

Thoroughly Modern

HAMLET

RSC star Alex Jennings plays the tormented prince at BAM.

By Michael Giltz

Alex Jennings is relaxing backstage — well, recovering, really — after an afternoon performance of *Hamlet* for the Royal Shakespeare Company in London. An evening show looms ahead, along with a U.S. tour hitting BAM May 21-30, but the 40-year-old actor takes on all questions with an easy demeanor. He laughs when reminded he once said it was “a load of bollocks” that Hamlet is the role by which all actors should be measured.

“It is a load of bollocks,” Jennings says. “However, I now understand why it is the thing it is. It was a part I never hankered after particularly, and I was surprised when I was asked to do it. I thought Peer Gynt was my chance at that kind of part, and it’s been fantastic to be able to do both. It requires a huge emotional commitment — more than any part — which is why it is what it is. It has to do with who you are at the time of life that you’re playing it, and how you respond to those ideas and those thoughts and those amazing, amazing words.”

Jennings earned an Olivier Award as Best Actor for *Peer Gynt*, but success hasn’t made him cautious. His *Hamlet* is a low-key, modern-dress affair with Jennings providing blackly

humorous line readings and whipping out a Polaroid at one point. There’s even a brief black-and-white film at the beginning, which features Jennings’ own son as a young Hamlet frolicking in the snow.

“I do sort of the odd funny voice

Groucho Marx. I was a bit worried,” he admits drolly. “I thought that I wasn’t being melancholy enough.”

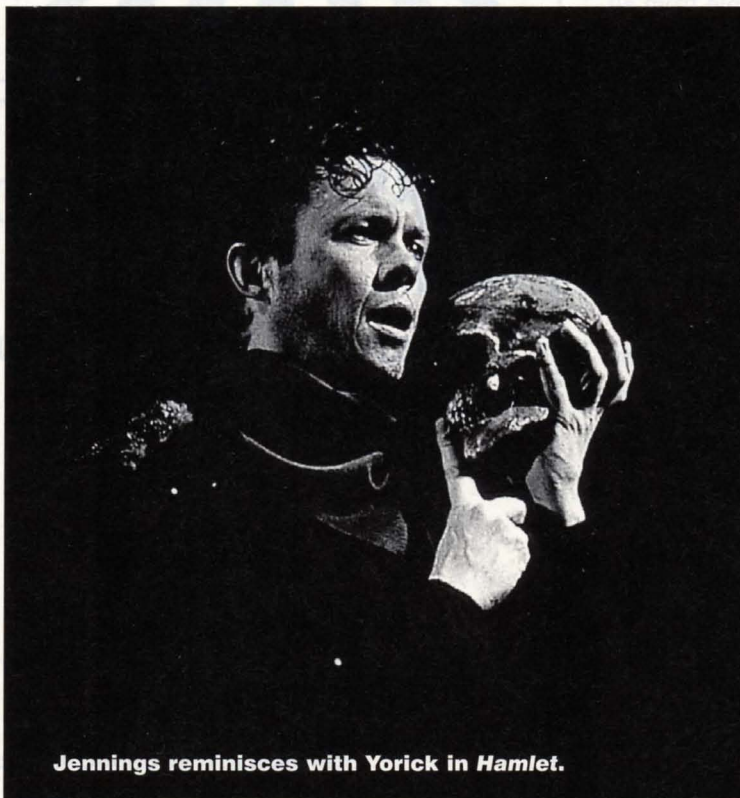
Since *Hamlet* has been staged thousands of times in every way imaginable — a one-man show; an all female cast; and even as a musical —

it’s surprising how furious some critics were that the RSC “dared” to cut the opening scene and trim all the political plotting.

“I do sort of feel, ‘Well, all right. If you don’t like it, then *you* have a go,’ ” Jennings says. “It seems to me ridiculous and narrow-minded. We’re not a museum. It has to be reassessed every time. Go ahead and read it if you’re so furious. Go and watch the film. It’s nothing new. Laurence Olivier cut the first scene. It’s our take on the play, our response to the play; not everybody is going to like it, but you can’t do these plays the same every

time. I feel very, very strongly that it’s intelligently adapted and we’re consistent in the angle we’ve taken.”

That angle was found in collaboration with director Matthew Warchus (Tony-nominated for his work on *Art*), who joined the produc-



Jennings reminisces with Yorick in *Hamlet*.

CLIVE BARDA

and odd impersonation, and a contemporary setting allows you to use that,” he explains. “I feel it’s a legitimate response: Hamlet’s playing games all the time. I say ‘A knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear’ like Humphrey Bogart and there’s another one I do a bit like

tion after Jennings and shared his star's admiration for Baz Luhrmann's film *Romeo + Juliet*.

"You couldn't always hear what people were saying but it didn't matter," Jennings says of the movie. "I found it very moving, which I've never found *Romeo and Juliet* before. I was moved by Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes particularly. It was beautiful. As long as you know why you're doing it, why you're setting it where it is, then I say to those people on the battlements, 'So what?'"

Never fancying he'd have a go at *Hamlet*, Jennings is little influenced by the stage productions he's seen — he admired Mark Rylance's take — and has screened almost none of the movies. "When we were rehearsing, I did start to watch a bit of the Nicol Williamson film, which I'd never seen, and I was very excited by what he was doing — so I had to turn it off." He also admits to being happily surprised by the bits he's seen of one other *Hamlet*: Mel Gibson's. "I thought he was really good; yeah, he's a proper actor. Why not a *Hamlet* of clanking armor and swords?"

Such seeming contradiction is familiar territory for Jennings. Born in Upminster, he first took to the stage after being inspired by a professor named Mr. Broughton.

"He made me realize I could do things I couldn't imagine; suddenly something was possible," says Jennings. "But in my first show, I didn't learn my lines at all. I just hadn't bothered, hadn't prepared. I went on stage and got some laughs, but I just ruined it for the others. Afterwards, someone saw me backstage in a corner looking miserable and asked Mr. Broughton why I looked so terrible, and he said, 'Because he fucked up,' which was so devastating because it was true. I've always been prepared since and never forgotten my lines, knock on wood."

He's far from an upper-class public school actor-laddie, but Jennings

made his name playing a charming fop in numerous plays, especially Ostrovsky's comedy *Too Clever by Half* at the Old Vic in 1988. He attended the same theater school in Bristol as Daniel Day-Lewis — though at a different year — but his film work has been modest. He became one of the RSC's principal stars just as the company endured a fallow period, shunting aside critical brickbats for everything from heretical productions (see *Hamlet*) to the company's decision to shorten its London season in favor of more performances in other parts of Great Britain. The latter issue is the only one that truly stirs Jennings' anger, and he defends it passionately.



As Oberon opposite Lindsay Duncan's Titania in the 1996 RSC production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"The bad press that the company's had about abandoning London — which we haven't done at all; we simply have a slightly shorter season — is complete crap," he declares. "Those critics should have seen the people in these cities away from London, people who don't get theater and were so grateful about being offered 13 plays in four weeks. They were travelling two hours to the show and two hours back afterwards and then doing it again a few nights later. It was really, really encouraging."

Also encouraging are the packed houses attending *Hamlet* during its London run. Jennings hopes to have a better go at the U.S. this time around, after taking a rapturously received *Midsummer Night's Dream* on tour and then to Broadway in 1996, where it did only moderately well.

"In Washington, D.C., we had silence during the show but standing ovations at the end, which was odd," he remembers. "I was told it was the government. You would look out and you'd see rows of suits and posh frocks and they sort of wouldn't laugh, but they regularly gave a standing ovation. It was bizarre. In San Francisco, we were in a 3,000-seater, which was madness really. Huge. And then the first week of performances in New York, maybe because it was the first time the RSC had been on Broadway for a long time, we had a lot of RSC groupies who were just happy that we were there. They laughed at everything. That was hard, too, because you

really had to keep a grip on your performance. But to be perfectly honest, we were fairly tired by the time we got to Broadway — we'd been on the road a long time. Not that San Francisco deserves less than New York, but it wasn't ideal."

Quite handsome, Jennings has no excuse for not being more famous outside the theater — except for the fact that he finds so little time to do work outside the theater. The film version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was done in a scant four

weeks and, according to Jennings, on too low a budget and without being rethought for film. A more satisfying recent role was as the dissolute barrister Lord Mark in *The Wings of a Dove*. "Ten days, nice part, not too much responsibility, and a trip to Venice," he laughs, enumerating the good points.

When his *Hamlet* tour is over, Jennings will take a break, relaxing at home with his landscape-gardener mate and two young children, waiting for "those mythic opportunities." If there's a street Jennings should walk up and down to make clear to producers that he's available for more TV and film work, he'd be happy to go there, he insists. "But I don't know where it is." ■

MICHAEL GILTZ is a freelance writer with a special interest in theater.