

TEACHER'S KIT



BELL SHAKESPEARE'S

HAMLET

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE DIRECTED BY JOHN BELL

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BELL SHAKESPEARE

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL TOURING COMPANY

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The Bell Shakespeare Company's website is useful, relevant and entertaining. **www.bellshakespeare.com.au** is the place to have your say about us and to come for informational needs. It's simple to use and easily defined. Our website comprises sections relating to our education programmes and initiatives. In the education section there are detailed breakdowns of productions, cast and creative biographies, synopsis, rehearsal and production images, quiz pages, editorial and links to other Shakespeare websites. For teachers, there are specific areas to help you bring the vitality of Shakespeare to students.

HAMLET COMPANY LIST

CAST

Hamlet	Leon Ford
Claudius	Christopher Stollery
Old Hamlet/First Player/Gravedigger	Bille Brown
Gertrude	Linda Cropper
Polonius	Robert Alexander
Ophelia	Anna Torv
Laertes	Paul Eastway
Horatio	David Davies
Rosencrantz/Marcellus	Damien Ryan
Guildenstern/Barnado	Ed Wightman
Osric/Francisco	Angus King
Voltemand/Fortinbras' Captain	Robert Meldrum
Cornelius/Priest	Pip Miller
Fortinbras/Player Lucianus/Reynaldo	Julian Garner
Lady/Player Queen	Luisa Hastings Edge

UNDERSTUDIES

Hamlet	David Davies
Claudius	Pip Miller
Gertrude/Ophelia	Luisa Hastings Edge
Laertes	Julian Garner
Ghost/Gravedigger	Robert Alexander
Polonius	Damien Ryan
Rosencrantz/Guildenstern	Paul Eastway
Horatio/Fortinbras/Reynaldo	Ed Wightman
First Player	Robert Meldrum

PRODUCTION

Director	John Bell
Set Designer	Laurence Eastwood
Costume Designer	Matthew Aberline
Lighting Design	Laurence Eastwood & Peter Neufeld
Composer	Alan John
Assistant Director	Robert Kennedy
Movement Coach	Gavin Robins
Movement Design for Players	Darren Gilshenan
Fight Director	Nigel Poulton
Sound Designer	Aaron Symonds
Stage Manager	Peter Sutherland
Assistant Stage Manager	Anna Kosky
Head Electrician	Graham Silver
Head Mechanist	Byron Shaw
Sound Technician	Declan Cooney
Wardrobe Maintenance	Jo Beaton
Set Construction	ShowTrek Productions
Scenic Art	MG Scenic Art
Costume Supervisor	Peter Bevan
Women's Costumes	Anthony Phillips
Men's Tailoring	Tony Bonnici
Costume Assistant	Karen Roberts
Wigs	Ascot Wig Makers
Millinery	Rosie Boylan
Voice Coach	Rowena Balos

CONTRIBUTORS

Neville Harrison, formerly an English and Drama teacher at the Glenaeon Rudolf Steiner School in Castlecove, Sydney, is on the Australian Independent Schools Board and has been a major contributor to Bell Shakespeare's Teacher's Kits over the years. He is currently writing a new edition anthology on Shakespeare to be completed later in 2003.

John Gleeson, formerly Senior English master at Trinity Grammar in Sydney, also spent 27 years at the ABC as producer/director, 8 years as Media in Education lecturer at University of Technology, Sydney, and was a lecturer in the Bachelor of Education programme at Sydney University.

Nell Hourn, formerly a senior tutor at The Australian Theatre for Young People in Sydney, is Education Officer for Bell Shakespeare. Nell conducts interactive Shakespeare workshops for teachers and students all over Australia and Singapore and is responsible for the editing and compiling of these notes.

All quotations from *Hamlet* are taken from the Arden edition of the play, though audiences will notice various textual and character truncations and differences in the actual production, which have arisen to suit the needs of the ensemble and this particular interpretation.

It is the intention of Bell Shakespeare to present a wide range of interpretative and staging ideas for students' discussion, suiting their various ages and interests, via the production of *Hamlet* itself and these Teachers' Notes. Thus interpretative ideas in the notes will differ at times from those in the production.

In order to get the highest educational experience from seeing this production, it is advised that students participate in an in-school pre-performance *Hamlet* workshop; that they have a knowledge of the whole plot of the play; and that they undertake lessons ONE and TWO before seeing the production.

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JOHN BELL'S THOUGHTS ON DIRECTING *HAMLET*

Hamlet is probably the most famous and frequently performed play throughout the world, and has been for over the last four hundred years. The reasons for its popularity are not hard to find: its plot is crammed with action and conflict; its human relationships cover many bases and will be familiar to a wide audience (relationship between parents and children, lovers, friends, surrogate parents etc); at its centre is the most enigmatic and fascinating character in all of world literature, Hamlet, "the first modern man"- the adolescent rebel raging against a corrupt and compromised world. Cruel and kind, noble and coarse, loyal and treacherous, ruminative and reckless, deeply serious and wildly irresponsible - Hamlet has gripped the imaginations of every generation of actors and theatregoers.

In this 2003 production, I intend to focus on the youthful innocence and idealism of Hamlet, Ophelia and Laertes - a generation tainted, betrayed and corrupted by their elders who have compromised their moral obligations in return for gratification and comfort.

Our designer is Laurence Eastwood who has created the vista of a black metal box with four surveillance cameras representing Denmark as a prison dominated by paranoia, eavesdropping and spying.

A major feature of the design is the lighting, which will indicate radical changes of mood, location and intensity. This will be assisted by Alan John's superb musical score - at once classical in its references and contemporary in its comment.

Matthew Aberline's costumes have a similar cross-reference: the high fashion of today but reflecting a corrupt and enclosed society. Their opulent colours have the taint of rotteness; furs and gowns will conceal and disguise. They apply to a world of treachery and cover-up.

Playing the young Hamlet is Leon Ford who has a long track record with Bell Shakespeare (*Henry 4*, *Henry 5*, *Actors at Work*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hippolytus*, *The Soldier's Tale*) and will bring to the role a generosity of nature, quirky humour and youthful passion.

He is supported by an outstanding company of actors including Bell Shakespeare Associate Artist, Chris Stollery, as Claudius; Linda Cropper as Gertrude, and the wonderful Billie Brown as three significant characters in Hamlet's life: The Ghost, the Player King and the Gravedigger.

I aim for a production of *Hamlet* that goes not for gimmicks but swift story telling. My production will focus on the brilliantly observed and passionately realised scenes of family conflict; and reveal the timeless moral dilemmas encountered by the characters while maintaining Shakespeare's essential non-judgemental humanity.

John Bell AM
Artistic Director

HAMLET SYNOPSIS

The play is set in Elsinore, Denmark, at the royal court of the newly crowned King Claudius.

Prince Hamlet is deeply depressed by the sudden death of the previous monarch, his father old Hamlet, and the hasty remarriage of his mother, Queen Gertrude, to his uncle Claudius.

When the ghost of his father appears to Hamlet informing him that he was murdered by Claudius, and calling upon him to avenge his death, Hamlet is locked into a dangerous mission he would rather not have been given. Instead of following his duty to the father he loved and killing the murderer promptly, he is paralysed by inaction. He intellectualises the task and seeks further proof of his uncle's guilt to the point where he himself is exposed to the murderer and has virtually signed his own death warrant.

Disgusted by the relationship between his mother and uncle, and allowing his jaundiced view of what he considers his mother's infidelity to taint his attitude to women in general, Hamlet abandons his girlfriend, Ophelia, who later loses her mind and drowns. He accidentally kills her father, the courtier Polonius, mistaking him for Claudius who, now frightened of Hamlet's madness and fearing for his own safety, convinces Polonius' son, Laertes, to kill Hamlet.

Finally a duel between Hamlet and Laertes, Ophelia's brother, ends in the deaths of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet himself, and rule of the kingdom of Denmark passes to neighbouring Norway.

DETAILED PLOT SUMMARY

Act 1, Scene 1

The setting is the King's watch area of a castle in Denmark.

Two sentinels, Francisco and Bernardo, cautiously exchange guard in the dead of night. Horatio, friend to Hamlet the Prince of Denmark, and Marcellus, another sentinel, enter with caution. Francisco takes his leave and Marcellus and Bernardo tell the disbelieving Horatio of a ghost both men have seen these last two nights.

The ghost appears and all men fearfully agree it looks very much like the late King Hamlet in battle dress. Horatio says that he feels this apparition does not bode well for Denmark. Marcellus is curious to know the reason for the very tight security measures they have recently been ordered to undertake and for the obvious construction of weapons and preparations for war hastily going on in Denmark. Horatio is ready with the answer, also explaining a little history to the world of the play in the process: the young Prince of Norway, Fortinbras, seeks to prove himself by making claims on the Norwegian lands lost to Denmark by his father, Old Fortinbras, when defeated in a great battle by the late King Hamlet. Necessary defence of these lands is the reason for the current preparations for war.

Horatio is reminded of the terrible omens sent by the heavens to warn of Julius Caesar's death in Roman times and is in agreement with Bernardo that this visitation by the ghost of Old King Hamlet dressed in the very battledress "that is the question of these wars", sits very uncomfortably indeed.

The ghost appears for a second time but will not be coaxed into speaking to Horatio. The cock crows and the ghost hastens away. Horatio proffers that he has heard ghosts are confined by day and so must vanish at first light. Horatio says they must acquaint Prince Hamlet with the events of the night for surely the ghost will speak to him.

Act 1, Scene 2

The setting is the royal court of Denmark, and Claudius, King of Denmark, addresses the assembled courtiers. We learn that Claudius' brother Old King Hamlet has only recently died, and indeed the state is still in mourning; that Claudius has married Gertrude, his former sister-in-law and wife to the dead King; and Claudius confirms that young Fortinbras of Norway indeed immediately threatens Denmark with claims on the lands lost by his father. To this threat Claudius responds by despatching a letter via his emissaries, Cornelius and Voltmand, to Old Norway, uncle to Fortinbras, beseeching him to restrain the prince.

Laertes, son of the royal advisor Polonius, has a suit to the King: to return to France. Claudius willingly grants him leave, and turns to Prince Hamlet who initially speaks in riddle and wordplay, making it clear that he has strong adverse feelings toward his uncle, Claudius. Hamlet is very melancholic.

Gertrude and Claudius beg him to let go of his sorrow and accept his father's death, and further not to return to university in Wittenberg but to remain in Elsinore. Hamlet complies.

The King and Queen are delighted with this; the court hastens away; and Hamlet is alone, and we have the first opportunity to get to know him in the first of his many soliloquies. The depth of his melancholy is evident as he wishes suicide was a Christian option; ruminates on the futility of life; expresses his rage and disgust at the hasty marriage of his mother to his uncle. We learn that Gertrude was a devoted wife to King Hamlet and that Claudius pales in young Hamlet's opinion.

Hamlet is briefly cheered by the arrival of his dear friend Horatio who is accompanied by the sentinels Marcellus and Barnardo. Horatio duly informs him of the appearance of King Hamlet's ghost dressed in arms. Hamlet is shocked and pessimistic but determines to watch this night in case the ghost reappears.

Act 1, Scene 3

The setting is somewhere in the private areas of the castle. Laertes is saying farewell to his sister, Ophelia, and warns her not to take seriously the recent affections given her by Prince Hamlet whom he expects will make a choice for a wife based on his responsibility as Denmark's heir. She must not therefore give herself over to him too freely. Ophelia takes the brotherly advice with good humour, warning him to make sure he practises what virtue he preaches.

But Polonius bustles in to give a long and serious farewell to his son, giving much wise and general advice on the art of living well. This speech contains many maxims that most of us are familiar with. Laertes finally takes his leave, and with some concern Polonius also warns Ophelia not to take Hamlet's affections too seriously – that they are not real. We learn that, at least in Ophelia's opinion, Hamlet has offered her true and earnest love. But Polonius is scornful, forbidding her to even speak with Hamlet henceforth. Ophelia is compliant.

Act 1, Scene 4

The setting is midnight at the watch area of the first scene. Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus are watching in the cold night for King Hamlet's ghost. We learn that Claudius is a drinking, carousing man, as are the common Danes. But Hamlet himself is not, evidently finding the practice distasteful and he worries over the reputation the Danes have abroad as drunkards. He is bothered a little over the generalisations that other nations commonly draw from this fault, blinding them to the virtues and achievements of the Danes. But he then significantly links this to the idea that a fault within an individual is often not recognised by those around him which has its own links to tragedy.

But the ghost indeed reappears, shocking Hamlet completely as he recognises the apparition as that of his father: he demands to know the reason for its appearance and when it beckons him away, Horatio and Marcellus fearfully restrain him. But Hamlet fights them off with determination and follows the ghost. Horatio and Marcellus, worried for their prince, disobey his orders to stay behind and follow him.

Act 1, Scene 5

In a lonely area of the watch, Hamlet demands the ghost speak to him. The ghost replies that he has only a brief time in which to speak before returning to punishing flames by day and then again walking by night, until all his sins are purged. He speaks of his tortuous suffering on the other side of life but is forbidden to unfold the secrets therein. The ghost tells Hamlet he was murdered. As he was sleeping in his orchard it was not a serpent that stung him as was put out. Claudius, his brother, poured poison in his ear, then took his crown and his wife, sending Old Hamlet to his death without any reconciliation to heaven for his earthly sins.

The ghost, disgusted by the sexual relationship between Gertrude, who seemed so devoted during their marriage, and Claudius, instructs Hamlet to avenge his murder but to treat his mother gently. Hamlet, utterly shocked and appalled, writes on a wall or a piece of paper, "One may smile and smile and be a villain".

Horatio and Marcellus enter and Hamlet makes them swear they will not reveal anything they have seen or heard this night to anyone. But Hamlet ends the scene expressing regret that he has been given the challenge of revenge.

Act 2, Scene 1

Polonius is instructing his man, Reynaldo, in the business of spying on Laertes in Paris. It is clear Polonius thinks nothing of telling Reynaldo to deliberately concoct stories of Laertes quarrelling or in drunken debaucherous behaviour and then to relate these lies around Paris to Laertes' acquaintances. Polonius devises this plan in order to find out what the rejoinders will be from Laertes' social circle, thus gleaning some idea of what his son is really up to in Paris.

But with the exit of Reynaldo, the comical mood of the scene abruptly changes with the entrance of a very frightened Ophelia. She explains that Hamlet has visited her in a wild state of undress, his nerves and emotions in a terrible state, while staring and sighing and making protracted perusal of her face. Polonius immediately concludes that Hamlet is mad for love of Ophelia, expresses regret that he ever interfered in their relationship, and determines to report the matter to the King.

Act 2, Scene 2

The King and Queen beseech Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, childhood friends of Hamlet, to stay a while at court and give company and good cheer to Hamlet while attempting to glean what afflicts him. Both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in ready agreement.

Polonius announces that the ambassadors from Norway, Voltmand and Cornelius, are returned with good news, and that he himself knows the cause of Hamlet's madness. The Queen makes a guilty comment that it is no doubt his father's death and she and Claudius' hasty marriage.

Voltemand announces that the King of Norway was shocked to find that indeed young Fortinbras was warring against Denmark whilst pretending to war against the Poles. Fortinbras has been rebuked by his uncle and has promised never more to take arms against Denmark, whereupon Old Norway gave him finances and permission to take up a campaign against the Poles. He requests permission from Claudius for Fortinbras to peacefully cross Denmark in the process. Claudius is well pleased.

Polonius, in a much quoted and very comical part of this scene begins a protracted description of the reasons for Hamlet's madness – love of Ophelia. The King and Queen are quite receptive to the idea, and we learn that Hamlet often walks for four hours at a stretch in the lobby of the castle. Polonius suggests planting Ophelia there at such a time while he and the King secrete themselves behind the arras to spy on their meeting. Claudius is in ready agreement. Hamlet enters reading, and the King and Queen depart.

Polonius approaches Hamlet and for the first time the audience experience Hamlet's 'antic disposition', or indeed his real madness. In heavily loaded, comical, and at times rather sad converse with Polonius, Hamlet touches upon the general dishonesty of men, Ophelia and sexuality, and death, while ridiculing Polonius at almost every opportunity.

Polonius takes his leave, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter to Hamlet's initial delight. The banter between old friends fades when Hamlet realises Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are there not to see him of their own volition but by the King and Queen's design.

Hamlet perceives correctly why they were sent for and to prevent any further investigation tells them his mind: he is indeed very depressed and finds no meaning in life itself, and though he acknowledges the greatness and wonder of humanity he cannot agree with it or find it true in his experience. Rosencrantz announces that he may find some sober delight in the players who have come to court. In the following exchange, usually edited in performance, Hamlet shows a great deal of interest, and is finally well pleased to greet the entering players.

Hamlet requests the main player recite a speech he once heard and loved: Aenas' tale to Dido, about the terrible death of Priam, Hecuba's husband, and the player takes up the long speech where Hamlet leaves off.

Hamlet carefully instructs Polonius to take good care of the players, and makes a request of the main player for a play to be performed this night, 'The Murder of Gonzago' which will have some insertions by Hamlet.

With their departure, Hamlet makes a self-deprecating soliloquy in which we discover how angry with himself he feels for his inertia over the cause set before him by his father's ghost. The main player has wept Hecuba's tears in a speech which is only an act, a fantasy, and yet he, Hamlet, has so much cause to weep, rage, and avenge, but he has done and can do nothing.

He finally determines to get the players to enact something like the murder of his father in front of Claudius and to observe his reaction, for the ghost may have been an evil spirit. In this way, he will have positive proof of Claudius' guilt, and the soliloquy ends with Hamlet in a much more positive frame of mind.

Act 3, Scene 1

The King and Queen are interrogating Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for any information they may have gleaned from Hamlet concerning the cause of his madness and his distracted nature. The two admit that they have found out nothing but reveal Hamlet was cheered by the arrival of the players. They pass on Hamlet's invitation to the King and Queen to attend the play this night which Claudius accepts with alacrity. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern take their leave.

The King requests that Gertrude depart also so that he and Polonius can hide themselves behind the arras in readiness for the 'chance meeting' between Ophelia and Hamlet. The Queen expresses the hope to Ophelia that indeed it is love for her that is the cause of Hamlet's troubles.

Polonius plants Ophelia in the lobby and prepares to hide. He tells Ophelia to pretend to read, and pontificates about pretence and the way we often mask evil with pretended virtue. It is a significant moment for Claudius who admits in an aside to the audience his guilt in his brother's death. His conscience is bothering him.

Hamlet enters with his "To be or not to be" soliloquy in which he ponders whether it is nobler to live bravely fighting all the pain and strife this world musters or whether it is better to kill oneself to escape it. He proffers that the only reason to bear life and its hardships is the fear of the unknown beyond life. He comes across Ophelia who tries to give Hamlet back gifts he has given her (probably poetry and tokens). He denies he ever gave them to her and speaks no sense at all throughout the scene to the bewildered Ophelia.

He tells her to "get to a nunnery" in his famous invective against women and breeding and humanity itself. He tells her there should be no more marriage and that everyone 'but one' shall live, indicating that he possibly knows the King is watching them.

Ophelia is shocked at the state of Hamlet's mind and we see through her eyes how far Hamlet has descended from the very high platform of achievement and potential as a scholar, courtier and soldier.

Polonius and the King re-enter and the latter is convinced it is not love that is Hamlet's problem and that he could prove dangerous. He has already decided to send Hamlet to England where change might make an improvement. Polonius agrees, but insists that neglected love may have started the whole process of Hamlet's demise, and suggests that after the play tonight Gertrude speak to him alone with Polonius listening in as now. The King agrees with this plan and gives a caution: "Madness in great ones must not unwatched go".

Act 3, Scene 2

Hamlet is giving some of the players acting instructions on gesture, comedy, and style of speech and action. The players exit and Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern confirm that the King and Queen will attend the performance tonight. Hamlet delivers a very lucid and heart-felt speech to Horatio expressing what a loyal and steadfast friend Horatio really is and how dear he is to Hamlet. The prince requests that Horatio observe the King during the play for any signs of guilt. Horatio is glad to do so and offers to spy closely on the King thereafter if he should depart the play early.

The King and Queen and court enter to watch the play. Hamlet immediately begins talking in riddles to any question proffered him by the King, or Polonius, or indeed Ophelia. He prefers to sit near Ophelia, mutters puns and indecencies to her, and sarcastically harps on his father's death and the evident lack of mourning by his mother.

The play begins in two parts. First, a mask or dumb show of the main action: of an affectionate King and Queen in a garden; then he being poisoned by another man whilst asleep; the poisoner then woos the Queen. The second part is 'The Murder of Gonzago' which contains an enactment of the same plot.

Claudius rises and calls for lights, departing in great haste. The play is abandoned, and Hamlet in great triumph stands alone with Horatio, who confirms the guilt of the King.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter beseeching Hamlet to the Queen's chamber where she wishes to speak to him. Hamlet reverts to evasive replies, word plays, jibes and outright admonishment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern both of whom he clearly sees as duplicitous.

Polonius confirms that the Queen is waiting for him. Hamlet speaks his shortest soliloquy so far in which he expresses intense eagerness for action and revenge; he determines to speak cruel words to his mother not act out violence itself.

Act 3, Scene 3

The King charges Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with immediately accompanying Hamlet to England, to which they are compliant. Polonius enters on his way to Gertrude's chamber where he intends to spy on Hamlet's exchange with her.

The King soliloquises on his guilt over his brother's death and his need to pray for forgiveness. He wishes to retain his Queen, his crown, and his ambition, yet be pardoned for the murder but knows it is not possible. He forces himself to pray, whereupon Hamlet enters and ponders in a soliloquy on killing him at this moment while he is praying. But Hamlet determines to wait until the King is engaged in a less holy act such as drunkenness or debauchery, so to make sure Claudius' soul goes to hell not heaven.

After he departs, Claudius stands and laments that he could not find any contrition at all.

Act 3, Scene 4

Polonius plies the Queen with instructions on how to handle Hamlet and then hides himself behind the arras. Hamlet enters, and a sharp and accusatory exchange leads the Queen to panic. Polonius calls for help from behind and, thinking it is the King, Hamlet thrusts his sword into the arras killing Polonius.

Hamlet lets out a bitter invective against his mother's incest, shows her pictures and comparisons of both brothers, Hamlet and Claudius, and forces her to confront her conscience. The Queen is deeply affected and feels the weight of her own remorse.

King Hamlet's ghost enters to remind Hamlet of his almost forgotten purpose of revenge, but the Queen cannot see the ghost and is convinced her son is mad. Hamlet begs his mother not to go to Claudius' bed evermore, and both acknowledge that he will be sent to England shortly. Hamlet admits complete distrust of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and a fierce determination they will not outsmart him. He drags out Polonius' body.

Act 4, Scene 1

The Queen enters in a heavy mood to convey the bad news to Claudius that Hamlet has killed Polonius. The King's first thoughts are for himself – that he would have been the victim had he been there. He determines to cover up Hamlet's crime lest he, Claudius, should be blamed for not acting sooner on Hamlet's madness. He calls in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, instructs them to go and retrieve Polonius' body from Hamlet and to bring it to the chapel. In the meantime he and Gertrude will seek counsel from advisors on the course to take next, but Hamlet will sail to England this night.

Act 4, Scene 2

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern confront Hamlet as to the location of the body but Hamlet's humour is acidic and evasive, calling Rosencrantz "a sponge". Hamlet requests to be escorted to the King.

Act 4, Scene 3

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bring Hamlet to Claudius. Hamlet is still answering in riddles and acidic word play but eventually reveals to the King that the body is in the upstairs lobby.

The King with some formality conveys to Hamlet that he must be despatched to England immediately. After everyone has left the stage, he then soliloquises on Hamlet's death warrant he has sent to the English King. Claudius says he cannot rest until he knows the deed is done.

Act 4, Scene 4

Fortinbras of Norway is about to take his promised march across Denmark; he sends his captain to convey word to King Claudius of his intentions.

The captain exchanges briefly with Hamlet, who discovers that Fortinbras is warring over a tiny, worthless patch of Polish land and that the Poles are fully engaged in defending it.

Hamlet soliloquises on his dull revenge. He accuses himself of thinking too much and of being a coward. Here are twenty thousand men prepared to die over a trifle, yet he, with all his motivation to avenge his father's death, can do nothing. He determines to have 'bloody thoughts' from here on.

Act 4, Scene 5

The Queen is informed of Ophelia's disordered state of mind and reluctantly agrees to see her. Ophelia enters singing distractedly of loss: of her father, of love and of maidenhood. The King enters and is shocked to see her so, and as she departs, Horatio is ordered to watch her closely.

The King is beset with worries and fears relating to his necessary cover-up of Hamlet's removal and Polonius' death, and there are rumours abroad among the people as to the reasons and details. Laertes has also returned from France and is feeding these rumours, and in a great riot he breaks through the guard into the royal chamber demanding to see Claudius and know the circumstances of his father's death. There are factions among the people demanding that Laertes be king and it is clear Elsinore is in a great deal of social unrest.

The King handles Laertes with superior control and calm and eventually subdues him, however Laertes is determined to exact bloodthirsty revenge. He is shocked and grieved by the sight of Ophelia who enters as earlier, deranged and singing songs of loss, and handing out flowers to the company present.

Laertes mood now changed, Claudius promises to inform him of how Polonius died and the reasons for the cover-up of his death and funeral.

Act 4, Scene 6

Horatio is given a letter from Hamlet by sailors beseeching Horatio to come by their directions to him at once. Hamlet has escaped the ship bound for England with the help of merciful pirates. The sailors also bear letters for the King.

Act 4, Scene 7

The King is alone with Laertes. He explains that Hamlet killed Polonius mistaking him for the King and the reasons for the concealment of the crime were deference to the love the people bear for Hamlet and Claudius' own love and duty to Gertrude, his devoted mother.

Hamlet's letter is brought in to the King. It is bitter in tone and begs an audience with Claudius the following day. Claudius is shocked by Hamlet's return and is sure the handwriting is genuinely that of the prince. He immediately suggests a plan to exact Laertes' revenge and make it look like an accident, even to Gertrude. He suggests a fencing challenge which he feels Hamlet will not be able to resist, so willing would he be to test his skills against those of Laertes.

Claudius suggests baiting the foils with deadly poison so that Hamlet will be poisoned by any scrape given by his opponent, and to backup the plan, he will also poison a drink provided for Hamlet's refreshment.

The Queen enters with the tragic news that Ophelia is drowned. Laertes is grief-stricken, but Claudius once again thinks only of himself with fears that Laertes' rage will start up again.

Act 5, Scene 1

The setting is a graveyard where a gravedigger and his assistant are digging a grave while discussing whether or not the woman to be buried there deserves a Christian burial. It seems it is not clear whether she suicided or not.

Hamlet and Horatio enter and listen to the cheerful song of the gravedigger. As the latter throws up skulls while digging, Hamlet takes them up and ponders on who this once might have been – one of high birth now reduced to human equality. Hamlet exchanges wit with the gravedigger in this very comical scene until the skull of Yorick, former royal court jester is thrown up, and Hamlet is stirred to reminisce on this loved member of the court.

The King and Queen, Laertes, and company enter clearly observing the funeral of someone of noble birth. Horatio notes that the funeral rites are truncated. When Hamlet realises it is Ophelia who is to be buried, he is shocked, and upon witnessing Laertes' exaggerated, demonstrative grief, rushes forward in a rage to grapple with him and declare his love for Ophelia. Horatio and the company pull the two apart and Hamlet exits with Horatio.

The King reminds Laertes of the plan and asks him to be patient.

Act 5, Scene 2

Hamlet is speaking to Horatio of everything he has been through. He is calmer and more controlled than at any time in the play as he reflects back on his emotional state earlier in the course of events. He describes his discovery of Claudius' commission to the English King to kill him; and of how he wrote another, sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths in his stead, sealing the commission with his father's royal seal, haply in his purse. He is determined that Claudius should die, and he is sorry for his emotional outburst with Laertes in the graveyard.

The scene veers to a more comical vein when the courtier, Osric, enters bringing a request from Claudius that Hamlet take up Laertes' challenge. Hamlet accepts the challenge, though he admits that his heart is very uneasy. Horatio begs him to forfeit the duel, but Hamlet is philosophical about the outcome and about death itself – that it will come now or later; it does not matter which.

The whole court enter for the challenge and as the King takes both Hamlet and Laertes' hands, Hamlet apologises eloquently and at length to Laertes, blaming his madness for any wrong he has committed against him.

The King speaks proudly and with largess of Hamlet's abilities and his own confidence in the prince's victory. He sets the poisoned cup for Hamlet's refreshment, but Gertrude presently takes it and drinks from it against Claudius' warning. Both Hamlet and Laertes are wounded by the poisoned foils. The Queen then falls and dies, and Hamlet calls for the doors to be locked.

Laertes exposes the King's treachery and Hamlet wounds Claudius with the same foil and further forces him to drink from the poisoned cup. He dies at once. Laertes offers his forgiveness to Hamlet before dying.

Horatio attempts to drink what is left in the poisoned cup, but Hamlet begs him to live and report the prince's story to the world.

Fortinbras of Norway has arrived at court, triumphant from his campaign in Poland, and the dying Hamlet predicts that the kingship of Denmark will now go to him. He dies as Fortinbras enters the chamber.

The English ambassadors also enter and announce to the dead court that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern too are dead. Horatio orders that the bodies here be placed high on a stage where he can announce to the world of all the events which have led to this mass slaughter.

Fortinbras claims his right in this kingdom of Denmark and orders that Hamlet be given a soldier's march to the stage:

"For he was likely, had he been put on
To have prov'd most royal"

Act 5, Scene 2, lines 402-403.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSONS

“Alas poor Yorrick! I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times... Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning?”

Act 5, Scene 6, lines 178-186

So much has been lost to Hamlet since those days at the Elsinore court of his father, King Hamlet when the young Hamlet rode upon Yorrick’s back, heard the roaring laughter at his rude remarks, antic songs and jokes, and kissed Yorrick with all the exuberance of a trusting and optimistic youth. Hamlet was not to know the achingly long voyage through grief that was to be his destiny - a voyage that would see truth, love and idealism eroded down to an abyss of deceit, corruption, arrant evil, and at times, his own suicidal despair.

The graveyard scene of Act 5 seems to bring together all the forces and all the motions that will propel the play to its inevitable end. Hamlet draws so much from the graphic details of the decomposition process, the skulls and their possible identities, and sees it all as a crude confirmation of his rejection of human kind and of the very worthlessness of life itself. To him the final reality is that all deceit, all human greed, pretensions and infidelities are reduced to the unforeseen ignominy of being “knocked about the mazard with a sexton’s spade”.

Yet the crude and basic elements of this scene contain the germ of Hamlet’s reconciliation, resignation, and acceptance of this tortuous voyage through grief. He no longer rails against the gross human inadequacies and failings which surrounded him and obsessed him in the earlier stages of the play, and he discovers a pathway to the kind of peace and acceptance eventually expressed in his “Let be” speech (Act 5, Scene 2, lines 215-220).

What is it about this play that has caused it to endure for 400 years? How has it remained relevant to generations of people over four centuries of contrastingly different values, priorities, mores? Why is it regularly described as the greatest play (and the greatest work of literature) in the English language and, indeed in any language?

And why does it constantly fascinate? Why do we find new meanings, new resonances in every interpretation, whether on stage, film, television, or radio through a re-reading of the text or on sheer reflection of the work? Why does this play *allow* for so many and so varied personally inspired interpretations? Perhaps *because* Hamlet is an ever present voice in the play.

- **In the voyage towards discovering the man, Hamlet, we get nearer to discovering ourselves: do we identify with his sensitivity, his self-exploration, his cunning and survival strategies, his anger, his flashes of violence and cruelty, his decline into fatalism, his inability to suffer fools gladly, his disillusionment, his loathing of hypocrites? Or does all this just add up to our identifying with his *humanity*?**

To condemn or even lose patience with Hamlet's indecision, his procrastination, his mood swings, his constant thought construction and de-construction concerning his mission of revenge is to be quite certain that *we* would act differently; that we would act with absolute decisiveness and just get on with job - rather like Fortinbras with his tunnel vision of human values and total indifference to an individual's life. To yearn for Hamlet to act like Fortinbras is to deny us this voyage into the mind and soul of so compelling and fascinating a human being as Hamlet. In the introduction to his 1948 film, Laurence Olivier claims, "This is the story of a man who could not make up his mind." That is true, and Hamlet's recognition and self-examination of his own ability or unwillingness to avenge his father's murder is a core concern of the play, and central to its development. But the play is surely much more than this.

LESSON ONE – A VOYAGE INTO CORRUPTION

“It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
While rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen.”

Act 3, Scene 4, lines 147-49

It is very much worth discussing what sort of place Elsinore is under King Claudius’s regime. What sort of ‘prison’ is it? Some come reluctantly to the place, some come for personal gain, while others seek to get out. How did the state of Denmark become ‘rotten’? Apart from Claudius, who else has been taking an active part that:

“Makes us traduc’d and tax’d of other nations.
They clepe us drunkards and with swinish phrase
Soil our addition.”

Act 1, Scene 4, lines 18-20

Clearly the court at Elsinore is the perfect place for the **spying game**: a usurper’s kingdom is the natural breeding ground for suspicion, and suspicion graduates to espionage on a grand scale. Eventually almost everyone at court, whether willingly or not, whether knowingly or not, is caught up in the spying game, and is *infected* by Claudius’ dissembling and insincerity.

Of course, Claudius is the mainspring of the ‘rot’ along with his gang of opportunists. In his opening words to the assembled court, Claudius is unctuous and fulsome in the extreme, and this is accentuated by his heavy use of the royal plural:

“Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother’s death
The memory be green, and that it us befitted
To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom...”

Act 1, Scene 2, lines 1-3

And then, a little later, he resorts to flattery – a corruption of the truth – with these ingratiating acknowledgements to the court’s acquiescence to his accession and marriage with the widowed queen:

“Nor have we herein barr’d
Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone
With this affair along: for all, our thanks.”

Act 1, Scene 2, lines 14-16

Laertes' request to return to France provides Claudius with a wonderful opportunity for a display of kingly largesse, graciousness and justice:

“You cannot speak of reason to the Dane
And lose your voice. What wouldst thou beg, Laertes,
That shall not be my offer, not thy asking? ...”

Act 1, Scene 2, lines 44-46...

These are indeed the words of a consummate diplomat. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether Claudius would have the intellect or sensitivity to find any reason for concern or alarm in the ambiguous, subtle reply Hamlet offers to the King's question as to why “the clouds still hang” on him: “Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun.”

And what implications to himself would Claudius see in Hamlet's reply to his mother's question of the length and depth of his mourning for his father? “Seems, madam? Nay, it is; I know not seems”. Seizing on this stinging suggestion that his grief is not genuine, Hamlet describes the typical outward signs and false behaviour of those *affecting* genuine grief, concluding with:

“These indeed “seem”,
For they are actions that a man might play.
But I have that within which passeth show –
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.”

Act 1, Scene 2, lines 83-86

Hamlet's reply to his mother finds a wonderful echo later when Claudius works on Laertes to finally dispose of Hamlet:

“Laertes, was your father dear to you?
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,
A face without a heart”

Act 4, Scene 7, lines 106-108

This suggests that Hamlet's response to Claudius in the first act of the play *did* register with the King, but he soon regained his bluster. Seizing on Hamlet's agreement to stay at Elsinore, he gushes: “This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet / Sits smiling to my heart...”, with this apparent confirmation of his success and security as a usurping monarch, Claudius terminates the audience and commands a celebratory drink!

But soon after this assembly of the court, King Claudius and Queen Gertrude have hastily sent for Hamlet's fellow-students, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In his speech of welcome to them there is little to suggest that Claudius feels any threat to his kingly status or personal safety arising from Hamlet's behaviour:

“What it should be,
More than his father's death... I cannot dream of.”

Act 2, Scene 2, lines 7-10

And:

“...and to gather
So much as from occasion you may glean,
Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus,
That, opened, lies within our remedy.”

Act 2, Scene 2, lines 15-18

Of course, the towering irony contained in the King's interpretation of the causes of Hamlet's 'transformation' as he describes it to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can scarcely escape us. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest at this moment that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's mission goes beyond the terms of the King's request. Such a mission with its ostensibly genuine intent can hardly qualify as spying in a malevolent way.

Our voyage into corruption has not yet started its descent into the abyss. It is as well to sift the *textual* evidence as to what *intentional* part Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play in the descent: Hamlet greets them with obvious delight. And then a creeping cloud of doubt, of suspicion, discolours the light-heartedness of the scene:

“Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it
a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly with me.
Come, come. Nay, speak.”

Act 2 Scene 2, 274-276

And what do we read into Hamlet's aside: “Nay, then, I have an eye of you?” But Hamlet *is* suspicious.

- **The intrigue and corruption surrounding Hamlet might be compared to that surrounding an honest detective in a modern Mafioso film. The students might like to draw the comparison to help them relate to the level of danger and evil enveloping Hamlet.**

To Hamlet, all Denmark is a prison, and as such the poison of suspicion is endemic there and self-generating. From Hamlet's first reunion with his schoolfellows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and that hint of suspicion as to their motive in coming to Elsinore, we witness the progressive stages of that poison. Later, Rosencrantz asks of Hamlet: “Take you me for a sponge, my lord?” And Hamlet's reply is blunt and piercing:

“Ay, sir, that soaks up the king's countenance, his rewards, his
authorities. But such officers do the king best service in the end... When
he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you and, sponge,
you shall be dry again.”

Act 4 Scene 2, lines 14-20

Earlier, Hamlet, when talking to his mother about his departure for England, refers to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as: "...my two schoolfellows, / Whom I will trust as I will adders fanged...". He suspects their real reason for being in Elsinore and, convinced that they are active accomplices in the King's machinations, engineers their deaths:

" ... Let it work.
For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petard; and 't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon."

Act 3 Scene 4, 7-11

Hamlet, now "be-netted round with villainies" feels totally justified in having Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed: "Why, man, they did make love to their employment. / They are not near my conscience."

As far as Hamlet's dealings with his schoolfellows are concerned, the poison has completed that part of its voyage, and seems to have brutalised its main victim – Hamlet himself.

As our voyage into corruption continues and, as events transpire, we would have to question whether or not Claudius has the essential qualifications to make him an archetypal villain. After all, his regime at Elsinore is a fairly fragile thing; it relies too heavily on a network of spying, on the intrusive advice of the likes of Polonius, on the ambivalent contribution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, on the confusion and divided loyalties of Queen Gertrude and, of course, disastrously on the impulsive, hot-headed Laertes who is too grief-stricken and vengeance-bound to dispassionately question the King's *real* motive in enlisting his services in finally getting rid of Hamlet.

But Claudius lacks the two essential requirements that make for a tyrannical villain: to be unswervingly *consistent* in thought, feelings and action and, secondly, to have *no conscience*. It is difficult to imagine Hitler or Idi Amin or indeed Shakespeare's Richard III or Iago entertaining the attacks of conscience that Claudius undergoes: "How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!...". Act 3, Scene 1, lines 49-54.

And, of course, this attack of conscience comes well before the 'conscience catching' play-within-a-play. Similarly, the well-honed tyrant would be most unlikely to even contemplate thoughts such as:

"O, my offence is rank. It smells to heaven.
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder..."

Act 3, Scene 3, lines 36-72

The archetypal villain needs a good brain, the capacity to make unerringly right decisions, to have x-ray vision into the minds and motives of his accomplices and victims, and, most essentially, a capacity to maintain his 'cool' in all situations. But in all of these we find Claudius significantly lacking.

- **Why couldn't he have *brazened it out* at the play-within-the-play, just as he unctuously brazened out his mourning for his brother, his accession to the throne and his extraordinarily swift and openly lustful marriage with Queen Gertrude, all of which we heard in the first act of the play? Instead, he flees the hall, raises speculations and suspicions among the assembly, and gives Hamlet the proof he seeks.**

And then we would have to wonder why Claudius would have such confidence in a person like Polonius, to allow him to take on the delicate mission of overhearing what mother and son would have to say to each other in her closet scene – information which could, once and for all, establish for Claudius just what Hamlet knows, or even suspects, about Claudius' sudden accession to the throne.

- **We have to question whether Claudius is an efficient ruler or is he too busy with 'what's eating Hamlet?' What do the students think?**

The results of this disastrous miscalculation on Claudius' part give a new momentum to the voyage into corruption; from the play-within-the-play, things are out of control. Hamlet has his evidence, and Claudius plunges into strategies which have irreversible consequences: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's commission to convey Hamlet to England to his execution *and* to his enlisting Laertes in a desperate bid to finally free himself from Hamlet.

Claudius' 'seduction' of Laertes can be seen as a gross and fatal miscalculation on his part, as well as an act of evil second only to the murder of his brother. This seduction is built around a sequence of cunning challenges, testing, subtle goading, questioning and provoking – all directed to the hapless Laertes. And he will even go so far as to sanctify the murder of Hamlet:

“...What would you undertake
To show yourself in deed your father's son
More than in words?...
Revenge should have no bounds.”

Act 4, Scene 7, lines 122-124 & 127

By the end of Act 4, Hamlet and Laertes are on identical voyages – voyages towards avenging their respective fathers' murders. Of course, neither man is inherently evil – each of their respective voyages starts from youthful innocence, but ends with each being corrupted.

As the play reaches its dramatic climax, none of the principals can escape from the contagion.

Indeed, vengeance has no bounds and in the final moments of the play the dead King Hamlet, Hamlet himself and Laertes each have the revenge they sought. With the death of the arch-corrupter, Claudius, the voyage is over.

In the final exchange between Hamlet and Laertes there is an almost liturgical absolution of any part they have played wittingly or otherwise in the rank corruption that has so blighted their young lives. Laertes asks of Hamlet:

“Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet.
Mine and my father’s death come not upon thee.
Nor thine on me!”

Act 5 Scene 2, lines 334-336

And from Hamlet: “Heaven make thee free of it! I follow thee.”

LESSON TWO – SHAKESPEARE, TRAGEDY AND HAMLET

“So oft it chances in particular men
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty...

Or by some habit, that too much o’erleavens
The form of plausible manners – that these men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect...

Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. The dram evil
Doth all the noble substance often doubt
To his own scandal.”

Act 1, Scene 4, lines 23 - 38

Hamlet was the first real tragedy of Shakespeare’s output. Certainly there are tragic figures in earlier plays but *Hamlet* broke new ground, and in the passage quoted above, he gave notice of his approach to great tragic individuals of this play and those to come – Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, and Coriolanus.

As Professor Edward Hubler has written in the preface to the Signet version of the play:

“Tragedy of the first order is a rare phenomenon. It came into being in Greece in the fifth century BC, where it flourished for a while, and it did not appear again until some two thousand years later when Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in 1600.¹”

But Shakespearean tragedy differs greatly from the Greek. Humour often plays a significant part and we cannot fail to notice that all dramatic genres are present in *Hamlet*. There is a sense of history for much of what he presents about Denmark represents what was the Elizabethan conception of that country. There is rich comedy in the magnificent graveyard scene, amusement at the verbosity of the pompous Polonius, and black comedy in the cutting wit and deliberate misconceptions of Hamlet. There is satire in Hamlet’s treatment of Polonius, romance, and of course, deep tragedy.

“...he knew that the difference between comedy and tragedy has nothing to do with subject matter. Each has a way of looking at life. Neither gives us a total view of life, nor does Shakespeare in his use of both; but he approaches totality more closely than any other dramatist.²”

It can be argued that in the character of Hamlet, he came closer to depicting the individual human being more than anyone before or since.

¹ Hubler /Signet Edition Preface p xxi

² Hubler /Signet Edition Preface p xxi

HAMLET'S WORLD

- **What do we learn of Hamlet's character early in the play and during the course of the play? What does Shakespeare intend us to think of him?**

In his opening scene he is gracious to Horatio and to the keepers of the watch. He is a prince but he displays the common touch with no hint of being patronising. He admired his father. Hamlet's bravery is not in doubt: in Act 1, Scene 4, he will follow the ghost, against the importunes of his companions, not knowing whether this spectre is good or evil. He has been courteous and gentle in his wooing of Ophelia who reports him to have "importuned me with love in honourable fashion". Later in the play, Ophelia recalls the Hamlet who was the honourable lover but who now gives all the appearance of madness:

"O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th' observ'd of all observers, quite, quite down!"

Act 3, Scene 1, lines 152-156

He is sensitive and scholarly. His use of language places him on a level of refinement that other characters rarely approach. His studiousness is apparent from his hours spent reading, an image which places him in juxtaposition with others at Elsinore where carousing is the more popular pastime, royal or not.

However, we cannot overlook his physical attributes. Ophelia remembers him as a soldier. He is a champion fencer and his quickness of action, even impetuosity are evidenced in his killing of Polonius, his boarding of the pirate ship, his leaping into Ophelia's grave and his acceptance of a fencing challenge by Laertes.

Late in the play, King Claudius, acknowledges that Hamlet is "lov'd of the distracted multitude" and excuses himself to Laertes for not having avenged the death of Polonius because of the great "love the general gender bear him". But the same Claudius can bring about his death in the duel because Hamlet will not "peruse the foils" as he is "most generous, and free from all contriving".

Although the odd production over the years has attempted to portray a somewhat villainous Hamlet, there can be no doubt that Shakespeare intends us to admire a sensitive, idealistic and noble young man.

- **This is an ideal point of discussion for the students: how many of them find a picture of the thoroughly *modern* man, perhaps 400 years ahead of his time, the 'SNAG' in Hamlet and why?**
- **What are the contrary views in the group? And why?**
- **When in the play does Hamlet think and behave like an Elizabethan man, if at all?**

- **Some audience members do feel Hamlet – Indeed Shakespeare as a writer – condescends to lower class characters at times. This can depend very much on the touch of the actor playing the role and indeed the pre-conceived social ideas each audience member brings to the play, but what do the students think?**
- **How would the students themselves approach such scenes if they were playing the role of Hamlet?**

But something has happened to Hamlet. He has become deeply melancholy. It is as well for us to recall that early in the play Hamlet is unaware that his father has been murdered. His first soliloquy wherein he seems to long for death, bemoans the Christian strictures against suicide, laments his mother's hasty marriage after the death of his father – and especially to one so infinitely inferior – evidences his early emotional state:

“... That it should come to this!
 But two months dead – nay not so much, not two-
 So excellent a king, that was to this
 Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
 that he might not beteem the winds of heaven
 visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
 Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
 As if increase of appetite had grown
 By what it fed on. And yet within a month –
 Let me not think on't.- frailty thy name is woman-
 A little month, or ere those shoes were old
 With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
 Like Niobe, all tears – why, she -
 O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
 Would have mourned longer – married with my uncle,
 My father's brother, but no more like my father
 Than I to Hercules. Within a month,
 Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
 Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,
 She married. O most wicked speed, to post
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
 It is not nor it cannot come to good.
 But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.”

Act 1, Scene 2, lines 137-158

So the melancholic Hamlet is soon to hear worse tidings. He will learn of his father's murder. At the same time he will be given the task of revenge which will stir him to ponder questions so weighty they will be almost beyond bearing.

But he fails to act, to take revenge. He is outwardly passive, yet is inwardly extremely active. He ponders the big questions of life and death and begins a most introspective journey – no other play by Shakespeare makes such use of soliloquy.

- **How does this inner activity and outer passivity appear to the other characters? Students can look out for this as they watch the play.**

- **Why does Hamlet behave in such an enigmatic way in several key scenes?**

So significant a scene as Ophelia's report in Act 2, Scene 1 of Hamlet bursting in on her in a state of undress might be overlooked by an audience and the students might be asked to look out for it as it is of much relevance to Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship which will be discussed in greater detail in Lesson Five.

- **Is Hamlet trying to see right inside Ophelia, to see the frailty of woman – his reaction to his disgust at his mother?**
- **Is he a young man desperate to confide all the horrors of what the ghost has told him to the woman he loves?**
- **Ophelia says, "That done, he let's me go." Has he let her go in a much greater sense than just physically at this point? The students might be asked to observe what happens in the Hamlet and Ophelia relationship the next time they meet.**

A PLAY OF QUESTIONS AND ENIGMA

There can be no doubt that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's best-known tragic character. There is also no doubt that the reasons for Hamlet's tragedy are more elusive to discover than any other. We are in no doubt of Othello's jealousy or Macbeth's ambition, but what of Hamlet?

Hamlet is a play of questions. Indeed there are seven questions asked in the first twenty-four lines. The opening of the play is mysterious – night, cold battlement, swirling mist, the possibility of a spectral appearance. "Who's there?" "Barnardo?" "Have you had quiet guard?" "Has the thing appeared again tonight?" The scene is disconcerting to the audience who must wonder where they are and what is happening.

As the act unfolds we might very well be expecting another revenge drama. But what we get, is something very different. Hamlet, far from carrying out actions of revenge, begins to question, to speak riddles to the King, the Queen and to Polonius, to mouth obscenities to Ophelia and to display a great deal of malicious wit and repartee. Hamlet's interrogation of both self and life is shared with the audience by way of the soliloquies, but these do not provide answers for Hamlet. Sometimes they appear to strengthen his resolve to act, but even then, he fails to act subsequently.

The major soliloquies are quoted in full at the end of Lesson Five.

LESSON 3 – A VOYAGE THROUGH GRIEF

When we meet Hamlet alone for the first time in Act 1, Scene 2 we discover a man reeling under the torment of what is virtually a triple grief: grief for his father, grief for the loss of his love and belief in his mother, and grief for his loss of faith in all human kind. He is alone, isolated in his grief and in a world which to him is no more than an “unweeded garden”, choked by all that is “rank and gross”. Hamlet condemns and rejects this world of infidelity, superficiality, insincerity and, he suspects, treachery. We hear the words and thoughts that express total disillusionment and betrayal of all that he values:

“Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on. And yet within a month –
Let me not think on’t.”

Act 1, Scene 2, lines 142-146

And then in an outcry of incredulity:

“O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer – married with my uncle,
My father’s brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,
She married. O most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not nor it cannot come to good.
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.”

Act 1, Scene 2, lines 150-158

Cynicism and bitterness take hold of Hamlet until he universalises all those human failings that now seem to have ‘be-netted’ him in their web-like clasp. And as his voyage through grief continues, his rejection and condemnation of those acts and attitudes that surround him now find a voice – a voice that expresses itself in attack. He spares no one: his mother, Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and, most certainly, himself.

In Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet confronts his own brand of shallowness, infidelity and hypocrisy. Stung by the First Player’s rendering of Hecuba’s grief over the slaughter of her husband, a grief graphically portrayed by the actor to such a depth of feeling that Hamlet plunges into a torrent of self-revulsion, self-contempt and withering condemnation of his own procrastination, his own seeming infidelity in not having by then “fatted all the region kites / With this slave’s offal.” Forgiving nothing, excusing nothing, in a rage of self-guilt and recrimination, he declares:

“For it cannot be
But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall...”

Act 2, Scene 2, lines 572-573

“Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Mist like a whore unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A scullion! ... About, my brains”

Act 2, Scene 2, lines 578-584

He rouses, and suddenly the whole tone of his black introspection springs into a brilliant flash of positiveness: here now is a *project*, a *purpose*, a *reawakening*.

“I’ll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I’ll observe his looks.
I’ll tent him to the quick. If ‘a but blench,
I know my course.”

Act 2, Scene 2, lines 590-594

“I know my course” Hamlet exclaims in a spirit of excitement, of triumph, even of joy. It is the turning point in his voyage, a revitalised Hamlet defying any consequences. Claudius will be the first and prime victim of his rekindled vendetta, the root of the infection in this “rank and gross”, “unweeded garden”.

- **It is also significant that Hamlet has found his confidence in the intellectual and artistic arena, not in the direct, physical act of revenge. The students might like to discuss how this brings us closer to understanding who Hamlet is as a person.**

But it is the hapless Ophelia who will be the first to feel the onslaught of Hamlet’s revitalisation, as she sits in the lobby – the stooge of Claudius and her father. In a tirade against what he has universalised as the frailty and deceitfulness of all women – no doubt stemming from what he sees as his mother’s inexplicable absence of genuine grief over the death of her husband and, of course, the speed of her remarriage – he challenges Ophelia with his wounding, acidic onslaught:

“I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp. You nickname God’s creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I’ll no more on’t. It hath made me mad. I say we will have no more marriage. Those that are married already – all but one – shall live. The rest shall keep as they are.”

Act 3, Scene 1, lines 144-151

There is so much anger, so much bitterness in this jaundiced view of women, a view and judgement that does not moderate during his voyage through grief.

It is somewhat tantalising to ponder whether Hamlet suspects that there are others overhearing his conversation with Ophelia. Much, or all, of what he says to her could be coloured by such a suspicion. Why, we might ask, does Hamlet suddenly break off from his exchange with Ophelia to bluntly ask, “Where’s your father?” and, moreover, who else but the King does Hamlet have in mind in his decree, “I say we will have no more marriage. Those that are married already – *all but one* – shall live?”

But now to Gertrude. Hamlet sees her guilt as on the same level or degree of betrayal and treachery as that of his uncle. He prepares himself for their encounter:

“Soft, now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature, Let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.
Let me be cruel, not unnatural.
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.”

Act 3, Scene 3, lines 383-287

He does not allow himself the highly charged verbal assault that he levelled at Ophelia, but instead chooses words and a tone that suggest a calculated calmness which gives added sharpness to his “daggers”. The Queen pleads (or warns); “Have you forgot me?” only to hear a reply that no mother would ever wish to hear:

“No, by the rood, not so!
You are the Queen, your husband’s brother’s wife,
And, would it were not so, you are my mother.”

Act 3, Scene 4, lines 13 -15

Then we hear the ring of chilling sarcasm in his challenge or, indeed, in his outright accusation: “A bloody deed – almost as bad, good mother, / As kill a king and marry with his brother.”

Hamlet then abandons the calm rejection of his mother in a rising crescendo of anger and contempt for the woman he sees before him. His words take on a metallic and physical thrust as he forces his mother to confront what he regards as a betrayal of all human values:

“Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty...”

Act 2, Scene 4, lines 92-95

The rage, the anger is crippling in its intensity. Hamlet’s grief finds its real author to be in fact his own mother, and in that he seems to find a more satisfying target for his vengeance than he would in fulfilling the ghost’s charge to “revenge his foul and most unnatural murder”.

With the ghost's departure from this scene, there is a complete change in tone and tempo. Whilst Hamlet does not retract any of what he has said to his mother, we sense that he now genuinely wants to obey the ghost's appeal to "step between her and her fighting soul". Indeed, the scene becomes calm, the calm of a near reconciliation between mother and son.

- **Is this because of the ghost's bidding, or could it be that his mother's anguished pleas for mercy have aroused a kind of pity in Hamlet for what he sees is a misguided, weak creature who just does not share his values nor his deep grief for his father?**
- **Or, perhaps the isolation in which he now finds himself is of such intensity that Hamlet feels a *need* for his birth mother. As young people who can identify with the youth of Hamlet in this production, the students might share their insights.**

Whatever the reason, the scene draws to a close with no daggers nor the "soul of Nero", but with Hamlet seeking his mother's abjuration to "throw away the worser part of it / And live the purer with the other half".

How far has Hamlet come, in his voyage through grief? He has given vent to his feelings about two of his agents of disillusionment, Ophelia and his mother. But there still remains the King who, so far, has escaped Hamlet's verbal or physical assault. And there still remains the legacy of the King – that microcosm of the world he has condemned and rejected – that prison which, to him, is the court at Elsinore.

With his sworn commitment to avenge his father's murder still not fulfilled, Hamlet now turns to another form of revenge: he will mock and ridicule to the utmost that world he has condemned, and treat it with all the overt derision his wit can summon. And Hamlet's wit in the art of *mockery* serves him well. In some instances it can take on a bitter and challenging taunting, such as Hamlet's description to Claudius of the theme of the play-within-the-play:

"Tis is a knavish piece of work.
But what of that?
Your majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not."

Act 2, Scene 2, lines 225-227

And, of course, Hamlet's rejoinder to Ophelia's "you are merry, my Lord":

"What should a man do but be merry? For look you how cheerfully
my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours."

Act 3, Scene 2, lines 123-25

And again to Ophelia's "Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord":

"So long? O heavens! Die two months ago, and not forgotten yet? Then there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year."

Act 3, Scene 2, lines 128-30

But Hamlet's wit can take on a much bolder, a more direct thrust at its target, as we hear in his reply to Claudius's question, "Where is Polonius?"

"...You shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby."

Act 4, Scene 3, line 36

But it is Polonius who is targeted unceasingly throughout the play, the constant butt of Hamlet's inexhaustible repertoire of gibes, word-play, taunts and flagrant mockery. Poor Polonius contrives a casual encounter with Hamlet in order to prove to the King and Queen that he has found the source of Hamlet's 'madness'. Probing for evidence, he asks Hamlet what he is reading. Hamlet's answer can hardly be interpreted as anything other than a direct and total reference to Polonius himself:

"Slanders, sir. For the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams; all which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down, for yourself, sir, should be as old as I am – if, like a crab, you could go backward.

Act 2, Scene 2, lines 196-204

And Hamlet must have enjoyed the opportunity to ridicule Polonius in front of the assembled court as they prepare to see the play-within-the-play. Polonius boasts of his acting prowess, declaring that he once "did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th' Capitol. Brutus killed me." How could Hamlet resist this opportunity: "It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there."

- **The students might be asked to find more of the gibes, taunts and mockeries in the text that Hamlet directs at Polonius.**
- **Do they attribute the jibes and word-plays to Hamlet's madness as Polonius does?**

A voyage through grief takes time, and embraces many stages and reactions. Hamlet's grief has often been described as 'melancholia', an intense and long-lasting feeling of sadness. Today we may well describe it as 'depression'. One of the common results of being depressed is inaction, and this is certainly true of Hamlet, whose failure to act is linked closely to the disgust and alienation that he feels about Elsinore and his immediate family. By his own admission he is apathetic and weary. In addition, he finds it hard to

understand *why* he is unable to take decisive action. The voyage towards acceptance, reconciliation, even action, is slow - but it *does* take place.

"I must to England. You know that?" Hamlet asks his mother. "Alack, I had forgot..." she replies. We can only speculate as to the tone and feeling within this exchange.

- **Is this voyage to England to be literally the end of the voyage through grief, or do Hamlet and his mother both sense, or even know, that it could be a voyage to Hamlet's death?**

He is fast approaching and assigning his life to fate. He is emotionally and spiritually exhausted. He tells Horatio, some little time later in Act 5, Scene 2, "But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart. But it is no matter." Indeed, he expresses no concern, no fear about the 'sporting' bout between Laertes and himself; whatever the outcome, he will consign that to fate. He simply tells Horatio:

"... we defy augury. There is a special providence
in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not
to come. If it be not come, it will be now. If it
be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.
Since no man knows of aught he leaves, what is't to
leave betimes? Let be."

Act 5, Scene 2, lines 215-220

There is a wonderful rallying of strength and defiance in this fatalistic acceptance of the real significance of life and death. To be ready for death is all that matters. No one knows what happens after death, "the undiscovered country, from whose bourn / no traveller returns" – so what does it matter when or where one dies?

- **But in all of this, is there not a quiet longing in Hamlet's heart that this voyage through grief should come to an end?**

LESSON FOUR – THE GENERATION GAP

Marcellus Is it not like the king?

Horatio As thou art to thyself.
Such was the very armour he had on
When he th' ambitious Norway combated.
So frown'd he once, when in an angry parle
He smote the sledded Pollacks on the ice

Act 1, Scene 2, lines 61-67

Horatio and the guard Marcellus give us a description of the ghost of the dead King Hamlet. In speaking of him, Horatio reports his warlike exploits, successes on the field of battle and later, when reporting the apparition to young Hamlet, he describes the figure as fully armed from head to toe. In the swirling mists at night on the cold battlements of Elsinore Castle, the apparition must have looked every inch the fearsome Nordic warrior.

What a contrast there is between this picture and that of young Hamlet, the melancholy young man, dressed in black by his first entry stage direction and again later as Ophelia waits for him (Act 2, Scene 2, line 168) when the directions read: "Enter Hamlet reading a book".

How far from the Nordic warrior is this inward, intellectual university student. It might be said that the two Hamlets share little else but a name. Yet King Hamlet imposes a task upon his son which ultimately he fails to perform, for although Claudius does eventually die at Hamlet's hand, we must question whether this achieves revenge for the Old king. This is explored further in Lesson Five.

Hamlet loves his father, and his immediate reaction is to obey, but as we know, something prevents him. He is prompted to examine himself and convince himself of the rightness or otherwise of such action. Old Hamlet, given a similar task would not think twice. But his son is of a different generation. He is a different individual and has had a different education, and there occurs in him a rising of individual consciousness that clashes with parental direction.

- **Parental direction and expectation is a real issue for young people. What are the students' experiences with this issue?**
- **Do they agree that this is an issue for Hamlet?**
- **Does Hamlet's ability or inability to handle the issue contribute to the ultimate tragedy?**
- **Does Hamlet philosophise too much without acting quickly – Should he either obey his father or reject him?**
- **Could Hamlet have found another way to overthrow Claudius?**

- **If Hamlet longs for the world of Elsinore that his father built, why doesn't he just stand up and fight down Claudius and the corrupt world he in turn has built? What is stopping him?**
- **There is an arguable case that Hamlet does not procrastinate at all – despite his self-recriminations. Find evidence to support this argument.**

It is often proposed, and with good reason, that Hamlet displays a lack of balance. He is bound up in the intellect and this leads him to become quite undisciplined in the areas of action and emotion. When he thinks too much, he spares Claudius at his prayers. When he acts without thinking, he kills Polonius instead of Claudius. His emotions become so distracted by his mother's marriage that he sees only abhorrence in womanhood and he becomes responsible for the madness and death of the innocent, loving Ophelia. He peremptorily sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, but shows no remorse for any of his actions – only for what he has failed to do – until the final act of the play.

- **Could it not be that given a practical, balanced approach he might have gained revenge on Claudius by overthrowing him?**

He does bring about remorse in his mother and she might well have sided with him. A true revelation of the facts could have made an ally of Laertes, rather than an enemy, but Hamlet's inner intellectual searching leaves nothing of practicality.

Hamlet is not the only tragic figure to receive instructions from a father in the play. Significantly, before Hamlet is confronted by his father's ghost, both Laertes and Ophelia receive instructions from Polonius. Laertes proves ultimately to lack a balanced personality as his active will overrules his intellect and he becomes the dupe of Claudius.

- **The destinies of all the young people in the play – Hamlet, Laertes, Ophelia and Fortinbras – are indeed affected by the fates and actions of their fathers. Discuss and compare why and what other choices each could have made.**
- **How was this idea realised in the Bell Shakespeare production?**

MINOR CHARACTERS

POLONIUS

“This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

Act 1, Scene 2, lines 78-80

The shallowness of Polonius is demonstrated in his immediate action after delivering this, the last of his ‘off the shelf’ maxims to his son, Laertes. He takes aside his servant Reynaldo, and sends him to France to spread false information of minor vices of Laertes—of gaming, drinking, swearing, and womanising in order to elicit information about Laertes’ real behaviour there.

“Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth;
And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out.”

Act 2, Scene 1, lines 63-66

Devious is the best description of Polonius. He is at home behind an arras hiding and spying. Suspicious at first of Hamlet’s intentions toward Ophelia, he subsequently feels that the prince’s love for his daughter is the cause of his distraction, so he sets up Ophelia as a decoy so that he can spy on them. Ultimately, of course, the hiding and spying bring about his undoing.

Polonius does provide some humour for the play. His garrulousness is amusing:

“My liege and madam, to expostulate
What majesty should be, what duty is,
Why day is day, night night, and time is time,
Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time.
Therefore since brevity is the soul of wit,
And tediousness the limbo and outward flourishes,
I will be brief.”

Act 2, Scene 2, lines 86-92

The scant regard in which Hamlet is held is clear in the prince’s words as he drags the old man’s corpse:

“...this counsellor
is now most still, most secret, and most grave,
who was in life a foolish prating knave.”

Act 3, Scene 4, lines 215-217

CLAUDIUS

“Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts-
O wicked wit, and gifts that have the power
So to seduce! – won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen.”

Act 1, Scene 4, lines 42-46

Claudius is the ‘satyr’ to Old Hamlet’s ‘hyperion’, the bestial to the god-like. In these two brothers it is as if Shakespeare is giving us the picture of the best and worst in man.

This brotherhood of god and beast, the good and evil, is brought to remembrance on at least two occasions. Hamlet remarks how times have changed for Claudius since he became king-

“Is it not strange; for my uncle is king of Denmark,
And those that would make mouths at him while
My father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for
His picture in little.”

Act 2, Scene 2, lines 359-362

Hamlet also brings portraits of her two husbands in his accusatory confrontation with his mother, holding them before her to heighten the comparison.

In the play arranged by Hamlet to “catch the conscience of the king”, the King’s conscience is indeed caught. However, he is sufficiently aware of self-preservation that before attempting prayer, he arranges Hamlet’s exile, for he has learnt from the play that his crime is known.

Claudius has no intention of giving up “those effects for which I did the murder / My crown, mine own ambition, and my Queen”, and Macbeth-like he will pursue a path of foul deeds to hold onto his crown. He must admit failure in prayer:

“My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
Words without thoughts never to heaven go”

Act 3, Scene 3, lines 97-98

GERTRUDE

Why did Gertrude marry so quickly? There is no evidence that she was involved in the plot to murder King Hamlet. There is evidence in Hamlet's first soliloquy that Gertrude is a sensual woman, even with Hamlet's father:

“...she would hang on him
as if increase of appetite had grown
by what it fed on”

Act 1, Scene 2, lines 143-145

And the ghost gives more than a hint that his brother had the power:

“So to seduce! – won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen”

Act 1, Scene 5, lines 45-46

The use of the words ‘will’ and ‘seeming virtuous’ are significant.

Gertrude undoubtedly loves her son and wants him restored to health. He eventually makes her confront her shameful second marriage, extracts from her words of repentance, and seems to obtain her assurance of eschewing her husband's bed. Although Gertrude does remain at Claudius' side throughout the play, there is no doubt she is conscious-stricken and we can only surmise as to whether she does refrain from visiting his bed.

- **Gertrude is something of an enigma- we do not really understand her motivations. Discuss her character as it was interpreted in the Bell production: Was her motivation for marrying an inferior man like Claudius evident at any point?**
- **Can the students proffer any reasons for her evident lack of grief over her first husband's death?**
- **If the female students had to play the role, how would they motivate this character? Why does she do what she does?**

HORATIO

HAMLET Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
As e'er my conversation cop'd withal.

HORATIO O my dear lord.

HAMLET ...Nay, do not think I flatter,
For what advancement may I hope from thee
That no revenue hast but thy good spirits
To feed and clothe thee?...

...Dost thou hear me?
Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,
And could of men distinguish her election,
Sh'ath seal'd thee for herself; for thou has been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks.

Act 3, Scene 2, lines 54-59 & 62-68

In this speech Hamlet is preparing to ask Horatio to watch the King's reaction to The Murder of Gonzago play. Horatio is the trustworthy observer, somewhat sceptical, yet his word is accepted by all. The guard have Horatio observe the ghost before Hamlet, and the prince has him at his side in the graveyard scene from which point the prince begins to see everything more clearly.

Horatio is the personification of clarity. He is the one who carries on unaffected by the 'slings and arrows' of life. It is not for nothing that, at his death, Hamlet charges Horatio to tell the story and to pass the election of kingship to Fortinbras. Horatio is given the words of Hamlet's benediction:

"Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

Act 5, Scene 2, lines 364-365

THE MURDER OF GONZAGO

"...I'll have these players
play something like the murder of my father
before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;
I'll tent him to the quick. If a do blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is so potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

Act 2, Scene 2, lines 590-601

So Hamlet is still unsure of the ghost's credentials. He is overjoyed at hearing the players' arrival and the opportunity it provides.

- **The students will no doubt note that Hamlet, who has spent so much time until now speaking in jest, jibe, and riddle, is now, at the players' arrival so lucid.**

His instructions to the players make it clear as to how he wants the play performed and indeed reveals his knowledge on the subject.

So that the point is not lost on the King, the murder is enacted twice – first in dumb show and then with speech. The play also depicts a queen as an unfaithful wife and both player king and queen express regret for their actions. Claudius' reaction leaves Hamlet in no doubt as to his guilt and the prince is so overjoyed he bursts into song. But resolution is defeated as he comes across the king in prayer and thought again turns resolve to inaction. Almost immediately, in his mother's chamber, he rashly strikes at the noise behind the arras, and his sudden unthinking action results in the killing of Polonius.

- **Hamlet's soliloquy "By and by is easily said" (Act 3, Scene 3) shows him as ready for revenge as this man will ever be. Yet a few moments later he fails to kill Claudius because he is praying.**
- **It is well worth discussing what the Elizabethan audience's Christian understanding of Hamlet's hesitation might be.**
- **Refer to the ghost's lament on his own suffering Act 1, Scene 4 for reference.**
- **Given Hamlet's Christian understanding of the world, would the students hesitate also in his position?**

What is interesting about the play-within-the-play scene is what precedes and follows it. First there is Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech where Hamlet muses on death and the afterlife. He is caught in a dilemma which will not be resolved by the king's reaction to the play for what will death hold either for himself or for Claudius? But also before the play is his meeting with Ophelia in which his abhorrence of womanhood in its frailty leads him to puzzling words which cause her to fear for his mental well-being. In leaving her, he says:

"Go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad. I say we will have no more marriage. Those that are married already – all but one – shall live; the rest shall keep as they are."

Act 3, Scene 1, lines 148-151

He makes it clear to us, though not to Ophelia, that he will not marry her but he intends to kill the King.

Following the play is the confrontation with his mother. In this lucid tirade he achieves his purpose of raising remorse and repentance in her. But of course the cost is Polonius' life and added to this grief, there is Ophelia's concern for Hamlet, the loss of his love, and sadly, she is driven to insanity.

So although with the play-within-the-play Hamlet achieved the proof of Claudius' guilt, its effect upon the King was merely to warn him that his crime was discovered. Its effects on the female characters through action immediately before and after, are far more serious.

- **Exposing a corrupt individual in public is an excellent way for others – In this case, the whole court – to see the truth. Why doesn't it work?**

LESSON 5 – LANGUAGE

No other work in the English language has given us so much by way of quotation and proverb. There is, particularly in Hamlet's words, an aptness of expression and imagery, a resounding quality that make those words live on the mind. A few examples only will suffice, for the students will have heard familiar expressions as they watched the play.

- **To test their memories of which character said what, the students can try the quiz section of the Bell Shakespeare education website.**

“There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio,
than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

“Brevity is the soul of wit.”

“The time is out of joint.”

“Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.”

“To be or not to be.”

“I must be cruel to be kind.”

Every one of the soliloquies, inwardly searching as they are, evoke from Hamlet expression of the deepest yearning, suffering, and questioning that the audience cannot do anything but feel this character deeply. In comparison, the words of the other characters are more prosaic, contrasting effectively in their matter-of-factness with the inner turmoil of the prince.

Only on rare occasions, such as Ophelia's lament for Hamlet's “mind o'erthrown” and Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death, do other characters speak with the beauty of construction and imagery given to the prince.

OPHELIA

Ophelia is, after Hamlet, the most tragic figure in the play. Perhaps it is worthwhile summarising her appearances:

1. (Act 1, Scene 3) On Laertes' departure for France, she is exhorted to chastity by her brother who is aware of Hamlet's advances but doubts his will ever to marry her. Polonius follows this advice by ordering her to reject any advances Hamlet might make.
2. (Act 2, Scene 1) Ophelia reports to Polonius the strange appearance of the dishevelled Hamlet in her room, wherein he grasps her and stares at her wordlessly before leaving. Polonius believes from this that Hamlet has become distracted by rejected love.
3. (Act 3, Scene 1) Ophelia acts as a decoy for the King and Polonius who will observe the confrontation in an attempt to discover the reason for Hamlet's

malaise. Hamlet rejects her and vents on her his abhorrence of womanhood. 'Get thee to a nunnery, go...' Ophelia ends the scene with her 'O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown, speech.

4. (Act 3, Scene 2) Hamlet chooses Ophelia to sit with to observe the play-within-the-play. He lays his head on her lap and converses with her in double entendres at best, at worst, indecencies.
 5. Act 4, Scene 5) Polonius has earlier been killed by Hamlet. In this scene, Ophelia having lost Hamlet's love and now her father, comes to the King and Queen singing and quite distracted.
 6. (Act 4, Scene 7) Ophelia, quite deranged, reappears at court, this time with Laertes present. She presents flowers to the assembled company and departs singing.
 7. (Act 4, Scene 7) Gertrude reports the death of Ophelia.
- **What do we make of the character of Ophelia? Discussions might be interesting.**
 - **Critics often speak of her as one of Shakespeare's lesser heroines because of her fragility – a quality that is not valued in women these days. What do the students think?**
 - **How did Ophelia's fragility come across in the Bell Shakespeare production? Did the quality weaken her character, or was there a lot more to her?**
 - **If the students were playing this role in a modern production how would they handle her character? Would they attempt to make her a strong modern woman who understandably breaks under pressure? Or would they read her differently?**
 - **Why does Hamlet treat her so badly? Indeed does he treat her badly?**
 - **Does Ophelia reject Hamlet's love (as Polonius believes) or does Hamlet reject Ophelia?**

Taking the last question: why should Ophelia reject Hamlet – because Polonius told her to? It is easy for us to see in Ophelia an obedient daughter, but we would be insensitive not to see in this innocent and naïve girl, one who lives in the emotions. Her heart would still be with Hamlet, and her speech after she acts as a decoy is full of tenderness, concern at Hamlet's derangement, and indeed love. She is "Most deject and wretched, / That suck'd the honey of his music vows," and feels not only for Hamlet's loss of mind but also for his loss of love for her.

The other evidence we have is Hamlet's statement that "Frailty thy name is woman". He is appalled at his mother's behaviour. He comes to Ophelia and tries to see into her, and in his dark thoughts, Ophelia too becomes infected with his obsession with infidelity. From that moment on, he treats her with disdain. He sees the dark side of himself and

becomes obsessed with conception and breeding and he abhors the procreation of sinful human beings.

“What should such fellows as I do
crawling between earth and heaven,
We are arrant knaves all.”

Act 3, Scene 2, lines 128-30

Here is another example of Hamlet’s lack of balance and his failure to recognise that beauty and innocence can still exist in the world.

It is interesting to note some of the alternate meanings of words which Hamlet uses concerning Ophelia. At one stage (Act 2, Scene 2, line 174) he calls Polonius a “fishmonger”. But an alternate current allusion was that a fishmonger was one whose daughter had great propensity to breed. Hamlet follows up with a seemingly inappropriate statement that the sun breeds maggots in a dead dog, then asks if Polonius has a daughter. Of course he has and Hamlet knows it.

“Let her not walk i’ th’ sun. Conception is a blessing,
But as your daughter may conceive- Friend look to’t”

Act 2, Scene 2, lines 184-85

This is incomprehensible to Polonius but very clear to an audience, particularly with the two senses of conception – that is, mental and physical.

In their next meeting, Hamlet virtually orders Ophelia to take herself off to a nunnery. She will not breed there and only there will she retain a reputation for chastity. Should she remain in the world that Hamlet experiences, “be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny”. But there is also the sarcastic use of the word ‘nunnery’ here for ‘brothel’ and in his conversation with her at ‘The Murder of Gonzago’ play, he treats her as if she were a brothel inmate. She receives a veritable litany of indecencies and sexual double entendres – “lie in your lap”; “country matters”; a fair thought to lie between maid’s legs”; and even words like “nothing”, “naught”, “show”, “groaning”, and “edge” carry a fair bit of sexual innuendo, perhaps even more so to an Elizabethan audience.

Ophelia becomes deranged, she sings songs of lost and frustrated love and her songs do not avoid the sensual side of love. She bestows flowers, each flower of significance – rosemary for remembrance and pansies for thoughts, she gives to Laertes; fennel and columbines denote marital infidelity and are no doubt intended for the Queen, rue for repentance, for the King. The daisy of unhappy love must be for herself and she would give a violet (of faithfulness) but they “withered all when my father died.”

Gertrude later reports her death in an exquisite passage:

“There is a willow grows askant the brook
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream.
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make

Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,

But our cold maids so dead men's fingers call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clambring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death."

Act 4, Scene 7, lines 165-182

The conjecture over whether Ophelia committed suicide or not – and the latter is evidenced by Gertrude's description – meant that no holy rites could be given by the priest at her funeral. It is left to Laertes to speak, and his words are ironic:

...lay her in the earth
and from her fair and unpolluted flesh
may violets spring"

Act 5, Scene 1, lines 232-234

For it was Laertes who wanted her to keep her "chaste treasure" from Hamlet. Hamlet rejected her because:

"Although he sees the nobility of man, the beauty of women,
the majesty of the universe, what his imagination dwells on
is the quintessence of dust, the reason unused...
the nasty sty, the prison."³

- **In Act 4, Scene 7 Ophelia's deranged singing gives away some familiarity with the ways of men, and her language is even quite bawdy, leaving some to interpret that she and Hamlet *have* been sexually intimate at some point. The students might like to read the scene carefully and discuss their views.**
- **Which interpretation holds the greater tragedy for Ophelia as a character – that she died as an deranged innocent, with all of her love for Hamlet unfulfilled; or that she gave herself completely to Hamlet, (despite her father and brother's instructions) only to be rejected rather viciously by him?**
- **Which interpretation did the students see in the Bell production?**

³ Jenkins /Arden edition (2000) Introduction: p152

There is no doubt that here is a scene of absolute mastery. There is quite superb humour provided by the gravedigger, a common workman who gets on with the job he has to do. He is uneducated but he is the only character in the play who can match wit and jest with Hamlet. There is honest endeavour in the man and no hint of deviousness or malice.

- **In this scene where Hamlet comes to self-realisation and a proper understanding of the human condition, might not the gravedigger be an exemplar; might not Hamlet see in him, subconsciously, a true dignity of humanity?**
- **The students might like to search for textual support for this statement.**

Hamlet and Horatio come across the gravedigger at work, singing away and throwing up anonymous skulls as he discovers them. The scene continues good-humouredly with the banter between the characters until the gravedigger throws up a skull and names it, Yorrick.

Anonymity is at an end. Now Hamlet gazes at the skull of one he knew and learns more from it than he did by staring at Ophelia. Hamlet does not say much and he speaks in prose, vastly different from the introverted and wordy soliloquies. The visual image of the prince and skull convey a meaning that Hamlet has stopped philosophising about death and is now properly confronting it. In the skulls are the good and evil, the noble and the lowly, Alexander and Caesar, and the jester Yorrick. From his books Hamlet acquired concepts of humankind, "how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties"; he became beset by questions of death and life, "To be or not to be"; and from what was happening in the world, yet for all his intellect, he could make little sense of them. Hamlet spoke truly, though he meant it in jest, when he told Polonius early in the play that what he read was "words, words, words".

In the graveyard scene it seems that Hamlet confronts, realises, accepts and understands what it is to be human. He can accept death but he can also accept life. He can take and accept whatever comes; he can realise, when the moment comes, that he never stopped loving Ophelia and he can apologise to Laertes for the death of Polonius. The skulls of Alexander, Caesar and Yorrick once had a "tongue in it and could sing once" and it seems that we are all a part of those that are gone before as the same fate awaits us.

THE FINAL SCENE

It has often been remarked that Hamlet seems much older in Act 5 than previously. This, of course, is a reflection on his maturity. It is also often assumed that in the final scene he does eventually fulfil the ghost's command by taking revenge on Claudius. But we must question whether it is really revenge because Claudius is killed by Hamlet or if indeed revenge is any longer necessary. It is true that Hamlet is now in no doubt that he should kill Claudius and that the King surely deserves it, but this comes mostly from Hamlet's realisation that the King was devising Hamlet's death:

"Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon-
He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother,

Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life
And with such coz'nage – is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?"

Act 5 ,Scene 2, lines 63-70

Notice that there is no mention here of the ghost's charge to Hamlet.

Although Hamlet has come to self-realisation and acceptance of life and death, events have gone so far that final tragedy cannot be averted. Again we are at the question of what is Hamlet's tragedy?

- **Is it the tragedy of one who cannot make up his mind?**
- **Is it of one who thinks too much or too well?**
- **Is it of failure to understand the human condition until too late?**
- **Is it the tragedy of one immersed in moral idealism?**
- **Is it the tragedy of not being able to live up to the expectations and demands of the previous generation?**
- **Is Hamlet's tragedy that of a man who is well ahead of his time?**
- **Where was the tragedy for each of the students in the Bell production?**

There are many other possibilities. To categorise the cause of the tragedy of Hamlet is more than elusive. It is an open question in a play of questions.

"Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly-
And prais'd be rashness for it: let us know
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
There's divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will"

Act 5, Scene 2, lines 4-11

Aptly it is Horatio to whom Hamlet speaks at the beginning of the final scene where it could not be clearer that he is a new person. It is clear in this short speech that his previous failure to understand humanity – or to take a balanced perspective – his immersion in his books and his philosophising, did not prevent his understanding but were part of its process. Imagery has not forsaken Hamlet's language, but how different is the self-concept here than previously – "such fellows as I... crawling between heaven and earth."

The new self-conscious Hamlet has already announced himself to the world in the previous scene – ‘This is I, Hamlet, the Dane.’ He no longer fears for the future and when warned by Horatio to avoid the duel, he gives his unforgettable answer:

“We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow.
If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not
now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.”

Act 5, Scene 2, lines 215-218

Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes all die aptly by poison but it is the benediction and tribute to Hamlet which close the play. Horatio calls on “flights of angels sing thee to thy rest”; and Fortinbras gives his command, “Go bid the soldiers shoot...” Is there significance to a celestial and a soldierly tribute? Could it be that whilst there is a “divinity that shapes our ends”, we humans are still “of the earth”, *Hyperion and satyr*: both the godlike and the bestial dwell in us?

- **Do we also see finally an image of old Hamlet, the Nordic warrior, in our young Hamlet?**

THE MAJOR SOLILOQUIES

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew;
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah, fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this -
But two months dead, nay, not so much, not two!
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on. And yet within a month -
Let me not think on't. Frailty, thy name is woman.
A little month, or e're those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body
Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she -
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer - married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not nor it cannot come to good.
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

Now I am alone.

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage waned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears

And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears. Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing; no, not for a king
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain? Breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i'th' throat,
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?
Ha, 'swords, I should take it. For it cannot be
But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should ha' fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O, vengeance!
Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A stallion! Fie upon't, foh!

About, my brains. Hum – I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions.
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks.
I'll tent him to the quick. If 'a but blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil, and the devil hath power
T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

To be, or not to be – that is the question;
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep –
No more – and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep –
To sleep – perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub.
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment

With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action. Soft you now,
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remembered.

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature. Let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.
Let me be cruel, not unnatural.
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites.
How in my words some ever she be shent,
To give them seals never, my soul, consent!

Now might I do it pat, now 'a is a-praying.
And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven.
And so am I revenged. That would be scanned.
A villain kills my father, and for that
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.
'A took my father grossly, full of bread,
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven?
But in our circumstance and course of thought,
'Tis heavy with him. And am I then revenged,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?
No.
Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent.
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed,
At game, a-swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't -
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays.
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

How all occasions do inform against me
 And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
 If his chief good and market of his time
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
 Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and godlike reason
 To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
 Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
 Of thinking too precisely on th'event –
 A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
 And ever three parts coward – I do not know
 Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do',
 Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
 To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me.
 Witness this army of such mass and charge,
 Led by a delicate and tender prince,
 Whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed,
 Makes mouths at the invisible event,
 Exposing what is mortal and unsure
 To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
 Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great
 Is not to stir without great argument,
 But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
 When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
 That have a father killed, a mother stained,
 Excitements of my reason and my blood,
 And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
 The imminent death of twenty thousand men
 That for a fantasy and trick of fame
 Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
 Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
 Which is not tomb enough and continent
 To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,
 My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

CLAUDIUS O, my offence is rank. It smells to heaven.
 It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
 A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
 Though inclination be as sharp as will.
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
 And like a man to double business bound
 I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
 And both neglect. What if this cursèd hand
 Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
 Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
 To wash it white as snow? Then I'll look up.
 My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer
 Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
 That cannot be, since I am still possessed

Of those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, mine own ambition, and my Queen.
May one be pardoned and retain th'offence?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice;
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law. But 'tis not so above.
There is no shuffling. There the action lies
In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled,
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
To give in evidence. What then? What rests?
Try what repentance can. What can it not?
Yet what can it when one can not repent?
O, wretched state! O bosom black as death!
O limèd soul, that struggling to be free
Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay!
Bow, stubborn knees; and, heart with strings of steel,
Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe.
All may be well.

LEON FORD'S THOUGHTS ON PLAYING HAMLET

It is the day before the first day of rehearsals and four months since I was cast as Hamlet. That period between audition and day one is always odd – whether it goes for four months or one day. For this gig it's been a barrage of questions. From peers, from my family, from colleagues, from future audience members, from myself and of course from the director, John Bell.

How old is Hamlet? Is he really mad? Does pretending to be mad send him to true madness? Does he love Ophelia? Does he love his mum? A bit too much? Why does he have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed? Why doesn't he go straight from his encounter with the ghost to kill Claudius? Why does he instead go straight to Ophelia and, ungartered, "raise a sigh so piteous and profound as it did seem to shatter all his bulk and end is being"? And so on...

I don't know the answers yet. Perhaps he admires what Claudius did. Perhaps the Old King Hamlet was not as flawless and God-like as Hamlet romanticises him to be. Perhaps Hamlet is a coward. (Although there's no way I could kill someone if asked to. Even by a ghost.) Perhaps he has told Ophelia everything and she's covering for him by telling Polonius he's mad. Perhaps the four men imagined the ghost through a collective kind of affirmation or group psyche (like in *The Crucible*). Perhaps he's psychotic and paranoid imagining everyone to be against him. It does seem loyalty is important to Hamlet to the point where others are either with him or against him.

I haven't done a Shakespeare play for three years. It is however still obvious to me that the beauty of Shakespeare, and this play in particular, is that there is no right and wrong. We as a cast and I as Hamlet have six weeks to decide the big questions and the length of the season to sift through the smaller ones.

In television and film most of the decisions have been made before you even set foot in the audition room or on set. It becomes a matter of fitting the actor to the role. In many ways here, we have the reverse. My Hamlet will be different to the last Hamlet and the next. Hamlet is almost not a character in the naturalistic sense. He is a vessel for ideas and philosophies. With this in mind, and at this stage of the journey, it seems to be a case of going with the parts of Hamlet that I relate to: exploring and presenting the similarities in myself and Hamlet. Hamlet is everyone. Man or Woman. Anyone could read it and say "oh that's me". Similarly, they could read other parts and say "that's nothing like me". Therefore the only way to play him honestly, fairly, and most importantly from the heart, is to play my own Hamlet -as anyone should in playing the role.

What I do know is that I don't intend to do Hamlet as an archaic museum piece. The most important thing is for the audience to relate to this bloke as if they could meet him any day in the street. Rather than seeing the language as a barrier to that, I think it can be used to enhance the audience's relation to him. Humour is the universal language and I think Hamlet is a clown. He uses humour to diffuse and evade, and Shakespeare uses it to bridge the gap between Hamlet the Prince and an audience who should be and need to be entertained. I like Hamlet. He is a Prince, he's funny and is far more interested in the ordinary bloke than other members of the court.

Anyway, this is all just a starting point. Where it goes from here, who knows?

Having said it, I may turn up tomorrow and be told that Hamlet is a robot stranded on a desert moon called Denmark where the three-headed octopus Claudius, has assumed control! But I seriously doubt John would do that. He's much more collaborative than that, and has much better ideas.

Above everything, I am looking forward to the challenge that lies ahead!

FROM THE STAGE MANAGER

The stage manager's role on a show is one that constantly changes, depending on what stage of production the show is in. With *Hamlet*, I will briefly outline my approach to stage management in a rehearsal room, during production week, when in the theatre, and when on tour.

In the rehearsal room, I am responsible for documenting everything said by John Bell the director, and the cast. I am the primary mode of communication between the creatives who work in the rehearsal room, the staff who work from Bell Shakespeare's office, and the other people who help create the show like the lighting designer, the composer, the wardrobe department, the set and costume designer, and anyone else who is working on the show.

I prepare all of the rehearsal schedules, organise the cast to have wardrobe fittings, prompt the actors, prepare a blocking script (which means writing down what point in the script the actors exit and enter, and any moves they make on stage.) I liaise between all the departments. For example, if a director says in a rehearsal room "This scene happens at night", I would tell the lighting designer, who would have to create a night time effect and tell the sound designer, who may want to add night time sounds, etc. If a table gets knocked over every show during a fight scene, I tell the workshop, who would have to re-enforce the table.

I work with the assistant stage manager and designer to get all the props required, and into the rehearsal room as soon as possible, so the actors get to work with the real things.

I draw in tape on the floor an outline of the set, so the cast can get used to moving in the actual space they will have in the theatre. I may need to organise rehearsal doorways, stairs, furniture so the cast can get used to walking up and down stairs, in and out of doors, hopefully in their real costume shoes, which I have got from the wardrobe department.

If an actor hurts himself, I have the keys to the first aid kit, and also get them to fill in an accident report, and a workers comp form should the injury cause problems further down the track.

Bell Shakespeare often has student secondments and directorial observers. I look after them in the room, and make sure they are aware of rehearsal room etiquette.

I write a rehearsal report which is distributed to everyone at the end of each day. If we have run ahead or behind our daily rehearsal schedule, I call everyone to give them all any changes to the following day.

I make sure there is a plentiful supply of tea, coffee and milk for the cast and director for the copious amounts they consume during the rehearsal period!

In production week, all technical and creative departments come together. I record in my blocking script (which is called a prompt copy) all of the lighting and sound cues.

It takes quite a long time to get a show ready before an audience. Often you can spend a full day plotting the lights. In the grid are several hundred lights each of which has a very specific and different purpose. Although an audience may only remember three or four different lighting states, during the course of a show, even the most basic show, there can be over 100 lighting cues. If they happen correctly, the audience does not often notice; if they don't happen correctly, the show will look wrong. The prompt copy contains all of these cues and the position in the script where the cues are called. During the show, the stage manager sits stage left (Prompt Corner) with headsets on, and tells all his operators (lighting, sound, flymen, pyrotechnics, automation, follow-spots) when their cues are coming up, and then the exact moment when to hit the 'Go' button, to start the cue. This is called 'calling a show'. The stage manager does this every night, night after night, with the script in front of him.

If a lighting or sound operator gets sick or needs time off, this means we can replace him at a moment's notice, and all the replacement needs to do is hit the GO button when the stage manager tells him to. The stage manager also calls the actors to the stage before their entrances, and solves any problems or emergencies as they happen.

The stage manager needs to prepare a Prompt Copy that is easy enough to follow, so that if he himself is involved in an accident, or gets sick, another stage manager can read the Prompt Copy, and call the show also. You can never cancel a show- it costs the company too much money. A stage manager can also be responsible for rehearsing in understudies for the various actors' roles.

A show report is filled out every night by the stage manager telling of anything unusual that happened during the show, and any maintenance that needs to be done for the next show. (Was a costume ripped? Did one of the lights blow?)

After opening night the director and all creatives leave the show, and the stage manager is responsible for the standards of the show to be maintained. The cast and crew then become answerable to the stage manager.

On tour, the stage manager is responsible for all of the above things and also for keeping the actors happy away from their homes! Again the SM is the main mode of communication between the office staff who organize the tour and the people on tour.

The show is put into venues where the crew are not familiar with the show. An accurate prompt copy ensures that the show looks the same, and the cues all happen exactly as on opening night- even if the crew operating the show are different and have not seen the show before.

Hamlet has a video component which will be my job to operate throughout the production. I will be operating 3 VCRs and numerous switches throughout the show – as well as telling all the other operators what to do and when to do it. And I will need to switch from one format to another as the images change. Sometimes we will see three different images on 3 different screens and occasionally one image across all three screens.

My assistant and I, Anna, will also need to co ordinate the moving of actors and props across the stage. Bell has used raked stages before (*Richard 3, Henry 5*) where the stage is high at the back and drops down at the front. However, the *Hamlet* set has flat

edges so there are numerous steps all around the edges of this rake that make it difficult for the actors to get on and off the stage, particularly when (as with the character Hamlet) they will be bringing large props on and off during exits and entrances.

The traffic of actors is always an important part of stage management. *Hamlet* will require stage management to not only look after the actors as they move across the stage but also as they move underneath the stage as well. We will have at least one actor who will be required to crawl around underneath the stage in very dark, hot conditions and to do this he will definitely need the help of the stage manager.

The set has three big revolving doors on the Prompt Side (PS) of the stage and it will also be my job to operate these doors.

The way we are doing the lighting is very different as, unusually, the set has a roof and sides, so we can't use a conventional lighting rig. It all has to be lined up to little holes all over the set. This has changed the way we have built the set: we have had to build cat walks across the whole roof so the electricians can get up there, and we have had to change the way we built the floor to accommodate the lights and allow room for the electricians to get in there as well.

Hamlet is a great play and it is a wonderful challenge ahead for everyone in every line of work for the company. There is a great deal to do, but I know the end result as well as the process is going to be just so rewarding.

DESIGNING COSTUMES FOR *HAMLET*

There are three major points in these designs I wanted to discuss: **The Silhouette** – and how it reveals the truth about characters; **Historical Costume** elements and how they sit within a fashion context, and lastly; **The Role of Colour** as a tool for advancing the drama of the play. I have also attached a few illustrations of various costumes with notes on how they reflect my process as a designer.

Silhouette

The silhouette of characters is possibly the most important element of the costume design. The silhouette refers to the shape of the costume, the outline. It is the element that most interacts with the built-in directional lighting by Larry Eastwood and Peter Neufeld, providing the handle on which the audience can quickly recognise characters amidst a large cast of actors doubling roles. And it reveals the inner psychological landscape of characters, also suggesting the mode in which the audience can relate to those characters.

In *Hamlet* we use silhouette as a metaphor for hypocrisy, creating larger, more manipulated silhouettes for some characters therein enhancing the sense of façade.

For example, when we first see Gertrude, she is holding court celebrating her marriage to her recently dead husband's brother. She wears a gown of shot burgundy silk with an extravagant full skirt and a sculptural wrap of pleated silk organza. Of all her costumes her silhouette here is the most dramatic and also the largest that we will ever see her. Later when she confronts Hamlet in her chamber – when she is possibly at her most sincere and vulnerable - she wears a natural shaped slip style dress with an embroidered burgundy net over a black silk sheath.

Other characters such as Horatio and the Grave Digger require an immediate relationship with both Hamlet and the audience. To facilitate this, the costume design deliberately removes elements of silhouette – making body shape more natural and understated- so that the viewer reads it as *lacking* a sense of façade.

Fashion Context

This production of *Hamlet* is set within a contemporary void, which allows the costume design to experiment with costume elements in historical dress. In a modern day court, such as Buckingham Palace, there are many elements of dress which are hundreds of years old but which still hold place in that society, such as that of the Beefeaters.

The costume design seeks out elements of dress from other periods and twists them into a contemporary fashion context. An example of another designer working like this is Vivienne Westwood. As a British designer, she researches that country's fashion history and playfully creates new designs from outmoded ways of dress.

In *Hamlet* a range of period elements are used in the costumes – frock coats, bustles, crinolines, leg of mutton sleeves, and clerical coats. However the context of the design makes them look more appropriate to either a modern day awards show like the Arias or indeed the fashion catwalk.

These historical elements subtly tell us about the character's state of mind, by posing certain questions, such as why does Ophelia wear leg of mutton sleeves (circa 1890) when Hamlet wears a T-shirt?

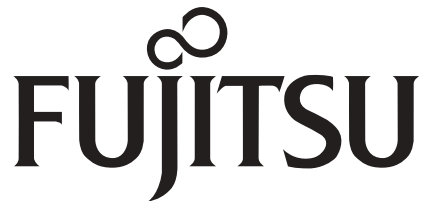
Colour and Drama

As the drama of the play evolves so does the colour story. A colour story is like a description for all the colours used and how they relate together. Initially the world of Denmark is shown as a world of dense, saturated jewel-like colours – burgundy, plum, ox-blood, Prussian blue – reflecting onto the walls and floor of the glossy metal set around it.

The colour story establishes Claudius as a source of darkness. As Claudius manipulates characters, the darker the colour story goes. The jewel-like colours of the first court scene have all turned black by the last scene.

This subtly underpins the drama with an impending sense of doom and a tension that the world of *Hamlet* is evolving to an unhappy conclusion.

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