit of Broadway musical entertainment might not appear to go hand in hand. Thus, only a handful of *Hamlet* productions have been recorded in the history of musical theatre over the last century: *Mr. Hamlet of Broadway* (1908), *Rockabye Hamlet* (1976), and the remotely-related Disney musical *The Lion King* (1997).¹ More recently, *Hamlet! The Musical* premiered in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2007 and was revived continually for short runs in the UK until 2012. Another notable production that deserves attention is the Czech-originated *Musical Hamlet*, which has run continually from 1999 to 2012 worldwide.

What these musical adaptations of *Hamlet* have in common, with the exception of the Czech *Musical Hamlet*, is comic orientation; they turn Shakespeare's tragedy into something amusing, happy, ludicrous, or even ridiculous. The remotely 'Hamletish' *Lion King* ends happily ever after: Simba (Hamlet) defeats Scar (Claudius), regains his kingdom, and even begets a successor with Nala (Ophelia). *Mr. Hamlet of Broadway*, which presented Shakespeare's tragedy within a framing plot like *Kiss Me Kate*, is "the first Shakespearean musical comedy" in Frances Teague's view.² *Rockabye Hamlet*, a more straightforward Shakespearean show in terms of plot, was marred by "poor music, ludicrous action (for example, Ophelia strangling herself with a microphone cord), and above all an incoherence that rendered the complexities of Shakespeare's play all but unintelligible"; closing after only seven performances, it remained as "something of a joke within the theatrical community."³ *Hamlet! The Musical* also made a travesty of Shakespeare's tragedy, as its reviews collected in the website demonstrate: "a gloriously executed spoof of Shakespeare's finest tragedy" (*Daily Mail*), "Gleefully inventive and irreverent" (*Financial Times*), and "A madcap interpretation of the Shakespearean tragedy set to music played by a live band" (*New York Times*).⁴ The Czech *Musical Hamlet* is thus unique in the musical history of *Hamlet*; it is a rare tragic musical adaptation of the play that has achieved a certain degree of international success.

As a musical of non-Anglo-American origin and non-transnational-corporate production origins, *Musical Hamlet* has been enormously successful. It boasts "over 1400 performances worldwide" over twelve years according to its

official website.⁵ Intriguingly, its success came mostly in countries outside Anglo-American spheres of theatrical interest such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Korea, which have less contact with Shakespeare. Except for Prague, Seoul has been its biggest single market, where “its success has been astonishing with over 450 performances and plans to run it for more years.”⁶ *Musical Hamlet* ran in Seoul from 2007 to 2011 in four separate revivals. Despite the significance of *Musical Hamlet* in the history of Shakespeare musicals, it has not received the scholarly attention it deserves nor has been documented in sufficient detail.

This article has a two-fold aim of documenting one significant musical version of *Hamlet* and of considering Shakespeare’s relation to popular culture through the specific example of its production, reception and marketing in Seoul. This, in turn, will offer an analysis of the current cultural geography of South Korea. Before examining its actual production in Seoul, I will briefly consider the genesis of *Musical Hamlet* in Prague in the context of the musical industry worldwide. The emergence of *Musical Hamlet* as a tragic version, I would suggest, is indebted to the rise of the mega-musical, the latest middlebrow musical genre to which Shakespeare is supposed to add cultural prestige. Then, I will focus on *Musical Hamlet* produced in Seoul, considering the value of Shakespearean currency in popular culture. The four revivals of *Musical Hamlet* in Seoul record a process of careful negotiations between Shakespeare and the theatre market to produce a salable cultural commodity of artistic merit. Faithful to the generic requirement of the mega-musical, *Musical Hamlet* turns the tragedy into a tragic melodrama, while trying to accommodate as much of the Shakespearean ‘feel’ as possible. However, the audience’s response to *Musical Hamlet* makes one wonder whether the Shakespearean effect of “upward mobility” in popular culture, as Lanier puts it, is valid in Korea.⁷ To put it differently, one may ask whether the evocation of ‘high art’ can promote the reception of a popular entertainment. Moreover, Shakespeare’s dwindling share in the negotiations demonstrates the dominance of late-capitalist *nobrow* over residual high art in the cultural geography of South Korea.

The Genesis of Musical Hamlet and the Mega-musical

Musical Hamlet, or *Hamlet Muzikál* in the Czech original, is a rock-based musical of two acts, written and composed by Janek Ledecký, a Czech celebrity pop star. Opening in Prague in 1999, it gained popularity in the Czech Republic and Slovakia for some years. After its initial success, American theatre director Robert Johanson joined the team to adapt the musical for Broadway, leading to the creation of the “US version” in 2004. In 2008, it was further developed into

the “world version” co-produced by Czech and Korean teams. Since then, the world version has been performed in Korea, Japan, the Czech Republic, and Romania.

Musical Hamlet originated out of the musical boom in the Czech Republic, which began with the importation of Western musicals as a result of capitalist influences. Describing Czech musical theatre scene around 2000, Delbert Unrush takes *Hamlet Muzikál* and *Rusalka Muzikál* as two examples of “strictly commercial ventures” in creating original musicals. The ultimate aim of these local musicals is to “make money,” first through domestic success and then through international breakthrough: “the world-wide successes of such musicals as *Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Misérables*, and *Cats* are models these people seek to duplicate.”⁸ *Musical Hamlet*’s success (over 1,400 performances in 12 years) seems meagre in comparison with that of other ‘big’ mega-musicals. For instance, Andrew Lloyd Weber’s *Cats*, which premiered at the New London Theatre in 1981, recorded 21 years’ run of almost 9,000 performances as of 2002, and is still today being performed worldwide.⁹ The term “mega” refers to the scale of production costs and box-office returns, as well as the grandness of the musical itself, which is characterised by “a grand plot from a historical era, high emotions, singing and music throughout, and impressive sets.”¹⁰ Geared for the global market, *Musical Hamlet* follows the formula of a mega-musical closely; it is a sung-through musical of a grand plot, with spectacular sets, costumes and choreography.

Due to its commercial orientation, *Musical Hamlet* was criticised as a “McDonaldised musical version of a classic,” which would “make Will turn in his grave.”¹¹ Unrush worries that Western capitalism may corrupt the Czech theatre: “it is only a matter of time before a ‘stupid American musical’ graces the stage of the National Theatre.”¹² While Unrush uses the word “American” as an umbrella term for Western influence, the blockbuster musicals that *Musical Hamlet* imitates are not themselves precisely American. The phenomenon of mega-musicals started with what theatre critics dub “the British invasion” of the 1980s, when musical productions by British composer Andrew Lloyd Weber such as *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera* overran Broadway, up until then regarded as a characteristically “American institution.”¹³ Thus many notable mega-musicals are of European origin, although their transnational production and circulation in the global market render it meaningless to distinguish their nationality.

What is noteworthy about the European mega-musical is its grand plot,

which draws a sharp contrast to 'light' American musicals. The viability of *Musical Hamlet* as tragedy reflects the 'elevation' of the musical genre advanced by the mega-musical. European mega-musicals often employ 'highbrow' subject matters, relying on well-known world classics such as Victor Hugo's novel (*Les Misérables*), T. S. Eliot's poem (*Cats*) and Puccini's opera (*Miss Saigon*). *Rusalka Muzikál*, another Czech musical modelled on the success of mega-musicals, also draws on Antonín Dvořák's eponymous opera *Rusalka*. Mega-musicals approximate the nineteenth-century European grand operas in their form and orientation for the moneyed audience. They have in common the "grandiose medium that combined music, drama, dance, lavish costume and set designs, and special effects," as Paul Prece and William Everett note.¹⁴ In this sense, the mega-musical also resuscitates the musical's initial connection with the European operetta, which had a major influence on the development of the genre along with the emergence of variety theatre. In addition, mega-musicals often have tragic or sentimental endings, distinguishing themselves from American musical comedies.

A comparison of two Puccini-based musicals makes the point clear. In Jonathan Larson's *Rent* (1996), an American musical based on Puccini's *La Bohème*, Mimi is miraculously revived at the end, whereas the French musical *Miss Saigon* (1989) by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil faithfully follows the tragic ending of its source, Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Likewise, the French musical *Romeo et Juliette* by Gérard Presgurvic (2001) no longer changes the ending of Shakespeare's tragedy as was done in Leonard Bernstein/ Stephen Sondheim's *West Side Story* (1957), in which Maria, the Juliet figure, survives. *Musical Hamlet*'s tragic treatment of Shakespeare's play reflects this change in trends.

To Love or Not to Be: From Tragedy to Tragic Romance

After its initial success in Prague, Ledecký's *Hamlet Muzikál* was developed into *Musical Hamlet* with the American market in mind. However, the "US version" failed to gain sufficient recognition to survive along with other long-run mega-musicals on Broadway. The breakthrough for the international market came from South Korea. After its premiere in 2007, *Musical Hamlet* ran in Seoul for three more revivals until December 2011.¹⁵ Each revival production was called a 'Season,' a term inspired by the parlance of American TV drama series. After 'Season Two' in 2008, the "world version" was created in collaboration of Czech, American and Korean teams. It ran for about six months in Seoul until February 2009 as 'Season Three', and became the definitive version of *Musical*

Hamlet. The following discussion of *Musical Hamlet* will be based on this world version.¹⁶

A tragic love story forms a convenient subject for the mega-musical, which is “overtly romantic and sentimental in nature, meant to create strong emotional reactions from the audience.”¹⁷ Faithful to the generic requirement, *Musical Hamlet* adapts Shakespeare’s tragedy into a tragic romance. The musical follows Shakespeare’s plot line relatively closely, yet with a shift of emphasis. It presents *Hamlet* as a romantic tragedy similar to *Romeo and Juliet* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. “Any good musical has to have a good love story,” says Robert Johanson, the American director who adapted the Czech musical for its English version; practically, a musical is a process of “how to explore a love story through music because a love story allows for more songs.”¹⁸ *Musical Hamlet* focuses on love themes, amplifying the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship as well as inventing a love story for Gertrude and Claudius. Altogether, nearly a third of the musical numbers in *Musical Hamlet* are love songs for the two couples.

Ophelia is given more attention, playing a more active role in her relationship with Hamlet. Her love song, “Let’s Not Waste Time,” is placed at an early stage of Act One, establishing the love theme as the driving force of the musical. The duet “Let’s Rise above this World” turns into a bedroom scene, in which the couple expresses their love for each other, and led by Ophelia, they make love. Reprised as Ophelia’s suicidal song in Act Two and repeated a few more times, “Let’s Rise above this World” becomes the most memorable song in the production. This love duet overrides the short “To Be or Not to Be” song as the signature number of the musical. Even “To a Nunnery Go” becomes a love duet, in which Hamlet renounces his love in favour of revenge with his words only, whilst the musical accompaniment runs counter to this suggesting that he is still in love. Sung to the same melody as the love song “Let’s Not Waste Time,” the song effectively belies Hamlet’s words.

More intriguing than the love story of the young couple is the re-invention of the Gertrude-Claudius couple. The royal couple is assigned four different musical numbers that define and develop their love plot. Early in Act One, “I’ve Waited a Lifetime at Your Door” reveals the couple’s repressed love for each other long before the death of King Hamlet. In “Love and Only Love,” Gertrude and Claudius praise the power of love that can transform everything, inviting the wedding guests (and the audience) to fall in love. After the play-within-the-play, the mood grows darker in Act Two. “I’m Untrue” is Gertrude’s justification of her hasty marriage to her brother-in-law in the name of love. Her meagre excuse that

“I am also a woman and I want to be loved” reveals the conservative patriarchal ideology of the production in Seoul.¹⁹

“The Chapel,” a number added in the world version, relates Claudius’s story of forced fratricide. It has a striking similarity to John Updike’s novel *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), a prequel that explores the triangular relationship between Gertrude and the two brothers. The novel renders the love of Gertrude and Claudius as the cause, rather than the effect, of the murder. Similarly in the musical, Claudius’s agonised song attempts to justify their love, revealing that Gertrude was unhappily married to the belligerent king. At the discovery of their adultery, Claudius was subject to immediate banishment or death as his penalty, and hence his fratricide is excused as an act motivated by love. “The Chapel” explores the psychology of Claudius torn between conscience and desire. From the older couple’s perspective, the musical metes out the melodramatic justice of absolute morality. Gertrude repents her sin in the reprise of “Twilight is a Child” in Act 2, which is equivalent to the scene of Ophelia’s funeral in *Hamlet* (5.1): “God, punish me. / I [my desire] am to blame for all this. I am fearful. / May God release us from this curse!” As Oh Seung-Joo notes in a review, the most remarkable aspect of the world version *Musical Hamlet* is “Eros”: the shift from the weighty theme of the original to a more popular and accessible one of love.²⁰ The “baptism of Eros,” as Oh puts it, does more than just popularising the production. The glorification of love in the musical performs an escapist role for the audience, creating an illusion that romantic love can be a panacea for all problems. The treatment of the Claudius and Gertrude couple as well as the female characters in *Musical Hamlet* is of particular interest in the context of South Korea. The story of extra-marital love affairs and triangular relationship has provided one staple plot for many soap operas on the Korean TV, which prove to be particularly popular among female viewers.²¹ In the past, these melodramas ended with the punishment of the “erring” woman. Yet, recently, illicit love affairs have been viewed more leniently, and some TV dramas even present them as a liberating opportunity for women locked in loveless marriages. However, as Kim Young-Sung points out, even such dramas repeat a conservative ideology of romantic love by suggesting that women can only find liberation through the love of a man.²² This can be equally applied to Gertrude and Ophelia’s active search for love in *Musical Hamlet*. The emphasis upon romantic love in the musical also reinforces the neo-liberal ideology that has dominated South Korea since the late twentieth century, which tries to blind people to social issues by proselytising the spurious feeling of personal freedom and achievement.²³

The 'Function' of Shakespeare in Musical Hamlet

The transformation of Shakespeare's tragedy into melodrama may make "Will turn in his grave," as the reviewer of *Prague Post* laments. However, *Musical Hamlet* does not forsake Shakespeare completely. Although it foregrounds the love story of the two couples over revenge, politics and philosophy, it also endeavours to keep something of Shakespeare. The lyrics, originally written in Czech by Ledecký, were translated into English by Robert Johanson, and then from English into Korean by Wang Yong-Bum. The version uses contemporary language, yet it employs words and phrases that recall Shakespeare's language: for instance, in Hamlet's letter to Ophelia, Polonius's worldly advice to Laertes, and in some of Hamlet's soliloquies.

Intertwined with the love songs, other musical numbers capture essential information of *Hamlet* to keep the revenge plot going, such as Claudius's court scene, Laertes's advice to his sister, Polonius's worldly advice, the Ghost, Hamlet's madness, the play-within-the-play, Claudius's prayer scene, Hamlet's killing of Polonius and Laertes's return, Ophelia's suicide, the gravedigger scene and the duel. Keeping close to the revenge plot, *Musical Hamlet* also highlights quasi-Shakespearian themes such as *theatrum mundi* and *memento mori* that commonly appear in his plays. In the travelling theatre troupe's number, "Today for the Last Time," life is compared to theatre where everyone masquerades: "life is like a play,/lies everywhere and everything hidden." The Gravedigger's number, a comic showstopper in a boogie-woogie style, reminds the audience that "all beings – beggar or king - come to the same thing when they are dead." The famous "to be or not to be" soliloquy is turned into a short musical number of the same title and appears twice in Act Two, although the music to which these words are set is a variation of Hamlet's love song with Ophelia "Let's Rise above this World," and longing for love supplants the existential question completely in the refrain of the song.

The subordination of the Bard to romance is not astonishing in a musical form, which is first and foremost a commercial enterprise. What is remarkable about *Musical Hamlet* is the amount of Shakespeare it endeavours to accommodate within its commercial boundary. Why did the producers choose Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to begin with if they just wanted a love story? Why is Shakespeare brought into the mega-musical field of popular entertainment?

As Douglas Lanier notes, the relationship of Shakespeare to popular culture is far from being simple. Despite Shakespeare's involvement in the stratification

of culture into high-, low- and even middlebrow in the late nineteenth century, the bard still appeals to popular culture as “ready-made cultural prestige.” Shakespeare offers products of popular culture “a royalty-free way of suggesting their cultural utility, importance, and continuity with tradition, only later to distance themselves once they gain a popular audience.”²⁴ While cultural stratification has lost its rigid boundary in the postmodern twenty-first century, Shakespeare incorporated into popular culture still signals “upward mobility, the potential to cross cultural boundaries, as well as a utopian arena of value outside commercialism” in Lanier’s view.²⁵ Much of popular Shakespeare entertainment produced in Hollywood demonstrates such a double-ended orientation of commercial success and artistic merit. For instance, Kenneth Branagh’s films in the 1990s popularised Shakespeare to make his great works more accessible to the public, which also requires maximum market coverage. Branagh’s films were criticised for their conservatism or their “determined effort not to offend,” as this was taken to result from his too great a consideration of box-office demands.²⁶ Among the musical versions of *Hamlet* mentioned at the beginning of this article, *The Lion King* also utilises Shakespeare as security for its high cultural status. In fact, *The Lion King*’s association with Shakespeare’s tragedy is so tenuous that it would be difficult to recognise it without the producer’s claim. As Richard Finkelstein argues, Disney emphasises the Shakespearian connection as its marketing strategy to elevate its productions as a “timeless” classic.²⁷

Nonetheless, whether or not Shakespeare’s “upward mobility” can contribute to ticket sales as expected by some producers, is a matter to be investigated, as we will see in the case of *Musical Hamlet*. Already in 1997, Linda Boose and Richard Burt assert that “the S-word” became something to be avoided in Hollywood, even in the marketing for films based on Shakespeare.²⁸ For instance, Branagh’s brave attempt to popularise Shakespeare had to be terminated with the financial disaster of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* released in 2000, after which he scrapped future plans for two more Shakespeare films, *As You Like It* and *Macbeth*. Burt even argues that Shakespeare, far from being a bringer of cultural prestige, is a mark of the outmoded loser in the dominance of American popular youth culture. The knowledge of Shakespeare in American culture has become “a decidedly low capital, frequently mockable commodity, caught within the peculiarly American ambivalence about intellectualism.”²⁹ This accounts for another trend of appropriating Shakespeare in popular culture, that which relies on debasement and travesty. The musical adaptations mentioned earlier of *Hamlet*—*Mr. Hamlet of Broadway*, *Rockabye Hamlet* and *Hamlet! The Musical*—fall into this category, which uses Shakespeare “as a high-cultural foil against

which mass media can establish themselves as a popular, democratic, modern alternative.”³⁰ Burt pushes the debasement category further to include what he dubs “Schlockspeare,” a hybrid of Shakespeare and trash motifs ubiquitous in mass media including adverts, porno movies and online materials.³¹

The ‘audacity’ to produce an “S-word” musical bespeaks Shakespeare’s different cultural footing in the Czech Republic and South Korea in the 2000s, which may be similar to that in the Hollywood of the 1990s. Ledecký’s *Hamlet Muzikál* came into being in the same way as Branagh’s ambitious project of popularising the Bard for the maximum benefit of the audience and as well as for the maximum box-office income. Like Branagh’s bardolatry, Ledecký’s admiration of Shakespeare was one impetus in the creation of *Hamlet Muzikál*. When his music producer Martin Kumzak suggested the idea of a musical version of *Hamlet*, Ledecký accepted the task out of his love for Shakespeare: “The book [Kumzak brought with him] was the same edition that I read when I was 12 in my mother’s library...And I said, why not? Why not tell this great story in contemporary music and language?”³² Despite the scepticism of the people around him, Ledecký went on to succeed in creating a tragic musical out of the original play.

Musical Hamlet and Shakespeare Negotiations in Korea

A number of factors contribute to a musical production’s success in one country or failure in another. Economic, political and cultural differences will all play their parts. It is beyond the scope of this article to consider all possible variables in the function of commercial success. The hypothesis of this article is that Shakespeare’s differing cultural currency has a part in the viability of *Musical Hamlet*, and thus it will focus on Shakespeare’s part in the fate of the musical in South Korea.

In the Korean producers’ initial decision to import and co-produce Ledecký’s *Musical Hamlet*, Shakespeare formed part of their ‘depth’ marketing strategy, which played on Koreans’ preconceptions about shallow American commercialism and European cultural superiority. The EMK Musical Company has concentrated on European (mainly Czech) musicals such as *Musical Hamlet*, *Musical Mozart*, *Musical Kleopatra*, *Das Musical Elizabeth*, *Das Musical Rudolf* and *Das Musical Rebecca*, boasting of producing “authentic European musicals with solid narrative and artistic value” into the Korean musical market.³³ The German article “Das” in the titles of some musicals emphasises their European origin, differentiating them from light Broadway musicals. According to reporter

Park Shin-Young, Czech musicals appeal to the musical industry for their 'depth': "Located at the heart of Europe and influenced by Austria, Czech musicals are built on the know-how of various music genres including classical music."³⁴ "The music of Czech musicals has unique flavour, different from that of Broadway," says Kim Jang-Sup, director of the Czech-original *Musical Kleopatra*.³⁵ The 'depth' of *Musical Hamlet* was one motivation for Robert Johanson to join the creative team and adapt the Czech musical to the taste of international audiences: "I first saw Ledecký's *Hamlet* at the Lambs Theatre in Broadway five years ago, and it was different from American musicals. It was much more profound."³⁶

To many Koreans, the word 'Europe' has an allure that is very different to that of 'America.' Back-packing around Europe has become something of an obligation among university students in Korea. The set of *Musical Hamlet* exploited Koreans' fascination with European cultural heritage. The set designer for the world version production in Seoul was Seo Jin-Sook, who had a long-standing experience in various musicals and operas. The production used the same three-sided revolving stage as in the Czech original, yet with more embellishments and details. Structures resembling the remains of the Roman Coliseum stood on both sides of the stage. *Musical Hamlet* also boasted state-of-the-art stage technology; the mammoth revolving set in the centre facilitated rapid scene changes and speeded up the action. The main side of the revolving set was made of a huge gray stone-like wall with an entrance in the middle, from which emanated a wooden drawbridge. Creating the atmosphere of a medieval castle in Elsinore, it was used for various scenes, aided by drapery and other stage properties. For instance, it served for the wedding scene of Gertrude and Claudius, decorated with a chandelier, flower baskets and candle-like lightings hung from above. An arched frame of stained glass windows was placed to serve as a chapel, creating an image of a European cathedral. Most spectacular was Gertrude's room decorated with mirrors, which reminded the audience of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Overall, the stage drew on the images of well-known European heritage sites, capitalising on Koreans' admiration of European culture.

In addition to the European association, the name and reputation of Shakespeare certainly played a part in marketing *Musical Hamlet* as a work of 'depth'. The greetings of the investors in the *Musical Hamlet* programs intimate a certain amount of obscure bardolatry in Korea. Lim Sung-Keun of Poibos Production decided to invest in *Musical Hamlet* for its status as a world classic; based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that "deals with universal human conflicts and

issues,” *Musical Hamlet* is “a work that preserves the depth of Shakespeare’s classic and at the same time shows a modern man Hamlet completely different from the classic.”³⁷ Investor Lee Cheol-Joo of PMG Network differentiates *Musical Hamlet* from other musical shows, which are “light and fun-oriented”: the aim of *Musical Hamlet* Season Two was to create a production that keeps the “authenticity of the classic.”³⁸ Kang Tak-Young of Daeshin Venture Investment fondly recalls that he read *Hamlet* in his university days as “the very picture of agony and love”; the love of Hamlet and Ophelia remains to him as tragic romance even after a gap of over thirty years.³⁹ These statements reveal Shakespeare’s lingering appeal to some Koreans of the older generation in their forties and fifties as a high-brow cultural icon, regardless of their *vague* understanding of the classics. Such admiration, however, is not shared by the audience, the majority of whom consisted of the generation younger than the investors.

As it turned out, the investors overestimated Shakespeare’s currency in the Korean musical market. While Shakespeare’s name might add respectability to the show, it could also give an impression of boredom. Eum Hong-Hyun, chief producer of *Musical Hamlet*, regrets in a recent interview that “*Musical Hamlet*, an excellent musical in terms of drama, music, set and speed, has suffered from the audience’s prejudice that Shakespeare is a bore.”⁴⁰ The Season Four production program did away with greetings and any mention of Shakespeare’s classics. The production posters also reflect such diminution of the S-word in the marketing. “Shakespeare’s masterpiece” in the Season One poster became “a masterpiece” (“based on Shakespeare” appearing in a smaller font) in Season Two. Shakespeare’s name was even further reduced in size in the world version poster, and then disappeared completely in the Season Four poster. The world version poster featured Hamlet holding a red rose, with his bare chest revealed in an open jacket. The caption above the picture read: “Fatal love, mightier than a typhoon.” The Season Four poster presented the sepia profile of Hamlet and Ophelia kissing in an embrace under a shower of flowing red petals (Figure 1). This highly erotic image was captioned as “Fatal love, enthralled by desire.”

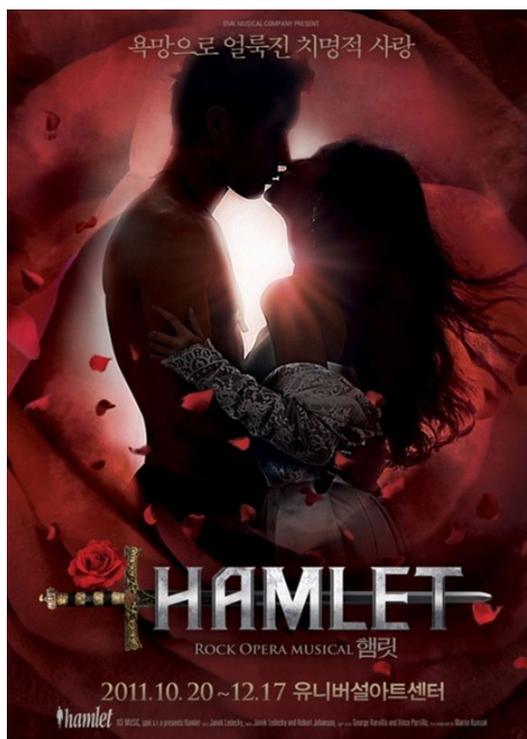


Figure 1. The Season Four poster. (Courtesy of the EMK Musical Company)

In fact, the success of *Musical Hamlet* in Korea depended less on Shakespeare's 'highbrow' status than on the star actors playing the title roles. Hamlet was transformed into a 'cool' prince in a leather jacket, creating a fandom among audiences, the majority of whom were women in their twenties.⁴¹ As Stephen Buhler notes, association with youth culture has been one characteristic of a few successful Shakespeare musicals after *West Side Story* on Broadway.⁴² In the production, Hamlet signified more than his part actually embodied in the book, partly due to the traditional image already accumulated on the role, and partly due to the actors' physicality. Each season had two to four actors cast as Hamlet, all of whom sported good looks, not to mention talent in singing and dancing. Four actors were cast as Hamlet in the world version production—Park Gun-Hyung, Im Tae-Kyung, Lee Ji-Hoon and Yoon Hyung-Reol—actors well-known from TV dramas, show programmes and musical productions.⁴³ The competition among the Hamlet cast extended to bodybuilding, as well as singing and acting, as Yoon Hyung-Reol revealed in an interview: "The rehearsal room of *Musical Hamlet* these days feels like a gym, for the production has a scene where Hamlet takes off his shirt and makes love with Ophelia."⁴⁴ Many fans attended the show more than once, just to see Hamlet performed by different actors. The multiple casting led to the creation of fandom based on fan 'cafés' (cyber communities), which spread blogs and reviews on the internet.⁴⁵

Despite the musical's direct association with Shakespeare, few seemed to question its authenticity in *Musical Hamlet*. Most press reviews and previews focused on the international collaboration of the world version and the exciting prospect of exporting Korean-made musicals. Oh Seung-Joo's review in online newspaper *Oh My News* offers a rare criticism of how distant the musical is from the original play. *Musical Hamlet* transformed the agony of life into Eros and romance: "*Musical Hamlet* becomes viable by giving up being *Hamlet*."⁴⁶ The responses of individual bloggers to Hamlet's romantic transformation varied from ignorance to indifference. Some audiences (mis)took it as a faithful rendition of the classic that they knew in their childhood; a few informed audiences praised it as an efficient musical adaptation, but the majority did not care. Audiences' reactions also suggest that not many Shakespeare *cognoscenti* attended the show, which may indicate their snobbism that contributes to the still existing gap between 'high' art and 'middlebrow' entertainment.

The process of downplaying Shakespeare in *Musical Hamlet* reveals the subtle change of his cultural currency in South Korea at the turn of the millennium. Introduced in Korea along with its forced modernisation, Shakespeare has reigned as the icon of superior Western culture and the symbol of intellectuality. "The public began to think that one should know Shakespeare to pass as an intellectual," notes Shin Jeong-Ok in her seminal study of Shakespeare's reception in Korea.⁴⁷ Although Shakespeare has never been part of secondary education in Korea as in Britain and its former colonies, intellectuals endeavour to read Shakespeare in Korean translations or adaptations. Such aspirations of the parent generation continue into the education of their children, resulting in the increasing number of Shakespearean adaptations for children in the book market.⁴⁸

However, the younger generation seems to care little about Shakespeare or wish to become intellectuals, which may be taken as a sign of modernism giving way to postmodernism. Shakespeare's status is also dwindling in higher education in Korea, as Shakespeare's place in the traditional English department curriculum is threatened with the increasing emphasis on practical English courses in a number of universities. Shakespeare criticisms will remain strong in Korea as long as the scholars in the field are active in office, yet it should be also noted that fewer postgraduate students take up Shakespeare for their postgraduate research. Although Shakespeare continues to prosper in the 'highbrow' legitimate theatre, its territory is rapidly shrinking with the surge of popular musical entertainments. In addition, even in legitimate theatre, directors

nowadays tend to have less respect for Shakespeare's original texts and freely appropriate the Bard for their own ends, as I have argued elsewhere.⁴⁹ The reception of *Musical Hamlet* also attests the diminution of Shakespeare's share in Korean popular culture.

It may sound anachronistic to apply terms such as highbrow art or popular culture in a criticism of the twenty-first century. John Seabrook, among others, argues that the rigid distinction in cultural hierarchy has been blurred as the result of late capitalism that reduces all artistic productions to the commodities of eclectic admixture of highbrow and lowbrow, leading to the phenomenon of "nobrow" with a new "hierarchy of hotness."⁵⁰ *Musical Hamlet* can be an example of a *nobrow* product in which high art and pop culture float freely for the audience's consumption. However, the new phenomenon of *nobrow* cannot entirely override the still existing cultural divide of high art and popular culture, even if the hierarchic stratification is less rigid. As Lanier cogently argues, the tenacity of cultural stratification underlies much of popular Shakespeare productions, which mobilises the Bard in a search for respectability, as was shown by the producers' initial motivation for investing in *Musical Hamlet*.⁵¹ At the same time, the audience's disregard for Shakespeare marks the change towards freedom and flexibility that may do without cultural hierarchy—one day.

However, it is difficult to tell whether to celebrate Shakespeare's devaluation in *Musical Hamlet* as sign of weakening Western cultural imperialism or to bemoan the production's thralldom to global capitalism. As some critics have warned, "high culture in the form of Shakespeare and pop culture in the form of global mass media are both simply different modes of Western cultural imperialism that undermines indigenous cultures."⁵² Examining the emergence of cultural hierarchy in America in the twentieth century, Lawrence Levine optimistically celebrated the growing cultural flexibility in the late twentieth century as the new sensibility that "reflects a new, more open way of looking at the world and at the things in the world."⁵³ However, the vision of this cultural eclecticism is not entirely positive. Although *nobrow* can be a form of liberation from cultural elitism, it also risks subordination to all-encompassing global capitalism. Shakespeare's phantom in *Musical Hamlet* marks the nostalgia for high art still lingering amid the *nobrow* buzz, which has become the dominant cultural mode in twenty-first century South Korea.

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Korean names in the text will be written in the Korean way of putting the surname before the given name. They will appear in the Western order in the endnotes. All quotations from Korean sources including articles, books, programs, newspapers and internet materials, are my translation unless noted otherwise, and will be marked as [K] at the end.

The EMK Musical Company did not wish to give permission to reproduce production photos, but they are available at the “multimedia” section of the *Musical Hamlet* website, http://www.musicalhamlet.com/index.php?doc=new_index/board/photo_01_list.php.

¹ I have referred to the following studies on Shakespeare musicals: Wes Folkerth, “Pop Music: Entries Play by Play,” in *Shakespeares after Shakespeare: An encyclopedia of the Bard in Mass Media and Popular Culture*, vol. 1, ed. Richard Burt (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007), 268-407; the entry on “Shakespeare Musicals” in Thomas Hischak’s *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical: Theatre, Film, and Television* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 669-70; Stephen M. Buhler, “Musical Shakespeares: Attending to Ophelia, Juliet, and Desdemona” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 150-74; recent monographs on the musical theatre including Frances Teague, *Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Irene G. Dash, *Shakespeare and the American Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) and Julie Sanders, *Shakespeare and Music: Afterlives and Borrowings* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). The production year given in parentheses is based on the premiere.

² Teague, *Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage*, 101.

³ Folkerth, “Pop Music: Entries Play by Play,” 372.

⁴ *Hamlet! The Musical* official homepage, <http://hamletthemusical.com>. Accessed 10 May 2016.

⁵ *Hamlet The Rock Opera* Website [Czech/English], Accessed 10 May 2016. <http://www.hamlettherockopera.com>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 43.

⁸ Delbert Unrush, “The Shattered Mirror Part III: A Theatre in Search of Itself: The Musical Theatre of Prague: Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed,” *TD & T - Theatre Design & Technology* 37:4 (2001): 22.

⁹ “Cat Facts,” in *Cats* official Website, <http://www.catsthemusical.com>. Accessed 11 May, 2016.

¹⁰ Jessica Sternfeld, *Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 5.

¹¹ Katerina Honskusova, “Outrageous Misfortune,” *Prague Post*, 24 November 1999, quoted in Judith Sebesta, “‘Something Borrowed, Something Blue’: The Marriage of the Musical and Europe,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, eds. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 282.

¹² Unrush, *The Shattered Mirror*, 25.

¹³ Sternfeld, *Megamusical*, 1.

¹⁴ Paul Prece and William A. Everett, “The Megamusical: The Creation, Internationalisation and Impact of a Genre” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, 250.

¹⁵ *Musical Hamlet* was first shown in Seoul at the Universal Arts Center from October 12 to November 11 2007 (dir. Wang Yong-Bum). Season 2 ran at Yong Theatre in Seoul from February to April 2008 (dir. Kim Kwang-Bo), and went on provincial tours in Korea for some months. On August 21 the same year, “The New Musical Hamlet - World Version,” equivalent to Season 3, opened at Theatre S, Sookmyoung Arts Center in Seoul and ran until 22 February 2009 (dir. Wang Yong-Bum). Season 4 ran from 20 October to 17 December 2011 at the Universal Arts Center in Seoul (dir. Robert Johanson).

¹⁶ The two-CD set of the world version, released in 2009, lists 32 tracks of musical numbers including two overtures and provides a booklet that contains all the lyrics. The list of the tracks can be found on the *Musical Hamlet* website,

http://www.musicalhamlet.com/index.php?doc=new_index/default/sub05_03.php. For analysis of *Musical Hamlet*, I have referred to this CD set, the video-recording which was broadcast on SBS "Culture Report" programme on 15 October 2008; and a performance of the Season 4 version that I attended on 28 October 2011. I use the present tense in describing the musical advisedly, as I examine the book primarily rather than a particular performance.

¹⁷ Prece and Everett, *Megamusical*, 250.

¹⁸ Ah-Young Chung, "Czech *Musical Hamlet* Travels to Seoul," interview with Robert Johanson, *The Korea Times*, 20 February, 2008, <http://koreatimes.co.kr> [Newspaper in English]. Accessed December 11, 2015.

¹⁹ The lyrics cited in the essay are not the original English but my translations back from Korean lyrics included in the CD booklet, with the exception of the song titles whose English versions are provided in the CD booklet and the programs.

²⁰ Seung-Joo Oh, "Musical *Hamlet*, Gains and Losses," *Oh My News*, 10 November, 2008, <http://ohmynews.com>, accessed 9 October, 2015. [K]

²¹ Examples of such melodramas would be numerous. Melodramas by Kim Su-Hyeon, arguably the most popular TV drama scenario writer in Korea in terms of viewing rate, often deal with adulterous love affairs. Kim's *Sand Castle* (1988, MBC), *The Trappings of Youth* (1978, MBC/1999, SBS), and *My Man's Woman* (2007, SBS), to name a few, were enormously popular. For further discussion, see Jin-Hee Yoo, "Category Grammar and Gender Ideology of the Su-Hyeon Kim's Melodrama Focused on *My Man's Woman*" in *Journal of the Korean Contents Association* 9. 11 (2009), 175-183. [K]

²² Young-Sung Kim, "Aesthetics of Family Disorganization and Healing Shown in Korean TV Dramas," *Literary Criticism* 57 (2015): 72. [K]

²³ Young-Ja Lee, "The Cultural Capitalism of the Neoliberal Era," *The Korean Journal of Humanities and the Social Sciences* 36.4 (2012): 99. [K]

²⁴ Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 43.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁶ Douglas Lanier, "Shakespeare and Cultural Studies: An Overview," *Shakespeare* 2.2 (2006): 233.

²⁷ Richard Finkelstein, "Disney Cites Shakespeare: The Limits of Appropriation," in *Shakespeare Appropriations*, eds. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (London: Routledge, 1999), 181.

²⁸ Linda Boose and Richard Burt, "'Totally Clueless?: Shakespeare Goes Hollywood in the 1990s,'" in *Shakespeare, the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video*, eds. Linda Boose and Richard Burt (London: Routledge, 1997), 11-12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 49.

³¹ See Richard Burt, "To E- or Not to E," in *Shakespeare after Mass Media*, ed. Richard Burt (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1-32.

³² Claire Lee, "Czech Pop Star Rocks *Hamlet*," interview with Janek Ledecký, *The Korea Herald*, 20 October, 2011, <http://koreaherald.com> [Newspaper in English]. Accessed 12 November, 2015.

³³ EMK Musical Company Website, <http://www.emkmusical.com>. Accessed 11 October, 2015.

³⁴ Shin-Young Park, "Invitation to Czech Musicals," *The Korea Economic Daily*, 29 September, 2008, <http://hankyung.com>. Accessed 11 November, 2015. [K]

³⁵ Hee-Sun Kim, "Czech Musicals Surge into Korea," *Yonhap News Agency*, 30 July, 2008, <http://yonhapnews.co.kr>. Accessed 10 November, 2015. [K]

³⁶ Yuri Park, "Interview with the original teams of *Musical Hamlet*: writer Ledecký and director Johanson," *Kukmin Daily*, September 3, 2008, <http://www.kukinews.com>. Accessed October 9, 2015. [K]

³⁷ Season One programme, 2007. [K]

³⁸ Season Two programme, 2008. [K]

³⁹ Season Three programme, 2008. [K]

⁴⁰ Ji-Hye Song, "Interview with Eum Yong-Hyun, Producer of *Elizabeth*," *Magazine PlayDB*, 3 July, 2012, <http://playdb.co.kr>. Accessed 10 December, 2015. [K]

⁴¹ According to "Interpark," one of the most popular ticketing service websites in Korea, those that booked tickets *Musical Hamlet* Season Four were 83.5% women to 16.5% men. <http://www.interpark.com>. Accessed 25 June, 2016. Although I could not obtain the exact data of the audience for *Musical Hamlet*, its major audience seems to be women in their twenties. A case study of the audience for *42nd Street* in 1999 also informs that women took up 72% of the

audience, and 66.6% were in their twenties. Gidu Kang and Ji-Hui Lee, "Explorative Study of the Lifestyle of Musical-Goers," *Management Studies* 30.4 (2011): 1150. [K]

⁴² Stephen M. Buhler, "Musical Shakespeares: Attending to Ophelia, Juliet, and Desdemona," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, 154.

⁴³ Images of the Hamlet cast as well as other scenes can be found on the *Musical Hamlet* website, http://www.musicalhamlet.com/index.php?doc=new_index/board/photo_01_list.php.

⁴⁴ Hee-Yeon Kim, "Hunchback Quasimodo and Danish Prince Hamlet," interview with Yoon Hyung-reol, *Kyung Hyang Daily*, 8 August, 2008, <http://khan.co.kr>. Accessed 11 December, 2015. [K]

⁴⁵ I have referred to numerous personal blogs on "Naver," one of the most popular portal service websites cum search engine in Korea that accommodate blogs and cyber 'cafes.' The old version of the official website of *Musical Hamlet* also provided a 'board' that collected some three hundred blog reviews, which is now out of access.

⁴⁶ Seung-Joo Oh, "Musical Hamlet, Gains and Losses." [K]

⁴⁷ Jeongok Shin, *Shakespeare Comes to Korea: A Study of Shakespeare's Reception in Korea* (Seoul: Baeksan Publisher, 1998), 59. [K]

⁴⁸ Mi Young Lee, "A Study on Recent Adaptations of Shakespeare in Korean Children's Literature," *Inside/Outside* 29 (2010): 255-56. [K]

⁴⁹ Yeeyon Im, "Oh Tae-Suk's *The Tempest* and Post-Shakespeare in Korea," *Inside/Outside* 36 (2014): 83-93. [K]

⁵⁰ John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture* (London: Methuen, 2000), 28.

⁵¹ Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 49.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵³ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1988), 244-45.