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Voodoo in the Bayou

This adaptation of *Hamlet* takes place in the modern marshlands of Louisiana, where Voodoo phantoms and opioid withdrawal harrow Hamlet and company. This transposition of time, place, religion, and politics serves to reimagine *Hamlet* without the glorious castle walls and velvet thrones, but instead, in the moonlit backyard of a humble bayou in the modern U.S., where the cultural and religious history provides a rich foreground to tell our story. While the victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade were robbed of nearly every human right and worldly possession, their culture and religion could not be erased— most of the slaves who landed in Louisiana were Fon people who brought over their religious practice of Voodoo.[1] Despite the slave drivers' attempts to eradicate Voodoo and force Christianity upon them, the Fon people secretly worshipped their own Voodoo gods at the Christian altars. Thus, modern Voodoo is swimming with Christian imagery, tradition, and ideology.[2] Both Hamlet I and the enslaved Fon people possess a spiritual righteousness and eternal power which cannot be erased by violent men who purloin the lives of the innocent, mounting thrones through jealous bloodshed.

The mise en scène of this adaptation features the home of Claudius, Gertrude, and Hamlet, which stands upstage right: a small wooden house with a rusty tin roof, support beams

[1] Patrick Taylor; Frederick I. Case (2013). *The Encyclopedia of Caribbean Religions*. University of Illinois Press.
[2] Manuel Novoa, Jose. 2000. *New Atlantis Full Documentary: Voodoo*. Transglobe Films. https://youtu.be/gtKpkm7xYi8.

that hold it high above the swampy ground (in case of flooding), a large front porch with a railing, and a grand rickety staircase that leads down to centerstage. Trees and foliage fill the upstage area and the space underneath the home, creating the illusion that the stage is truly immersed in nature. Every scene of the play takes place at night time, sunset, or sunrise, in order to help narrate how much time passes between scenes. To create the sunrises and sunsets, the cyclorama intermittently peeks through the trees and foliage with an orange, pink, or red glow.

The sense of isolation that pervades the castle of Denmark is maintained in the peaceful bayous of Louisiana, far from any suburban or metropolitan setting, where the night is silent aside from the songs of the frogs, crickets, and birds. The set is always swimming in the slightly exaggerated moonlight, speckled with floating fireflies, as the home emits a warm glow from its windows. This combination of dark blue and orange-yellow light creates a beautiful Van Gogh effect. The house sits beside a winding river that extends for miles in either direction, but only a small bend of the river is visible on stage left.

Downstage, an unreal world of Voodoo paraphernalia creeps onto the stage like moss—bottles, dolls, candles, beads, books, and more are strewn across the steps of the thrust stage, like a humble shrine. Because the Voodoo in this adaptation serves to replace the Christianity in *Hamlet*, the spirit realm from which the ghost emerges is now the Voodoo afterlife instead of the Christian purgatory. This translation is physicalized in the ghost's Voodoo-esque costume and the Voodoo paraphernalia. The downstage shrine also serves as a visual representation of the disarray, addiction, and madness that is ever present in Hamlet's mind. In moments of supernatural emergence or madness, the religious clutter is lit up by a hidden blacklight and becomes radiant and neon, which is paired with the internal glowing of the river, the Voodoo

portal between life and death. This connection between the spiritual world and water is inspired by Horatio's warnings against the temptation of the ghost, asking, "What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord, / Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff / That beetles o'r his base into the sea, / And [...] draw you into madness? Think of it. / The very place puts toys of desperation, / Without more motive, into every brain / That looks so many fathoms to the sea / And hear sit roar beneath." (I.iv.7-16), to which Hamlet replies, "It waves me still" (I.iv.17). The abundance of water imagery associated with the ghost is fascinating in the context of life on the bayou. For the people of southern Louisiana, the rivers are their home, their daily source of food, and their mode of business. When this water is also a source of mystery and danger, as Horatio's words suggest, then the dual nature of the river becomes symbolic of Hamlet's homelife after his father's death— his home is simultaneously the only safe haven he has ever known, and also the setting of the treachery and paranormal activity that ruins his life.

In some forms of Voodoo, believers perform daily rituals in honor of the dead in order to keep the spirits content— otherwise, the spirits may become restless and malicious. In Haitian Voodoo, funerals for the dead sometimes feature a ceremony that is meant to guide the spirit into the spirit realm, during which the living spin the coffin in circles so that the spirit becomes symbolically dizzy and unable to find its way back into its body.[3] Because Hamlet's father was unrighteously slaughtered and improperly mourned, his spirit is restless and lost, which is why he haunts Hamlet and company.

The ghost encourages Hamlet to stop procrastinating and face the inevitable: murdering Claudius, and in this adaptation, abandoning opioids. In 1995 in Bywater, New Orleans, Voodoo

[3] Manuel Novoa, Jose. 2000. *New Atlantis Full Documentary: Voodoo*. Transglobe Films. https://youtu.be/gtKpkm7xYi8.

practitioners attempted to use Voodoo to combat drug addiction and crime.[4] The use of Voodoo as a tool to battle the drug crisis is directly reflected in the relationship between the ghost of Hamlet I and Prince Hamlet. Because Hamlet is habitually manipulative over the course of the play, it is unclear whether his apparent insanity is genuine or artificial. He is plagued by erratic mood swings, suicidal tendencies, irritability, and inaction, all of which stem from his grief, isolation, and supernatural episodes. In my production, I'd like to introduce another reason for his misbehavior: an opioid addiction. The opioid epidemic has wreaked havoc across America in recent years, especially in Louisiana.[5] Hamlet is never high onstage, nor is his addiction dramatically emphasized, because his addiction should not overshadow the psychological complexities that cause his raw human suffering. In order to communicate that he has an addiction, Hamlet occasionally appears onstage with a bottle in his hand and pops a pill in his mouth as he walks offstage. His substance abuse simply serves to further connect the text of *Hamlet* to the modern day context of Louisiana, largely because Hamlet's suffering is similar to that of an addict.

Substance abuse is a form of escapism. Likewise, in the play, Hamlet turns to escapism— whether it be feigning madness, abusing his loved ones, or even considering suicide— instead of directly addressing the root of his suffering and avenging his father. Towards the beginning of the play, Ophelia recounts a recent experience with Hamlet, stating, "My lord, as I was sewing in my closet, / Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced, / No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd, / Ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ankle, / Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each

[4] Bragg, Rick. 1995. "New Orleans Conjures Old Spirits Against Modern Woes." *The New York Times*, August 18, 1995. https://www.nytimes.com/1995/08/18/us/new-orleans-conjures-old-spirits-against-modern-woes.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm.
[5] Landry, Jeff. n.d. "End the Epidemic: Ending Opioid Abuse in Louisiana." https://www.endtheepidemicla.org/.

other, / And with a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors, he comes before me" (II.i.87-94). Hamlet confronts her with a cloudy mind, a pale face, and a disheveled appearance. These details are all indicative of an opioid high.[6] Though Hamlet is always sober on stage, he is definitely high during this scene that takes place offstage. At the outset of his story, however, Hamlet is sober— his involvement with the drug in the first place is motivated by his desperation to cure his mournful affliction.

In order to righteously transpose *Hamlet* to the contemporary bayous of southern Louisiana, another contextual clarification must be made in addition to these previously stated about the Voodoo religion and the opioid epidemic. Claudius and Gertrude are no longer royalty– a disparity which seems to undo the fundamental basis of *Hamlet.* But their social authority is maintained in this adaptation because they are the heads of their extended family and tight knit community. The loyalty exhibited toward the couple is no longer a formal political obedience, but rather, an expression of familial and communal duty. Therefore, at the top of the show, Bernardo, Francisco, and Marcellus are no longer soldiers guarding the castle of Elsinore, but instead, cousins of Hamlet who sit on the porch of the house at night with loaded shotguns. They stand guard in case Fortinbras and his squad attack in the night, seeking revenge for Hamlet I's grisly murder of Fortinbras I. The threatening Norwegian power is now a small community located a few hours away from Hamlet's— a parallel family unit whose livelihood also revolves around loyalty, revenge, and the abundance of the bayou.

The following description captures how I would direct the first scene of Act I in this adaptation of *Hamlet.* Francisco, Hamlet's loyal cousin, sits on the raised porch of the rickety

[6] "Opioid Overdose." 2019. *Medline Plus, U.S. National Library of Medicine.*, September 3, 2019. https://medlineplus.gov/opioidoverdose.html.

home with a shotgun perched on his thigh as he cradles a cigarette. Every time he takes a drag, the glowing red end of his cigarette resembles the floating fireflies that surround him in the elevated space of the blue moonlit stage. It is near midnight, but he is not bundled in a coat— even at night, southern Louisiana experiences unbearable heat during the summer. For all characters, costuming is entirely casual and modern, including jeans, flannels, khakis, and regular cotton shirts and shorts. They wear earth tones only to blend into the wildlife of the set so that the neon Voodoo visuals can provide a powerful contrast.

Francisco sits without a candle or lamp— he is on guard for Claudius, Gertrude, and Hamlet who sleep soundly inside. If Fortinbras and friends were to attack, he would want to take cover in the darkness of the night. Besides, in the silence of the bayou, away from the traffic and bustle, the approach of another body through the thick greenery is always audible and unmistakable. That is exactly what he hears: a rhythmic rustling from the upstage shroud of trees. Francisco crouches and takes aim, but he does not shoot upon hearing a curious and unafraid voice ask, "Who's there?" (I.i.1). It is Bernardo, his brother, who ascends the wooden staircase and habitually embraces Francisco. Francisco hands over the shotgun and the chair, sarcastically mentioning that "'Tis bitter cold" (I.i.8) as he flicks his dead cigarette into the mud and descends the staircase. Before he reaches the ground, the two hear rustling from off stage right, where Francisco was just about to exit. Bernardo cocks the gun in anticipation. The brothers break their frozen pose as Horatio and Marcellus step into the moonlight. The two briefly embrace Francisco as they pass by him, and ascend the staircase to join Bernardo for the night. The men immediately begin to discuss the ghost that has been haunting their recent night

shifts. They peer over the railing of the porch, down to the river, where the ghost always makes his entrances and exits.

On cue, the ghost indeed appears— he rises smoothly from the depths of the murky water, staring up at them, his person perfectly dry. As he floats into existence, the Voodoo paraphernalia downstage emits an electric glow and the river around him is illuminated with the unreal color of neon brown. The figure dons the makings of a Voodoo shrine, a thousand glossy beads, a patchwork of quilted colors, offerings, crosses, pink and purple swamp lilies, and bits of rusted jewelry. His face is partially obscured by a fractured skull, just the upper jaw and mask, and his head is topped with a halo crown in the likeness of the Virgin Mary. As the men desperately attempt to speak with him, he silently descends back down underwater, and they are left to frantically discuss the impossible encounter.

Horatio describes repeatedly that the apparel of the ghost is that of battle gear: "Such was the very armor he had on / When he the ambitious Norway combated" (I.i.71-72). Now, the ghost is not dressed in a suit of armor— he is instead adorned in the "warlike form" (I.i.55) that his ancestors assumed when they were forced into the Transatlantic Slave Trade.[7] Their only possible method of retaliation was secretly keeping their religion alive,[8] a defiant act which protected their souls in the face of terror. In this way, the ghost of Hamlet I wears battle gear.

The three go on to discuss the rumor that Fortinbras is stirring up plans for a revengeful attack on Hamlet's family. They suspect that the ghost is present because he caused the conflict to begin with: "so like the king / That was and is the question of these wars" (I.i.122-123). The men, frozen on the porch, quivering despite the heavy summer air, seek comfort from Horatio the

[7] Patrick Taylor; Frederick I. *The Encyclopedia of Caribbean Religions*.

[8] Manuel Novoa, Jose. 2000. *New Atlantis Full Documentary: Voodoo*.

scholar, but he only cranks up the fear. He describes the zombie apocalypse which once flooded Rome as Caesar was on the brink of assassination: "The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead / Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets" (I.1.127-128). This comment aligns masterfully with the Voodoo spirituality of the scene, given that zombies are deeply rooted in folkloric Voodoo culture.[9]

Then, the apparition "faded on the crowing of the cock" (I.i.172). At the end of some Voodoo ceremonies, chickens are sacrificed as spiritual offerings.[10] The folkloric idea that chickens can pacify divine spirits is paralleled in Christianity, as Horatio states that "Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated, / The bird of dawning singeth all night long. / And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad" (I.i.174-176). The scene ends with the sun's rising, as the men debrief and agree that they must inform Hamlet of the apparition. Marcellus states, "Let's do 't, I pray, and I this morning know / Where we shall find him most conveniently" (I.i.189-190), and he leads the other two through the front door of the home to awaken Hamlet as he sleeps.

In this scene, the levels of the set physicalize the helplessness of our characters: they stand cowering on their perch as the mystical monster dominates the entire earth and sea below, trapping them up above. We bear witness to the successful amalgamation of Christianity and Voodoo and the timeless powers of loyalty, revenge, and fear. In this production, the time, place, religion, and politics of the original text are all revolutionized in a way that only fortifies what *Hamlet* is all about: the magic and the pain that rise to the surface of a person when grief is unleashed.

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[9] Mariani, Mike. 2015. "The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies." *The Atlantic*, October. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/how-america-erased-the-tragic-history-of-the-zombie/412264/.

[10] Manuel Novoa, Jose. 2000. *New Atlantis Full Documentary: Voodoo*.

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