

**SHAKESPEARE'S MELANCHOLY
DANE BECOMES A POTENT
POLITICAL SYMBOL**
BY BARI WALSH



VERNON DOUCETTE

Margaret Litvin,
contemplating Yorick
and all things *Hamlet*.

her research into a book. “The sixties were the high point of Arab nationalism,” she says. “Before the 1967 war, Arabs really didn’t think there was anything they couldn’t do.” Staging performances of *Hamlet* and other classic dramas was proof that Gamal Abdel Nasser’s progressive government had put Egypt and the Arab world on a par with the West.

“That period of hope and confidence got utterly smashed by the 1967 war and the resounding defeat by Israel,” Litvin continues. The mood changed to one of anger and defiance, and the theater of the period was marked by “bitter calls to arms directly to the people, bypassing the governments.” In this era, she says, “*Hamlet* was a revolutionary, a righter of wrongs, and the ‘to be or not to be’ hesitator was way downplayed.”

Toward the late seventies, dramatic defiance was largely replaced by cynicism and parody, as a series of autocratic governments failed to make good on Nasserism’s promise. In recent years, Litvin says, *Hamlet* adaptations are about the character’s “inefficacy, his absorption in words that no one will hear or heed. It becomes a kind of lament for the death of Arab nationalism and the days when the Arab world at least had ideals to aspire to.”

A favorite adaptation is *Forget Hamlet*, first produced in Cairo in 1994 by Jawad al-Asadi, an Iraqi living in exile in Jordan. “The first thing he does is take out any shred of suspense. You know exactly who’s committed the murder, Ophelia has seen the murder, and there’s no shortage of evidence,” Litvin says. “But you can’t prosecute the crime because there’s no judge and no jury. Claudius is in complete control, running the guillotine day and night. He becomes kind of a Saddam Hussein figure.

“Even the subversive characters in the play, the gravediggers, end up shoring up his power, by joking about it,” she adds. “It’s a play about why the sword is mightier than the pen, and it’s very persuasive.”

Hamlet of Arabia

IN THE ARAB world, says Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet*’s famous “To be or not to be” is often translated as “Shall we be or not be?” This linguistic nudge, which can happen because Arabic lacks the infinitive, is telling, Litvin argues. It reveals the degree to which Arab cultural commentators see the

character, and *Hamlet* itself, as a potent way to talk about “an existential threat to a valued collective identity,” she says. *Hamlet*’s problem mirrors

WEB EXTRA:
Watch a video of Margaret Litvin discussing *Hamlet* and the Arab world, at www.bu.edu/bostonia

a problem facing the Arab world: “to exist or dissolve, to awaken politically or to slumber while history passes by.”

Arab adaptations of *Hamlet* in the postcolonial era make a surprisingly revealing prism through which to view the politics, culture, and intellectual life of the Arab world, says Litvin, a College of Arts & Sciences assistant professor of Arabic and comparative literature. “*Hamlet* is a play about

power in the Arab world, and it’s not usually seen that way in the West,” she says.

Looking at performances, adaptations, and citations of *Hamlet* in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and elsewhere, Litvin argues that *Hamlet* speaks to the region primarily as “a play about power, justice, and what to do when you’re in the middle of a political conspiracy. Your uncle has stolen the election and defrauded you of the crown, you’re surrounded by villains and spies, there’s a reign of terror, and the king cuts off the heads of everyone he dislikes.

“That’s all there in Shakespeare, but it’s a dimension of the play that’s been lost to many Western interpreters,” she says, who are more likely to focus on *Hamlet*’s “inwardness and doubt” than on his role as a political player in a time of crisis.

This particularly Arab lens onto *Hamlet* developed as postcolonial theater responded to political changes, according to Litvin, who is developing