



**BRISTOL
OLD VIC**

HAMLET

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
DIRECTED BY JOHN HAIDAR AND FEATURING BILLY HOWLE

KS3, KS4 & KS5 EDUCATION PACK

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INTRODUCTION

“If you want to know what it’s like to be lonely, really lonely, try playing Hamlet.”

– Peter O’Toole 1963

Peter O’Toole played Hamlet at the age of 24 at Bristol Old Vic and then 5 years later at the Old Vic in London. This is such a poignant quotation – the role has been at the pinnacle of the classical cannon for over 400 years and continues to challenge and excite new actors, directors and audiences.

So, why is it so hard to become this person? What will Billy Howle bring to the role? Is his Hamlet neurotic or heroic? What will he say to us? Is it about a country under attack? A family falling apart? A mind in turmoil or all three in different measures?

John Haider’s version will challenge all of these ideas. His radical edit and reworking of the play will bring an intensity to the claustrophobic world of the court in what he describes as an ‘expressionistic chamber piece’. Certainly the political infighting of families desperate to secure their dynastic future is a central theme in contemporary dramas such as *Succession*.

What does revenge look like in the 21st century? Are the edifices of state and justice working when a rogue government can overturn the law at will? We live in times where ‘fake news’ can influence the lives of millions and where we can be observed on social media 24 hours a day, with or without our permission. A surveillance society with so many eyes watching us, where introspection and self criticism can lead

to fragile mental health, particularly in young people. Suicide rates in young men are up by nearly 30 % in the last decade, self harm and eating disorders are escalating and untreated. Self help books are the new bible, stress and trauma are reported on a daily basis on a domestic and international stage.

Maybe activism is the new revenge? For sure many people are turning against established law and order and making their own decisions by taking concerted efforts to stop the state removing our rights to protest. Big business and shareholders are being challenged by activists who will not allow them to continue ruining the planet in the name of profit.

The play lives on toward its half centenary because it does not provide answers, only questions, which are interpreted by each generation in different ways. As teachers, we are in a position where we can challenge ideas and stimulate discussion within our classrooms while exploring a wide range of performance opportunities. We can decide on any one or all of these interpretations and each are as valid as any other.

I hope this resource pack is useful. In this year of change at Bristol Old Vic, it is good to see continued investment in teachers and audiences of the future. The challenges facing our young people and the marginalisation of the arts in schools are of concern to many of us. We need to fight for our subject and its place in the lives of our young people in an increasingly disconnected world.

Geraldine Hill Male

A Q&A WITH DIRECTOR JOHN HAIDAR

We spoke to director John Haidar during rehearsals to find out why he decided to take on Hamlet now and the reasons for its enduring resonance.

Why take on Hamlet now?

Most of us will never have experienced dynastic succession in the way we have in these last few weeks, following the death of the Queen. For King Charles III to close his first address to the nation with 'May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest', from Hamlet's final scene, was just as extraordinary. While it has largely been a time of national unity, though, Shakespeare's tragedy resonates with a time of national - and even international - crisis, where succession is of a different hue.

The play, of course, is enduringly resonant because it speaks to the cyclical pattern of history, with the rise and fall of those in positions of unimaginable power, but also because it is a tragedy of a 'world stripped of illusions', in the words of the Polish political activist and critic, Jan Kott. This idea was one catalyst for the approach to our production; the other was less theoretical.

I had been trying to find a recognisably modern parallel for Hamlet's use of soliloquy and was reading Peter Langman's book, Why Kids Kill, which focuses on the pathology of American high-school shooters since Columbine. As I pursued this research further, I noticed that - with increasing access to the Internet, coupled with the

meteoric rise of social media - as time went by, these young men became reliant on their online 'presence' as the means to document their experience. Often, this meant speaking to camera then uploading that speech to a potentially limitless, but unknown, audience.

What has influenced the development of this production?

The first is this version of the script - a hybrid of several playtexts - from the First (so-called, 'Bad') Quarto of 1603, the Second Quarto of 1604 and the First Folio of 1623, with minor additions from the Fourth Folio of 1685. I'm particularly concerned with those editions most likely gathered together from actors' drafts of the play's first performances - and in exploring the idea that there might be an earlier performance text, distinct from a later one that was intended to be read. It has been fascinating to note the differences between these editions.

Additionally, on the first page of our script, there are three quotes: one is from Ben Jonson, another is from T.S. Eliot and the third is from Caryl Churchill. In Eliot's case, his 1936 poem, 'Burnt Norton', contains the following line: 'Time past and time future, / What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present'. Inspired by this, we wanted to stage the tragedy in a way that felt increasingly irrevocable and unavoidable but often ritualistic too, in view of Hamlet's obsession with the theatre. As well as this, Alex Eales and myself have had lots of conversations about spaces in between. The play

A Q&A WITH DIRECTOR, JOHN HAIDAR

takes place at a specific moment in time and the production is performed at a specific moment in time, so the conversation between those spaces is important to us, which is why we have pursued an expressionistic, rather than a literal, aesthetic to design its ideas.

What do you want the audience to take away from this experience of seeing the play?

Of course, there will be members of our audience who have seen this play performed many times previously. There's a received sense of what the play is, a mythology that surrounds it. In some ways, I hope they're able to put other productions they might have seen to one side for a few hours and immerse themselves in this version, which I hope causes them to think about aspects of this writer's kaleidoscopic work, which takes in so much of what it is to be alive, that they might not have considered before.

I'm so excited for those who have never seen the play performed to have that opportunity - I know I speak on behalf of everyone working on the production when I say it's a brilliant thing to be able to share this with them.

I suppose I hope, whether you've seen it a dozen times (or more) or never before, it makes you think and feel something and that its humanity shines through - that these characters and their fractured world continue to speak to us now, as then.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE – AN UPSTART CROW

While we know very little for certain about William Shakespeare, we do know that he (probably) wrote 36 plays and 154 sonnets. Limited evidence from the time brings into dispute a handful more including Two Noble Kinsmen and Edward III.

There is also continuing debate about the exact authorship of the plays and whether other people including Christopher Marlowe and Francis Bacon may have had a hand in their creation. There is also an ongoing argument that Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, was in fact the author of the plays.

He breathed upon dead bodies and brought them into life

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

What we do know about William Shakespeare from primary sources was that he was born in Stratford upon Avon in 1564 , probably on April 23rd which is now acknowledged to be his birthday. His father, John, was a local merchant and his mother, Mary Arden, was a local landed heiress. Shakespeare was their third child and had two older sisters and three younger brothers. He married a pregnant Anne Hathaway on November 28th 1582 when he was 18 and she was 26. Susanna was born the following year, and twins Hamnet and Judith two years later. Hamnet died when he was 11 years old.

Somehow, Shakespeare ended up in London in the early 1590s and documents show him as managing partner in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company in London with which he was connected for most

of his career. Following James 1 accession to the throne in 1603, the company changed its names to the King's Men and were very popular with both the court and public audiences. As the companies leading actor, Richard Burbage played roles such as Richard III, Hamlet, Othello and King Lear.

The Globe Theatre was built in 1599 by Shakespeare and others on the south bank of the Thames. Fifteen of his plays had already been published and this prosperity enabled Shakespeare to buy substantial property in Stratford which earned him and his family a significant income. He died at the age of 52 in 1616. In 1623 two actors from The King's Company had Shakespeare's plays published. This first Folio contained 36 plays and sold for £1.

He was not of an age but for all time

– Ben Jonson

HAMLET (THE PLAY) & HAMLET (THE PERSON) SINCE 1601

I would not cross the road to meet Hamlet. It would never be necessary. He is always where I am.

— C.S. Lewis

Hamlet has been one of Shakespeare's most performed plays since first being seen in the early 1600s on the Globe with Richard Burbage in the title role. The 1603 Quarto edition indicates performances in London, Oxford and Cambridge, while Court records show it was performed before King James in 1619 and before King Charles in 1637. The Globe had a thrust stage, a trap door and the all male company of actors were supported with lavish costume, music and special effects.

The role has been performed by a multitude of actors over the last 400 years. Here are some of the notable pre twentieth century names associated with the play:

Thomas Betterton first played the role in 1661 and continued for the next 50 years until the age of 74. Claiming that he was 'yet learning to be an actor', his wife Mary Saunderson played Ophelia.

David Garrick (1717-79), dedicated his very successful career as an actor manager to promoting Shakespeare as the most important writer in the English cannon at the renowned Drury Lane Theatre. He was a proponent of a naturalistic acting style and seen as a virtuoso performer who could embody the many passions of Shakespeare's characters.

After seeing Garrick play Hamlet, the German tourist Georg Christoph Lichtenburg memorably described the moment when the prince first sees his father's ghost: 'His whole demeanour is so expressive of terror that it made my flesh creep'.

William Betty was a stage struck child actor who played Hamlet at the age of 13 in 1803. A child superstar, It was said that in three hours of study he committed the part of Hamlet to memory. Reactions to his performance are said to have incited a near riot with shrieks and screams and scenes of trampled people in the audience.

Henry Irving played Hamlet in 1874 at the Lyceum Theatre and was described by William Butler Yeats as a 'lean image of hungry speculation', as he adroitly played with Hamlet's volatility. Ellen Terry, his long time acting partner, was Ophelia and between them they played the madness in a way which made it difficult to tell whether it was real or not.

Sarah Bernhardt performed as Hamlet in 1899 at the age of 50. Using a skull given to her by the novelist Victor Hugo, she also became the first actress to play Hamlet on film.

John Gielgud was seen as the definitive Hamlet of the early twentieth century, playing the role five times between 1930 and 1944, before going on to direct Richard Burton in the role twenty years later. A superb actor, he was able to explore the nuance and complexities of the character as he matured.

HAMLET (THE PLAY) & HAMLET (THE PERSON) SINCE 1601

Laurence Olivier was an extremely physical actor and explored a Freudian approach in a full text version at the Old Vic in 1937. This version explored the complex relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude and was an early exploration of the play as a psychosexual drama. Olivier then continued with this focus in a film version in 1948 which cut some of the more political aspects of the film to focus on the family conflict.

And in the last fifty years.....

Derek Jacobi, Maxine Peake, David Tennant, Paapa Essiedu, Ben Whishaw, Simon Russell Beale, Adrian Lester, Kenneth Branagh, Mark Rylance, Cush Jumbo. Hamlet in Persian, Korean, Arabic, German, Russian, and Turkish. Hamlet in prisons, schools, on moors, on ships, in books and on film.

Hamlet has been performed throughout the world for over 400 years and continues to be a cultural phenomenon presenting real human beings struggling with a wide range of emotions and conflicts.

Hamlet's experience simply could not have happened to a plumber.

– George Bernard Shaw

HAMLET AT BRISTOL OLD VIC 1781 – 2022

1767 – William Powell

Bristol Old Vic has been staging Hamlet for 255 years. Our first Hamlet was also our first manager: William Powell.

Powell was the first actor to speak on our stage. Today, his inaugural words are inscribed on shutters in our foyer for all our audiences to see.

1781 – Sarah Siddons

Sarah Siddons is one of the first woman known to have played Hamlet. She played the role nine times over thirty years, including at Bristol Old Vic in 1781.

Siddons' boundary pushing Hamlet expanded the possibilities for actresses on stage and paved the way for others to follow in her footsteps.

1799 – William Dimond

William Dimond tried his hand at the role in 1799. Unfortunately, his performance wasn't very well received. The Bristol Journal wrote of his acting: "nothing is irregular, nothing is left to chance... you have little to excite astonishment".

1821 – Henry Johnson

Luckily, Dimond's performance didn't put Bristolian audiences off Shakespeare's masterpiece for good.

Hamlet was performed several more times between 1799 and 1830, including in 1821 when Henry Johnson took on the role.

1830 – William Charles Macready

William Charles Macready was a bona fide star of the 19th century stage.

His fans included Charles Dickens and Alfred Tennyson.

Macready added extra authenticity to his performance by casting his stepmother Sarah as Queen Gertrude. Echoing the play's plot, the two had a famously difficult relationship.

1958 – Peter O'Toole



Hamlet appears to have fallen out of favour in Bristol between the late 19th century and early 20th century. However, it came back with a bang in 1958.

A reviewer described Peter O'Toole's 1958 performance as: "The best thing to happen to Bristol's Thespian scene. He's a lean, lank individualist Teddy Boy!".

1964 and 1967 – Richard Pasco

Richard Pasco was a Hamlet for the swinging sixties. Val May's production was such a success it even toured to America. The New York Times described his Hamlet as full of "balance, sensitivity, intelligence and vigour".

Offstage, sparks flew between Pasco and his Ophelia, Barbara Leigh Hunt. The couple married in 1967 and remained together until his death in 2014.

HAMLET AT BRISTOL OLD VIC 1781 – 2022

1977 – Robert O’Mahoney



The same year he played Hamlet at Bristol Old Vic, O’Mahoney also appeared in a little-known film called Star Wars: A New Hope.

His co-star was no other than Alan Rickman, who played Laertes.

1991 – Iain Glen



Iain Glen wasn’t the only household name in Paul Unwin’s 1991 production. James Purefoy and Richard Lintern also starred.

Multiple Olivier and Tony award winner Bunny Christie designed the sets.

Bonus fact: the last two times we’ve staged Hamlet at Bristol Old Vic we’ve dug up a human skeleton underneath the theatre!

When the plague struck Bristol in the mid-1300s a lot of bodies were thrown over the wall and buried in this area. The last two times we’ve staged Hamlet we’ve also been doing building work and workers have accidentally dug up some unlucky plague victims.

One member of staff recalls leaving the theatre for lunch. He stopped to chat to the building works supervisor, but they were interrupted by a builder who approached them with a human skull on his shovel! During that renovation they found 4 bodies before realizing it was a mass grave for plague victims.

Efficient props sourcing if you ask us!

there is no such thing as Shakespeare’s Hamlet ... there are as many Hamlets as there are melancholies.

– Oscar Wilde

PLOT

Hamlet is based on the 13th century legend of Amleth, Prince of Denmark. It is usually told in five acts as follows:

ACT 1

The play opens with a scene on the battlement of Elsinore castle with Horatio and some guards encountering the ghost of Hamlet's father. They decide to tell Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, who has recently returned from University for the funeral of his father,

only to discover that his uncle Claudius is now King and has married his mother, Queen Gertrude. Hamlet continues to mourn for his father's death and laments his mother's lack of loyalty. Elsewhere Polonius, an elderly courtier, is watching his son Laertes depart for France, who warns his sister Ophelia to keep away from Hamlet. His father appears to Hamlet as a ghost and tells him that he has been murdered by his brother Claudius who killed him by pouring poison into his ear while he slept. Claudius and Gertrude were married very quickly after this and the ghost urges Hamlet to revenge 'his foul and most unnatural murder'. Hamlet swears vengeance and decides to feign madness.

This above all: to thine own self be true. ACT 1 SCENE 3

ACT 2

Hamlet starts to feign madness in order to observe Claudius and plan his revenge. In so doing, he rejects Ophelia and exhorts her to 'get thee to a nunnery'. Claudius and Polonius

are spying on him in order to try and find out what has caused the sudden change in Hamlet's behaviour.

Claudius summons Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, old friends of Hamlet, to try and understand what has happened. A group of travelling actors with whom Hamlet is already acquainted also arrive. Hamlet creates a play which includes scenes that mimic the murder of his father and plans to present it to Claudius and Gertrude.

What a piece of work is man!
ACT 2 SCENE 2

ACT 3

The play is performed and Hamlet observes Claudius closely to see how he reacts. Claudius is disconcerted by what he sees and he interrupts the action and leaves. He immediately resolves to send Hamlet away. Gertrude summons Hamlet in distress and on his way to meet her, Hamlet comes across Claudius on his knees in attempted prayer. Seeing an opportunity to avenge his father, Hamlet decides to spare Claudius' life as his soul would ascend to heaven if he was killed in the act of prayer. In the meantime, Polonius tries to protect Gertrude from the madness of her son and hides behind a curtain (or arras). Hamlet hears some movement and stabs the curtain and in so doing, kills the old man. The ghost of Hamlet's father reappears and warns his son not to delay his revenge or upset his mother.

What dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause.
ACT 3 SCENE 1

ACT 4

Hamlet is sent to as an ambassador to England as King Fortinbras of Norway crosses Denmark with an army on his way to attack Poland. During his journey, Hamlet discovers Claudius has a plan to have him killed once he arrives. He returns to Denmark alone, sending his companions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths in his place. Rejected by Hamlet, Ophelia is now desolate at the loss of her father. She goes mad and drowns.

Revenge should have no bounds. ACT 4 SCENE 7

ACT 5

Hamlet meets his friend Horatio and a grave digger in a graveyard where they discuss mortality. When Ophelia's funeral procession arrives at the graveyard Hamlet confronts her brother Laertes who has returned from Paris. A duel is arranged between Hamlet and Laertes – Claudius conspires with Laertes to kill Hamlet during the fencing match by poisoning both a rapier and some wine. The plans go wrong when Gertrude unwittingly drinks from the poisoned cup and dies. Then both Laertes and Hamlet are wounded by the poisoned blade, and Laertes dies. As he dies, Hamlet kills Claudius leaving only Horatio to explain the truth to the new king, Fortinbras, as he returns in victory from the Polish wars.

The rest is silence. ACT 5 SCENE 2

A play of such amazing richness

– Michael Billington

Notes on the 2022 edit for Bristol Old Vic:

The director, John Haidar, wrote out Hamlet in its entirety by hand to really get to grips with the play. When explaining this process when directing Richard III, he says that ‘the process of transcribing the text allows you to feel like you’re closer to the writer. It forces you to study the form of what they have written.’

The text is a composite of the First Quarto (1603), the Second Quarto (1604), and the First Folio (1623), with minor additions from the Fourth Folio (1685).

This version runs to 19 over 72 pages scenes with an interestingly placed interval after Scene 11.

‘The text is to be spoken at pace. It’s a play – it isn’t history.’

MAIN CHARACTERS

Hamlet is Prince of Denmark and son of Gertrude and the recently dead King Hamlet. At the start of the play, he has returned from university for his father's funeral and his mother's wedding to his uncle. Based on his comments about the dead courtier Yorick in Act 4, Hamlet is about 30 years old. Full of hatred for his uncle's political scheming and disgust for his mother's quick marriage, he is both thoughtful and impulsive, indecisive and ruthless, melancholic and loving. Choosing to feign madness to try and uncover Claudius' guilt, his mental health becomes very fragile. The play ends in his death in a duel with Laertes.

Oh that this too too solid flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew.

Claudius has been King of Denmark for a few weeks at the start of the play and has married Gertrude, his brother's widow. Hamlet's uncle, he is quickly identified as the murderer of his brother, King Hamlet. While his love for Gertrude seems genuine, he is driven by a ruthless pursuit of power and the description of him as a 'satyr' implies a high level of sexuality.

As a politician and strategist, he is driven by ambition and lust and is only occasionally troubled by guilt. He is able to play people off against each other and his opportunism and drive to keep power lead to the ultimate death of his wife and nephew. In the final scene, Hamlet poisons Claudius and once he is dead, Hamlet dies immediately after achieving his revenge.

Oh, my offence is rank. It smells to Heaven.

Gertrude is the Queen of Denmark and Prince Hamlet's mother. She has recently married her dead husband's brother less than two months after

King Hamlet's death. While she appears to have little remorse about the short period of her mourning before remarrying, this can be seen as a politically expedient decision for a Denmark threatened by Norway. She is portrayed as a sexual being, and while she appears to be a rather passive character, her internal thoughts are not presented to the audience. Her affection for her son Hamlet is genuine and her moral understanding of the situation deepens as her awareness grows. After the sword fight between Hamlet and Laertes, Gertrude drinks the poisoned goblet meant for Hamlet and dies.

The lady doth protest too much, methinks

Polonius is the Lord Chamberlain of Claudius's court. The father of Laertes and Ophelia, he is often portrayed as a pompous and overbearing old man. As Laertes sets off for France to continue his studies, Polonius gives him paradoxical advice, including the famous quotation, "to thine own self be true"—an ironic line from a man who cannot follow this advice. When Hamlet goes to his mother's bedchamber, attempting to confront her about his father's murder, he kills Polonius, who is hiding behind a tapestry and whom Hamlet mistakes for Claudius.

To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou cans't not then be false to any man

Ophelia is Polonius's daughter, a beautiful young woman with whom Hamlet has had an intense relationship. Initially compliant, she agrees not to see Hamlet anymore at her father's suggestion and to spy on Hamlet when asked by Claudius. She believes that Hamlet loves her, despite his

MAIN CHARACTERS

inconsistent courtship, and is devastated during a conversation in which he seems not to love her at all. When Hamlet kills her father, Ophelia goes mad and drowns in the river. Whether this is a suicide or not is left ambiguous.

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts."

Horatio is Hamlet's close friend and confidant, who studied with the prince at university in Wittenberg. He is a loyal advisor to Hamlet throughout the play. As Hamlet lies dying in the final scene, Horatio considers suicide, but Hamlet convinces him to live on to tell the story.

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

Laertes is Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother and has grown up in the Danish court with Hamlet. While both are driven by revenge for their murdered fathers, Laertes can be seen as a foil for Hamlet. Where Hamlet is contemplative and paralysed by his emotions, Laertes is reckless and quick to action. When he hears of his father's death, Laertes is ready to raise a rebellion against Claudius, but his sister's madness allows Claudius to convince him Hamlet is at fault. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes will stop at nothing for revenge. At the end of the play, Hamlet kills Laertes; as he lies dying, Laertes admits to Claudius's plot to kill Hamlet.

Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged most thoroughly for my father

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

are two courtiers, former friends of Hamlet from Wittenberg, who are

summoned by Claudius and Gertrude to spy on Hamlet to discover the cause of his strange behaviour. After Hamlet kills Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accompany him to England and they have orders to kill him when he arrives in England. The ship is attacked by pirates, and when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive in England, they meet an untimely death.

No news, my lord, but that the world's grown honest

INTERVIEW WITH THE DESIGNER

I was working in Copenhagen in December 2021 and took the opportunity to take a trip to Helsingør (Shakespeare's Elsinore). The town is small and somewhat run down and the castle, lying only a short walk away, seemed remote and cut off.

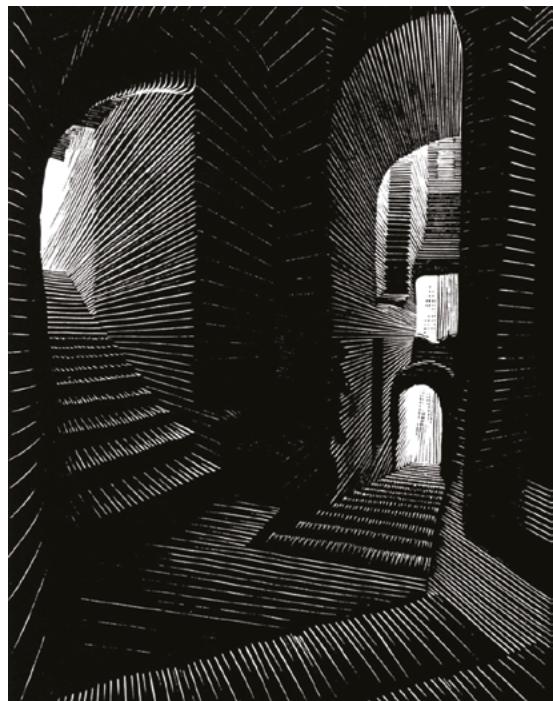
It was one of many royal properties the medieval court and the monarch would visit each year, staying for months at a time before moving on. It is dark and fortified, the walls feet deep and windows let in very little grey light. Small narrow steps wind up the towers and the rooms are in sequence one leading into another, leading to another. It seemed the perfect setting for the play.

This production of *Hamlet* is set in a dark world of shadowy staircases, hidden doors and black voids. John's punchy version of the script reads more like a psychological thriller than a historical play set in a castle. We spoke in our early meetings of the play being set in a non-naturalistic space: a psychological space as apposed to a real one.

From that, the design quickly became almost entirely black, reflecting Hamlet's state of mind. We wanted the stage space to at times be very small and intimate, but then large and open. The stage at Bristol is notoriously deep, but this was of real benefit as the negative space around the set becomes deep inky gloom.

As the design started to take shape, we widened our reference points. Escher drawings, Piranesi etchings and

other images capturing ideas of transitional spaces, light and depth. It became clear quite soon that we wanted the world to morph from one setting to another, like moving from room to room, allowing characters and the action to flow through and around the set.



Blackened textured walls would allow light to play across surfaces and as the set turns. It reveals or hides the figures in the piece, mirroring a world of overheard conversations and plots: A nervous, paranoid, mysterious court. It was important to consider the lighting and video within these spaces as we worked. Using models with simple desk lights allowed us to start more complex conversations with Malcolm and Jack about the texture and atmosphere we were aiming at.

Likewise, research and references for both set and costume were shared and cross-pollinated between the different areas of design. The resulting design allows us a window into the mind of Hamlet, the characters and situations he encounters and the inevitable conclusions.

REVENGE TRAGEDY AND JACOBEAN THEATRE

Revenge exists on a margin between justice and crime by Wilson Knight:

Revenge tragedies were very popular in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. These dramas involved one or more characters seeking revenge upon another and audiences expected violent bloodshed and murder leading to revenge to occur before their eyes on stage. Certain conventions would have been expected to be part of the play:

- Murder and blood often with a gory ending
- Ghosts and supernatural goings on
- Madness and insanity
- A protagonist seeking revenge against a clear villain
- Onstage and melodramatic violence with many corpses
- Disguise

A play within a play was common form of exposition, and soliloquies were commonly used to show the inner thoughts of the protagonists.

There is often a sense of catharsis at the end of the play so that after the destruction and violence comes a sense of calm and new beginnings – ‘the calm of mind , all passion spent’ described by Milton in Samson Agonistes.

Playwright Thomas Kyd is accredited with bringing the revenge tragedy to the English stage with *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587). The plot surrounds the character Hieronimo who seeks revenge for his son’s murder. The drama also contains a number of other violent murders and uses the Elizabethan conventions of both a play within and play and a ghost. Other well known revenge tragedies are

The Revenger’s Tragedy (1607), published anonymously though most likely written by Thomas Middleton, and John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623) and *The White Devil* (1612).

Audiences watching *Hamlet* would recognise the conventions of the play – significant numbers of people of all classes attended the theatre on a regular basis. They would see the vengeful ghost, a play-within-a-play and a hero who goes mad before the bloody resolution with four bodies in the final scene. The use of the poisoned sword, the chalice which kills Gertrude and the violent fights will have been relished by the crowd.

For Hamlet there are three points in the play where he could avenge his father but his inner conflict makes him miss the moment: the scene with the Players where Claudius confirms his guilt, the prayer scene where Hamlet chooses not to kill Claudius, and the scene where Polonius is inadvertently killed behind the tapestry.

What might be new for the audience would be Hamlet’s conscience and the battles he has with himself around his mortality, and the conflict he encounters once he commits to his path of action. This explores two different contemporary viewpoints - the view that people should stand up against earthly injustice juxtaposed with Christian values which imply acceptance and the belief in a higher power to administrate justice. Shakespeare explores both the external conflict between Hamlet and Claudius and the internal struggle of his protagonist. Here it is the revenger’s conscience that is the main impediment - Hamlet’s hesitation delays the action and eventually causes his downfall.

REVENGE TRAGEDY AND JACOBEAN THEATRE

This certainly makes the play more interesting than the typical revenge tragedy where the hero needs to overcome two obstacles: firstly to identify the murderer/s and then to kill them.

My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth. The time is out of joint. Oh cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right.

SHAKESPEARE'S CONTRIBUTION TO LANGUAGE

Hamlet is Shakespeare's longest play at over 4,000 lines and around 30,000 words. At its full length, the play would take over 4 hours (without an interval) to perform. Each of the three early versions include lines and entire scenes missing from the others.

Hamlet is mostly written in iambic pentameter and members of the nobility mostly speak in verse, but commoners like the gravedigger use prose. Language is used as an extension of character - the way characters speak gives us insight into how they think. Hamlet speaks over one third of the lines in the play and his style changes depending on who he is talking to. His famous soliloquies are spoken at length and with deliberation to show his internal conflicts.

Shakespeare's contribution to everyday language is well recognised and in his plays are the first recorded use of many familiar words and phrases, including the commonly used names such as Miranda, Imogen, Jessica and Olivia.

Here are some examples:

- Vanish into thin air: *Othello*
- Wild goose chase: *Romeo and Juliet*
- Break the Ice: *Taming of the Shrew*
- To come full circle: *King Lear*
- One fell swoop: *Macbeth*
- All that glitters is not gold: *Merchant of Venice*

When reading Hamlet, it is striking how many words and phrases are used in contemporary parlance, including:

- The mind's eye
- Neither a borrower or a lender be
- The time is out of joint (Out of Joint is also the name of a well known theatre company)

- The play's the thing
- To the manner born
- Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't,
- I must be cruel, only to be kind
- Hoist with his own petard
- Murder most foul

And then there are some phrases which are universally recognised:

- When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
- This above all: to thine ownself be true
- The rest is silence
- Listen to many, speak to a few
- Something is rotten in the state of Denmark
- Frailty, thy name is woman
- There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so
- What a piece of work is a man!
- To be or not to be, that is the question
- Get thee to a nunnery
- Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: A fellow of infinite jest.

If we wish to know the force of human genius we should read Shakespeare. If we wish to see the insignificance of human learning we may study his commentators.

– Orson Welles

KEY INTERPRETATIONS OF HAMLET

Hamlet is a political thriller, a family psychodrama and a study of a young man in the clutches of mental torment. All three elements are present in the play and the textual edit and artistic decisions will decide the focus of the overall performance. The edit John Haidar has chosen focusses the play as a chamber piece exploring the disintegration of a family. The exclusion of Fortinbras and the military characters Marcellus, Bernardo and Cornelius and Francisco supports this emphasis.

A Political Thriller - Is something rotten at the heart of Denmark?

All directors will engage with the play's exploration of political manoeuvrings, both at Elsinore and beyond, to some degree. Many performances have taken place in countries with oppressive political regimes and this allows the play to be provocative in its reach and analysis. All political power in Denmark is concentrated on the throne and in the figure of Claudius. His ambition is to hold on to this power after the murder of his brother and in so doing achieve political, social, and economic power. Claudius is a pragmatic politician for whom the ends justify the means and as such he is acutely aware of the need to manage public opinion. When his position is threatened, he is prepared to use his power by removing Hamlet from Denmark by sending him to England and his murder.

King Hamlet, like his son, was an idealist with a strong commitment to traditional notions of right and wrong. We know that King Hamlet has killed Fortinbras of Norway and the play ends with order re-established and the installation of Young Fortinbras of Norway as the new king of Denmark.

Deceit is at the core of the Danish court and in the end it is only by expunging this poison can the state recover and move on. Lies, ghosts, dissembling, plays within plays all drive the action and once the truth starts to emerge, everything becomes destabilised. Images of disease and decay are found throughout the play. This is a suspicious society where spying is the norm and people are constantly watching and monitoring each other.

You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife/ And would it were not so, you are my mother - A Psychosexual Drama?

Olivier's version of the play (and film) explores the Hamlet's reaction to his mother's very quick marriage to his uncle. A Freudian interpretation would suggest that the protagonist's behaviour is due to his repressed sexual desire towards Gertrude and that he is subconsciously controlled by an Oedipus complex. This idea then connects Hamlet's procrastination in avenging his father's death, and his ideas of suicide, to his repressed sexual desires. His anger at his mother's evident sexuality is palpable and because she marries her dead husband's brother, sees the union as incestuous. David Tennant, commenting on his 2008 interpretation at the RSC sees it rather differently and thinks that it is the natural revulsion of a child realising that their mother is still sexually active. 'I don't think that the thought of being repulsed by your parent's sexuality is the same thought as wanting to have sex with them.'

Ayliff's production in 1925 suggested that Ophelia was a victim of the

KEY INTERPRETATIONS OF HAMLET

patriarchal society she lived in. The audience for the first time was not presented with a sentimental portrayal of a disordered mind; rather sexually explosive scenes were portrayed where the suppression of her natural desires led to her madness. This was one of the many psychologically astute interpretations that would influence future productions of the play.

One of the ongoing dramas in Hamlet's head is death and its consequences. From the start, we see Hamlet considering life, death and the hereafter. The manner of death is also significant – do murdered people go to heaven? Ophelia's suicide is played down so that she can have a proper burial. The famous 'to be or not to be' soliloquy considers suicide but it is much more the uncertainty of the afterlife which troubles Hamlet. The recognition of Yorick's skull makes Hamlet finally realise that death is a great leveller and happens to us all.

What is not in dispute is that there are two central families with a complicated inheritance who disintegrate over the course of the action. Only Horatio survives to go forward to the future with Fortinbras of Norway. Different interpretations have given us a myriad of different performance possibilities, all of which have their own veracity.

There's method in my madness - A Mind in Turmoil?

Mark Rylance's Hamlet has been discussed as the genuinely mad Hamlet; Jonathan Pryce's was the possessed Hamlet. David Tennant saw Hamlet as a man who keeps energetically making his mind up, is full of certainty and then keeps running into obstacles. So is Hamlet neurotic or heroic or a bit of both?

We as an audience never really know when Hamlet is deliberately assuming an 'antic disposition' or whether this assumption starts to become a reality. The seeming reason for feigning insanity is to buy time, and as the play continues, Hamlet behaves more and more eccentrically. Neither the audience nor the other characters in Hamlet can be certain whether Hamlet is pretending or not. Hamlet refuses to make straightforward distinctions between madness and sanity, or between reality and pretence as his introspection leads him to self destruction. In the final scene Hamlet acknowledges he killed Polonius but that his fit of madness exonerates him from any responsibility for the act.

The possibility of mental illness is also a possibility – recent critics have suggested that Hamlet is suffering from bipolar disorder. There would seem to be a valid argument that his fits of chronic melancholy and talk of suicide could be diagnosed as depression.

Ophelia seems genuinely to suffer from a mental illness, and the suggestion is that it has been triggered by a series of events which destabilise her world – the death of Polonius, the absence of Laertes and the unexplained withdrawal of Hamlet's love. She suffers from a broken heart and broken mind and possibly symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. She is a tragic victim who has suffered due to circumstances beyond her control.

***He was the man who of all
modern, and perhaps
ancient poets, had the
largest and most
comprehensive soul.***

– John Dryden

ACTIVITIES

Revenge Tragedy – Now and Then (suitable for older students)

1. Discuss exactly what makes Hamlet a revenge tragedy. Make a list of the conventions listed in the previous section on Revenge Tragedy and where they appear in the play.
2. Now research as follows (using the safe search setting on your device). Search ‘revenge’ in Google News and read some of the news articles which appear. Now do the same and search ‘tragedy’ .
3. Finally, put both words together in your search and see what news stories consist of elements of both revenge and tragedy in our modern world.
4. Discuss your findings – the similarities and differences between each genre.
5. Working in groups, chose one article which could possibly be dramatized. Using this as stimulus, and focussing on the exact nature of revenge, create a short devised piece. Rehearse and perform.
6. Discuss the difference and similarities between a modern revenge play and one set in Elizabethan times.

Building a character’s back story – a complicated inheritance

1. In groups, chose one character from Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius.
2. Hot seat each character and try and find out as much as you can about them and what has happened before the start of the play.
3. Using this information, build a still image of each character, and then a family scene. You could also try a still image of multiple interpretations of each character to see the different interpretations.
4. Ask each student to choose one line for each character from the text and add this to the still image. Discuss the results.

5. Go to Act 1 Scene 2 where Claudius says: ‘But now my cousin Hamlet, and my son’ and read the next 30 or so lines.
6. Perform using your interpretations of the characters. How could you add Ophelia to this scene? She often appears in performance in this scene. Discuss what you have found out.

Design the Graveyard

1. The Gravediggers’ scene is set outside the court, where most of the play is set. It needs to have a grave and be out of doors.
2. Read though the scene and consider what scenery and props are mentioned in the text.
3. Create a mood board to for the graveyard looking at possible props, scenery, images and colours.
4. Create/make a design for the scene. Consider lighting and costume.
5. Reflect on the difficulties encountered and then compare with the final stage design.

Exploring the final scene

The final scene is very complex and has many actors and a great deal of action going on at any one time. As is common in Shakespeare’s plays, there are no written stage directions, apart from what can be understood from the text.

1. This is a long scene so read it though and split it up into sections. Decide who is on stage at the beginning of each extract – there are many observers at any one time.
2. Read the scene again making a note of any actions that are clearly in the text e.g. Hamlet hits Laertes, Gertrude takes the drink.
3. Walk the scene through using the information in the text.

ACTIVITIES

4. Consider the minor characters and what they might be doing and add this.
5. Then consider how each character responds to what is going e.g. Claudius reacting to Gertrude drinking from the chalice.
6. Try the scene again with these gestures added. What difference does it make to the scene?

Speaking the language with a focus on the soliloquies.

There are many soliloquies in Hamlet. Try and explore one of them as follows:

1. Work in pairs and alternate the lines between speaking and listening. Start with one line at a time and when the language and the ideas have become familiar, extend the length of the section spoken.
2. Focus on the listener and ask them to react to what is being said. Ask the speaker what impact having a listener has on the way in which they speak the lines.
3. Ask the actors to locate the speech in a modern context – in a park, a shopping mall, a train station.
What difference does this make?

7. Identify key words in the speech
8. Then consider:
 - What do we learn about Hamlet's character?
 - What is his state of mind?
 - What is the journey of the speech? How do ideas develop? What is the conclusion?
 - Where does it fit in the play? It is sometimes moved around by different directors.
 - What happens next?
 - Why do you think this speech so famous?

To Be or Not to Be – the most famous soliloquy ever written

1. Read all together as a chorus.
2. Read and move taking one line at a time.
3. Change direction whenever there is a punctuation mark.
4. Divide the class into two.
Read the speech aloud, with one group posing the questions, and the other group answering.
5. Read out just the last word of each line.
6. Repeat with the first word of each line. Which is most important?