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**Nomadic Hamlet 2.0: testing place and video space for audiences.**

*This paper discusses the re-presentation of the space of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' as a form of immersive theatrical experience using video projection as a central aspect of the scenographic design to allow an audience member/viewer 'to be' Hamlet in a live context. The experimental nature of the work develops from an initial set of projects shown at Wimbledon College of Arts in the performance arts festival 'Acts Reacts 2' (2015).<sup>1</sup>*

*Working within the parameters of 'space and place' and their ability to construct identity, the proposed experimental architecture looks to challenge the inherent assumptions of viewing video space. It presents a design that will reposition the recorded nature of video's spatiality in order to develop a model that will situate the audience/viewer at the centre of the live experience and allow them to reflect on how the mediated scenography can assist or hinder their experiences of 'being' Hamlet.*

**Introduction: Why Hamlet?**

Hamlet as a dramatic figure is ubiquitous within the Western theatrical canon. Histories of playing the eponymous hero as a mark of actorly cultural capital have abounded since the play established itself as Shakespeare's most popular text. It is well recorded that the first actor to play Hamlet was Richard Burbage who created the role of the troubled Dane at the beginning of the 1600s (see van Es, 2013). Ever since the play's Elizabethan popularity, Hamlet's vacillating, proto-modern psychology has endured for and both male and female actors alike, as well as audiences and 20th Century critics, despite the frequency of his appearance on stage the role remains extremely popular (Crompton, 2017).

More recently since the late 1980s there has been a revivalist rash of notable Hamlets (see for example Cavendish, 2017) and in addition to recognising the role as conferring distinguished stage acting pedigrees, a particular interest in seeing well-known screen actors 'being Hamlet' has also become an increasing public phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Examples of relatively recent casting of celebrity screen stars include David Tennant (Hamlet 2008), Jude Law (Hamlet 2009) and Benedict Cumberbatch (Hamlet 2015). This rise of media-known screen stars playing Hamlet has also worked effectively in tandem with another form of 'mediatisation' (Auslander, 2008) in the live broadcasting of theatre shows.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon has been

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<sup>1</sup> Acts Reacts is an ongoing annual festival of performance curated by a team at Wimbledon College of Arts which commissions a variety of media forms across theatre and fine arts practices.

<sup>2</sup> During the noughties, the established theatre director Jonathan Miller criticised the emphasis of employing famous names in casting, as this practice constricted regional theatre transfers. In particular famous celebrities playing Hamlet was an example that Miller specifically took to task (see BBC, 2008). There is still a clear trend of producing *Hamlet* on stage within the current decade, for example Associate Editor of *The Stage*, Mark Shenton comments in response to the RADA production in 2017 that, there is a 'forest of Hamlets at the moment' (Shenton in Brown, 2017) stressing the presence of many versions of the play for the theatre going public.

<sup>3</sup> Auslander is very clear about the complex dependency that occurs between live performance and how the relationship between the live and recorded is culturally contingent. This is not simply suggesting that screen

noted particularly in the case of screening the NT Live Cumberbatch version of Hamlet (2015) in attracting a far reaching, worldwide interest in the role of the stage performance, as screen-goers continue to see the cinema-screened play in their thousands at global picture houses.<sup>4</sup>

By 2017 this increasingly mediated meme of Hamlet arguably culminated with a ‘controversially’ exclusive fund-raiser which was shown at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. The RADA Hamlet (2017). Hamlet was played by Hollywood star and RADA alumnus Tom Hiddleston in a highly limited, lottery based three-week run in September designed to raise money for the conservatoire. Tickets for the event were limited and even critics were denied the usual guaranteed customary invitation to review the show (Brown, 2017). At a correspondingly exclusive, after-show party and as a mark of Hiddleston’s dramatic accomplishment - that is having ‘made it’ as Hamlet - Kenneth Branagh the performance’s director and current President of RADA, passed on a valued script copy that had an equally illustrious history of usage to Hiddleston (see Beregon, 1997).<sup>5</sup> In relinquishing his ownership of this copy Branagh signified as much a rite of passage as well as an accolade of dramatic skill, pedigree and ultimate accomplishment. In a theatricalised act of handing the over the sacred script (that is the role and accolade), the honour of being ‘crowned’ a Hamlet was bestowed by a previous Hamlet (Kenneth Branagh) upon the current Hamlet (Tom Hiddleston) and validated by both the invited post-show audience and coincidentally overseen by the very Hamlet that bestowed this ‘pedigree copy’ upon Branagh (in this instance it was Derek Jacobi). The ceremonial proceedings of the act of anointing Hiddlestone as Hamlet couldn’t have been more refined and distilled by the pedigree chain-of-actorly-being that was present in this instance to witness to the event.

### **The rise of the Hamlet meme.**

The mediatisation of Hamlet as a manufactured phenomenon is not a new event in the production of theatre, nor is the fact that playing role of Hamlet is understood as one of the key accolades of achievement within the acting profession, but both factors are deftly combined to be highly influential in the function of theatre’s role as business focused enterprise. Production and marketing values will evidently look to publicity and other pragmatic ways to promote active theatre going in whatever form or trends will generate audiences and ultimately income (in this case the screen star embodying the role). What is salient about these current trends is that the combination of factors, which embody both the production and popularity of Hamlet, have combined to create the conditions for a rapidly developing Hamlet meme within the recent decade.

Amidst the complex emergence of accumulative screen actors playing the role, the rise of a Hamlet meme also accelerates the role of the audience as consumer within an increasing global scale, due to the presence of the technology of live screening. The Hamlet meme presents an interesting paradox in that ‘seeing Hamlet’ and ‘being Hamlet’ is both an inclusive and exclusive act. As an inclusive act, screening Hamlet is potentially a democratising action as it includes and increases wider audiences. In addition to extending the physical space of the potential audience, knowing or appreciating the presence of an

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presence is a new phenomenon on stage but rather that with increased, technological presence it is a cyclical trend that has current, social capital.

<sup>4</sup> Cumberbatch’s Hamlet at the National Theatre (2015) still has a second life in the form of current global screenings, see <http://ntlive.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/ntlout27-hamlet>

<sup>5</sup> The after-show party event was held in the RADA Studios, Chiswick Street 12 September 2017.

accessible screen star has a similar set of inclusive values attracting wider audiences to witness Shakespeare's play. Nevertheless, the exclusivity of being Hamlet still remains attached to the playing of the role of the hero. In first instance it reconfirms the conventions of the acting profession, since only the select few are anointed to perform the role. Secondly the close proximity associated with the exclusive cultural capital of being witness at the live event in seeing the screen star, whilst others are seeing it from afar or not at all, is also an act of distancing exclusion.<sup>6</sup>

Paradoxically in the act of theatre-going, the audience as witness appears problematic in this instance due to the conditions of production set out above. Therefore, who views Hamlet is a key aspect to consider when designing a future architecture that may allow for a reimagining of Hamlet. This dilemma is dependent on an audience expectation of who is 'significant' enough to play the eponymous hero and is also constructed by where this event occurs. Both aspects of who and where are potential factors that may easily limit the accessibility of the text which is seen as a fundamental aspect to Hamlet's overall durability in terms of literary criticism. Certainly, from a literary perspective the transcendent power of the language of Hamlet has been distilled over the centuries to apply to the human condition beyond the parameters of space and place. This can be evidenced for example by the enduring critique of the text written by the Romantic essayist and critic William Hazlitt (2011) who reminds us, that the evocation of Hamlet resides in the writing, so that it is 'we who are Hamlet' as we engage with the complexity of the 'prophetic truth which is above that of history'. Similarly in a modern context the complexity and depth of Shakespeare's Renaissance filled language allows an audience to identify with the proto-modern psychology of the drama, so that the conditions of 'being Hamlet' can unfold with all the dramatic power of its enduring humanity to be 'as true to the human condition ... as the life that Shakespeare captured' (Murray: 1997: 274) even beyond the complexity of our post-digital dwelling and certainly beyond the medium of cyberspace.

Though the essence of Hamlet may reside in the literary text to a large extent, the complexity of the Hamlet meme appears inextricably bound to space, place and the conventions of current theatre going. Disentangling the meaning by re-imagining the space and place for viewing, seems central to the principles of an experimental architecture that will allow a wider space for 'being Hamlet'.

### **The role of Democracy: the scenography's the thing wherein we can manipulate space and place:**

The creation of the Hiddleston Hamlet as described above is contingent upon a notably exclusive and complex web of such social registers as have been laid out in the uncovering of the Hamlet meme. These registers include the act of being chosen to perform the exclusive role, supported evidently by the presence of an audience and in this case moreover reinforced in the meta-performative act of professionally conferring the symbolic copy of 'the script'.<sup>7</sup> The example remains a particularly unique embodiment of the character from the acting of the role to the extra-theatrical performative acts, surrounding the witnessing of 'being Hamlet'. But rather than being bound by the parameters of witnessing Hamlet as the pinnacle

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<sup>6</sup> Cultural capital, which is class based according to Pierre Bourdieu, controls our understanding taste of cultural values and responses. Here we are using Frith's (1996: 9) interpretation of Bourdieu in acknowledging that both high and low forms of cultural capital generate equally complex systems of evaluation, taste and credibility etc.

<sup>7</sup> Here meta-performative is used following Flloyd Kennedy's (2008) work that the words spoken were a genuine being in the moment, so that the handing over of the script, though accompanied by a deliberate speech act, were nevertheless perceived as authentic.

of a cultural honour, only limited to a chosen actor embodying the hero as a rite of professional recognition, how might the dynamics of good design evoke a more democratic space and place in which one can 'be Hamlet' in a live environment?

Hamlet's power may reside in enriched textual language yet understanding Hamlet also is contingent on a visual authenticity as well as a vocal and social one. Given the power of visibility in the practice of theatre can the exclusivity of 'being Hamlet' be broadened beyond professional pedigree through a theatrically mediated, scenographic architecture? Can scenography create an alternative architecture for live performance to exist and incorporate alternative versions of being Hamlet? Is it possible to use the mediated aspects of video projection to extend the experience to anyone being Hamlet in a live context? Might we manipulate space and place to allow the formation of an identity that would make any person feel that they were Hamlet? Is it possible to experiment with the spatiality of design so that space and place can support the creation of a Hamlet identity in their own right? In other words, given the right space and place could even your mother be Hamlet?

We look to evoke this potential space for 'being Hamlet' through the use of a designed space and place, so that Hamlet be embodied in a way that liberates the 'actor' from an audience and move the possibilities past cultural limits that currently exist, which depend upon relying upon the exclusivity of being witnessed by an audience directly. This position does not deny that audiences are key to the ideas of theatre, but rather acknowledges that the current parameters for understanding are too limiting to allow for an alternative space for Hamlet. Therefore, we look to reveal or create a heterotopic, live experience that tends to the condition of theatre, without necessarily putting a play on stage. In addition we argue that given the current prevalence of the mediated meme of Hamlet which allows the idea of Hamlet to be known to a wider audience, and that this character contains textual complexity that foreshadows modern psychological dilemmas, it seems that Hamlet is a possible experience that has a history of durability in Western drama that can be potentially recognised by 'every person' and thus survive the implosion of technology into the text. To find such a heterotopic space in the current mediated environment of Hamlet seems an interesting challenge. Can we use technology to recreate a liberated space and place that allows a viewer to be Hamlet in a live context using the current limitations of the screen Hamlet for an essentially democratising purpose? What roles can the technology of a mediated space play in the reconstruction of a Hamlet based identity. Can we create such a place as to where you might be Hamlet, within a live space, on your own but not by simply recreating a computer game within a holodeck aesthetic, but one where you are immersed in a theatrical space?

To answer the above conditions of recreating an ideal space for the evocation of Hamlet it is necessary to reflect on initial research that has attempted to move beyond cultural parameters, to then consider what a design may employ to support the realisation of a new space to reenvision Hamlet.

### **The original *The Nomadic Hamlet* (2015) or first attempts to liberate Elsinore**

To situate an experimental architecture in which Hamlet is given the agency to be performed and constituted from current identity by moving beyond the usual parameters constraining the understanding of the hero, we reflect upon the initial creation of the film *The Nomadic Hamlet* (Armstrong & Nichol, 2015). This film represents a first attempt to create a more neutral space for a Hamlet. Shown as part of the festival Acts Reacts 2 and accompanied by a

performative lecture *From Place to Space, or large Hamletian leaps from Skallerund to Schrodinger's Hamlet* (Armstrong, 2015) these two research-based performances worked in tandem to expose the problems of space and place in reading the play. In the performative lecture, arguments were made following a historical trajectory of looking at the images of man in place and space to support the difficulty of reading Hamlet in a 'neutral space'. The dialogue suggested that the current iteration of Hamlet himself tended towards a positive reconstruction of the modernist position of 'isolation in contemplation', as suggested by Eliot (1921), that is inescapably we analysis the character, rather than the play and that we are bound by the conditions of our understanding of the spatiality of our time and place in doing so. Influenced further by Augé's notion of the super-modern 'non-place' as a current manifestation of modern life, we set about designing possible recognisable scenarios in which our new Hamlet could dwell with credibility. It was decided that the transient, indistinct image of traveling and non-dwelling seemed appropriate as an audience member might well recognise either a domestic space or an urban setting of a non-place. In researching the locations, a number of backgrounds were selected to re-create different places and these settings were used to show the same speech in sequence. The shifting setting influenced the title's description of a 'nomadic' version of Hamlet. Repeating the infamous 'to be or not to be' soliloquy from Act 3 Sc 1, the speech was performed by Nichol and repeatedly filmed in both domestic places as well as non-places. This switching of places in the edited version meant that the image could oscillate between intimacy and distance, so that the viewer could look upon Nichol's version of Hamlet to determine how space and place and ultimately duration, effected the reading of Hamlet himself in the modern age. In addition to controlling the set design of place and space, design choices were also made to minimise the misreading of the character Hamlet in costume. Nichol wore a white/neutral smock shirt to symbolise the character. This decision was made following research on how Hamlet has been framed in costume, particularly looking at famous images of actors playing the character Hamlet, such as Ralph Fiennes (Kyncl, 2011), Peter O'Toole (Unknown, 2013), Richard Burton (ArenaPal, 2014), Kenneth Branagh (BBC, 2014). Sources such as these were evidence that wearing a simple white/light coloured shirt was a common designer's choice for the character and therefore enough visual indication to symbolise the role, without overtly complicating the character image to a specific time or place. Thus, in *The Nomadic Hamlet* (Armstrong & Nichol, 2015) the conditions of the scenographic space had been subject to a set of controls so that the reading of the character Hamlet could be renegotiated and enhance the title 'nomadic'. The parameters for the experimental film therefore looked to modernise space with a simple framing, to allow for a more urban and contemporary space or non-place for the eponymous hero to exist in.

### **Findings from the research:**

The strengths of the scenographic framing for *The Nomadic Hamlet* (2015) were canvassed using audience feedback. Two key aspects of the research were thought as the most effective elements in creating a credible image of Hamlet so that the character was recognisable without necessarily having detailed knowledge of the play. These were the use of the symbolic shirt costume and the repetition of the image of the most known speech 'to be or not to be' that discussed existence. Responses to the changing place/scenographic framing of Hamlet's soliloquy however only worked effectively when the audience viewed the whole of the film, so that the changing background was recognised over time. The significance of the shift in the setting was less effective when viewed for a shorter segment of the whole film. This was because in this instance the background was seen, or rather perceived to be more non-descript or 'wallpaper like' and only became more visible when people viewed the image

for longer periods. Interestingly the playing of Hamlet by an actor not widely recognised, did not appear to be an issue in identifying the character as Hamlet.

Reflecting on these audience responses to this first iteration of a more democratic Hamlet, we look now to devise an experimental architecture to move the viewing beyond the relatively unseen background of space as evoked in the medium of video to create a live context for a new playing of Hamlet. It is possible that the medium of film in this instance, even though supported by a live, performative lecture was not the most effective way in which to make being Hamlet accessible as it set up a relatively passive reading of Hamlet. As suggested previously it appears that it may be possible to move beyond the current Hamlet meme, to cast any person as Hamlet, if we can recreate a space of authenticity. To do this we need a design that will encourage the playing of character, not the consumption of Hamlet, in a live context that moves the narrative beyond experiencing the role in isolation and merely accepting the image as presented. What elements might be useful in creating such an experimental architecture where the live experience can more usefully use projection and other technologies to recreate the space/place of Hamlet?

### **To create a Hamlet that allows a vicarious existence for the participant:**

Following Eliot's (1912) criticism of Hamlet, that suggests the play attracts readings where critics project 'their own artistic realization' or 'vicarious existence' into the analysis of the character, we look to recreate the following space where an individual can 'be Hamlet' whilst viewing themselves playing the role in a live context. The new experimental architecture that we will trial will be constructed with the following conditions. First, we will construct a portable room in which an audience member can take centre stage without an audience present. This is to minimise any self-consciousness of a potential 'performance'. Inside the room we will present a circular space where projection will evoke a series of visual video designs and lighting that will create a feeling of a neutral space that will also suggest a personalised space of Elsinore. These video designs will be projected onto a circular gauze curtain that will allow the audience/performer to be surrounded by this textured image. The design of this place/space will be central to evoking the space for Hamlet to exist and there will be a series of pre-trial runs to find the correct images to support this, so that there may be a series of design choices that the person playing Hamlet can select from or invent using a pre-set, design pallet. Having control over a series of preferences may allow for a personalised space, which in turn may aid the feeling of authenticity, however individual these selections might be.

At the front of the circular curtain there will be a mirrored wall onto which the lines from the Act 3 Scene 1 will be projected so that the performer can read the script rather than commit the lines to memory, similar to autocue/karaoke prompting techniques. The mirror may also allow for the performer to 'see themselves playing Hamlet' and encourage identification with the role. In addition to the designed space we will use the research findings from the first research trial of *The Nomadic Hamlet* (2015) and encourage the performer to wear a white shirt to add to the creation of their character of Hamlet and also allow for a repeated set of attempts at playing the part if desired. The performance will be recorded, and sound amplified in the room, but the camera and other technological devices will be minimised as to not encourage possible 'stage fright' due to the present of obvious recording equipment. After Hamlet has been performed we will gather qualitative data from participants to reflect on the parameters of this experimental architectural space and improve the conditions needed to be an authentic Hamlet.

Our visual design proposal is revealed below:

### **Experimental Architecture Design by Dick Straker Mesmer:**

Taking as a starting point one of the most iconic images from Hamlet - the skull of his childhood jester Yorick, this object is simplified and enlarged to create an enclosure into which a participant can enter (see Figs 2 & 3 below). Once the viewer has entered through the rear of the skull they encounter a view through the large and expanded eye sockets to a panorama beyond (see Figs 1 & 2 below). Initially this is a view from Elsinore facing out to sea but can be any number of images relating to Hamlet's memories and geographical locations from his past.

The curved screen onto which these films are projected fills the field of view through the eye socket portals to create the sense of an all-encompassing panorama. From Elsinore castle across the straits of Øresund to the surrounding architecture within the castle the imagined point of view of Hamlet provides the backdrop to his dilemmas. On a closer transparent video layer that exists across the plane of the eye socket are displayed lines from the text. The participant can read in karaoke form scenes which relate to the exterior view.

Within the skull there will be audio effects that synchronise with the video to provide a soundtrack to the visual experience.

There is also the possibility of a third layer of image projected onto the interior surface of the skull. This may relate more to the other iconic image of Hamlet - his tunic. In an abstracted sense the participant is enveloped both within the 'dress' of Hamlet, his mind and the skull from his most recognisable speech. The surface materials and the imagery projected upon them along with the audio elements are intended to evoke a sense of place and emotion which prompts the viewer to contend with some of the performative experience whilst recalling passages of Hamlet.

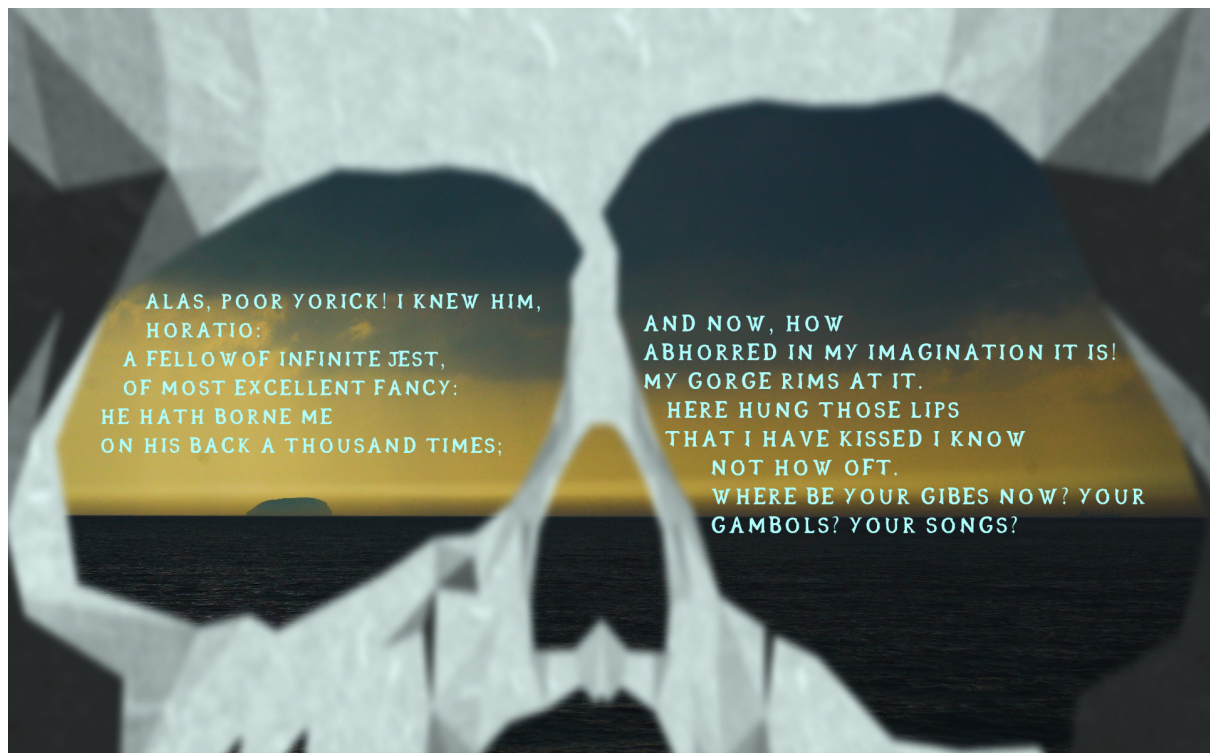


Fig 1 (image design, audience view 1 in *Nomadic Hamlet 2.0* by Dick Straker)



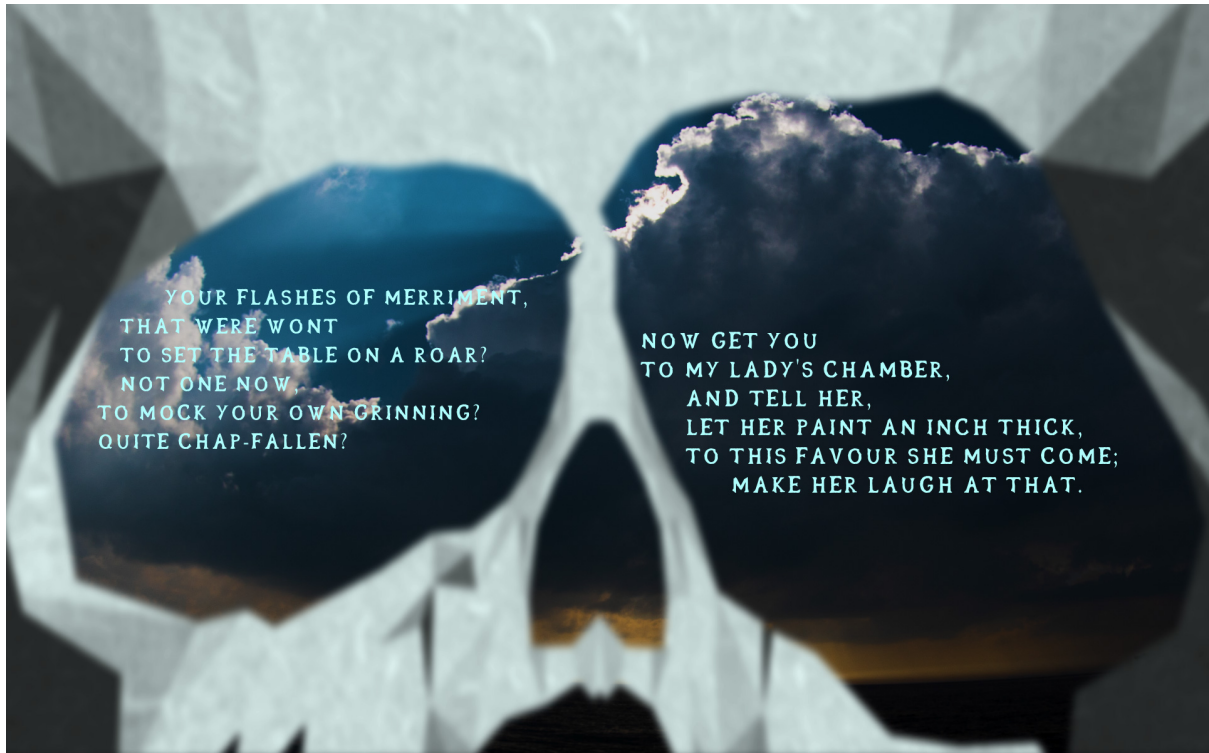


Fig 2 (image design, audience view 2 in *Nomadic Hamlet 2.0* by Dick Straker)

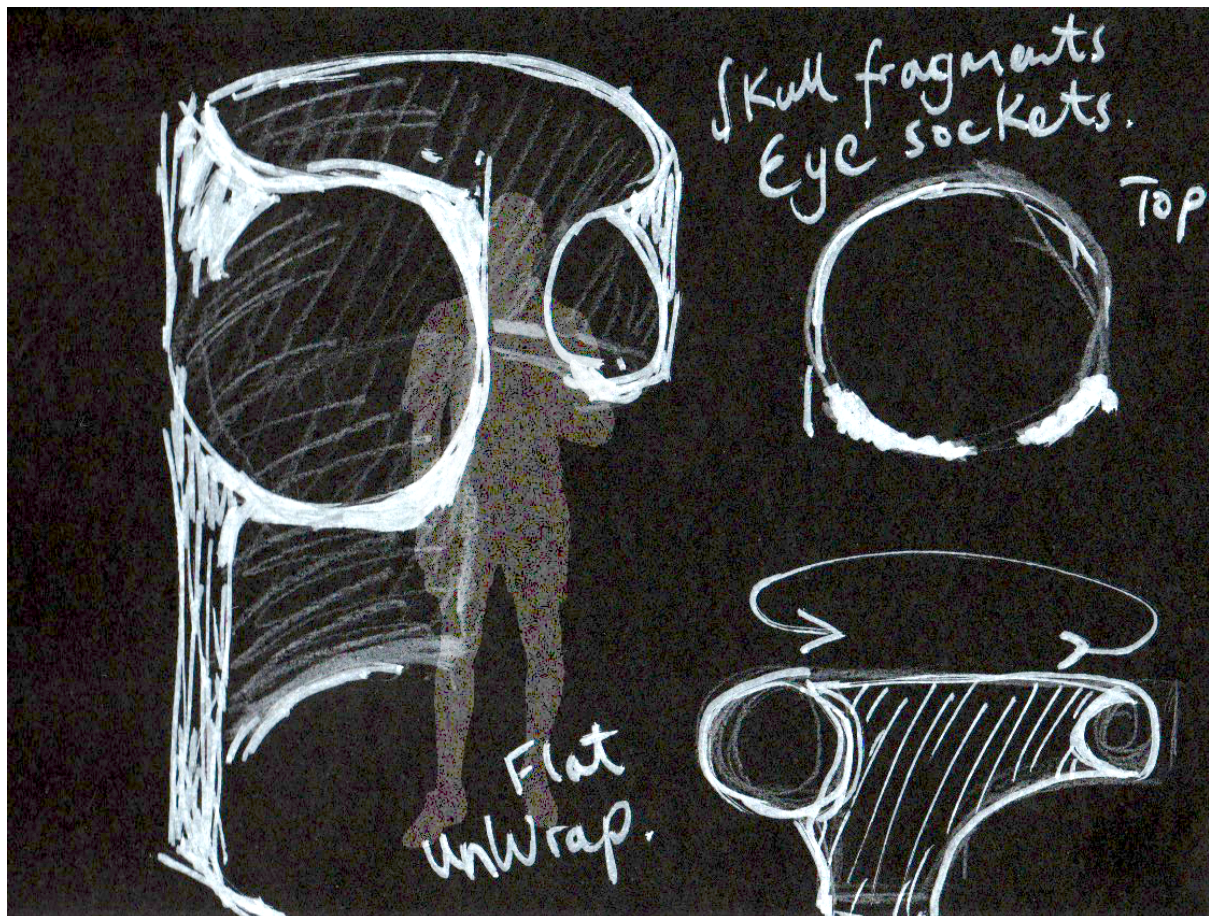


Fig 3 (design sketch for *Nomadic Hamlet 2.0* by Dick Straker)



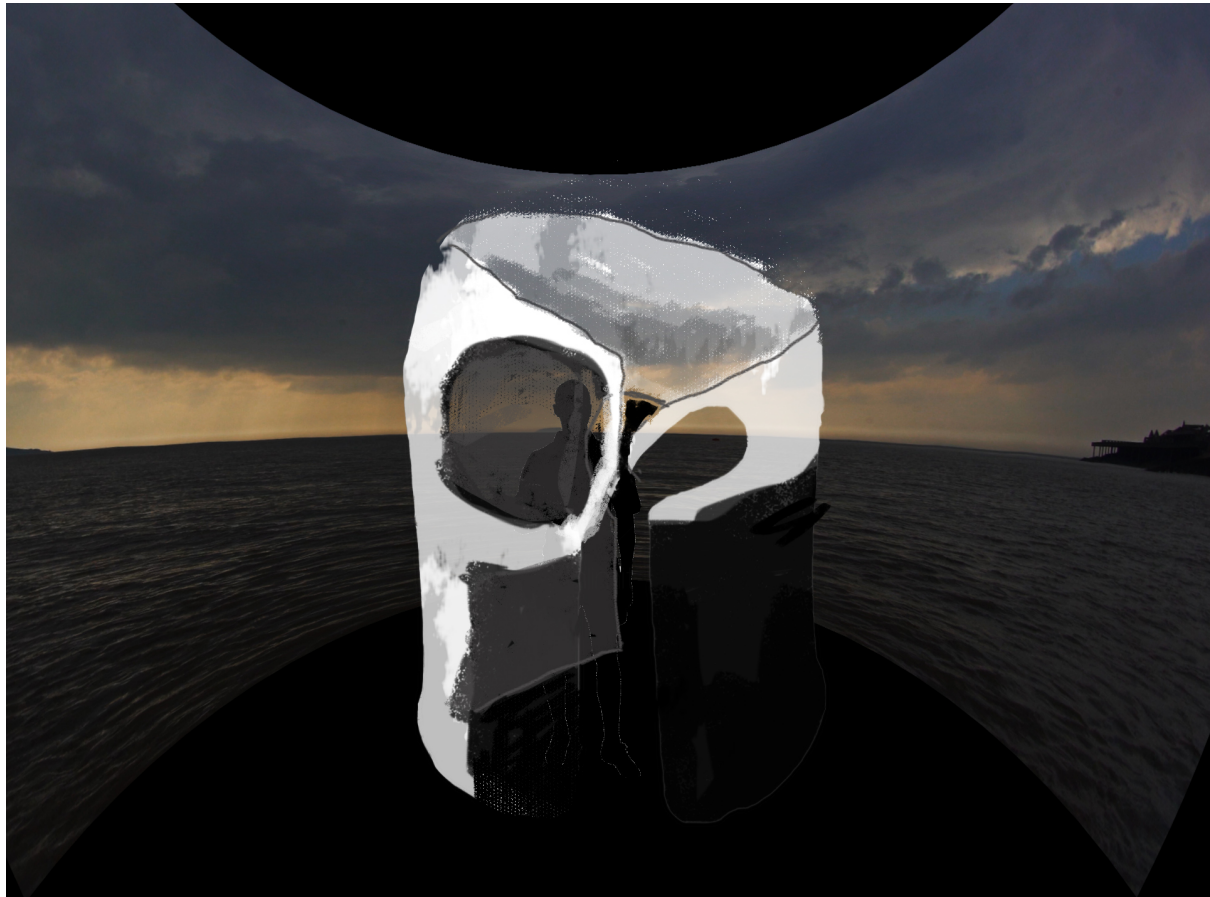


Fig 4 (prototype architectural design for *Nomadic Hamlet 2.0* by Dick Straker)

### **Summary:**

In recreating a space of experimental architecture for the audience to perform their own version of Hamlet we hope to act upon the popularity of the current Hamlet meme using the medium of scenography to design an alternative space in which once can ‘be Hamlet’ in a more extended way. Our plans look to turn the current broad use of technology within this theatrical phenomenon away from commercial production values of the Hamlet meme to stimulate a more specific focus to such an experience so that we can evaluate the impact of space, place and technology and influence a possible new and democratic path for ‘being Hamlet’. We look forward to this new scenographic experiment and the opportunity to uncover and test new audiences with one of Shakespeare’s most popular and enduring plays.

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