

Welcome to this introduction for the audio described performance of William Shakespeare's Hamlet, a powerful new adaptation directed by John Haidar and featuring Billy Howle in the title role.

The show is on Saturday November 12th at 2.30pm, with a touch tour of the stage and set at 12.30pm. Before the performance there will be a recap of these introductory notes at 2.15pm. Hamlet lasts for approximately 3 hours, including a 20-minute interval. The performance will be described by Megan Shaw and Rachel Bell.

The following recording lasts around 13 minutes and includes information about the set, characters and costumes followed by access information, content warnings and contact details for the venue.

## **SET**

Hamlet incorporates elements of the modern world, such as video projection and strobe lighting, within a more timeless setting.

The story unfolds in and around the monumental walls of Elsinore, inspired by a real castle in Helsingor, Denmark. It is a world of shadowy staircases, hidden doors and black voids.

The castle is represented by a slab of grey wall, standing 5 metres wide and over 6 metres high at the rear of the space. The stone wall is clad in black, textured wooden boards, sometimes lit to

produce deep shadows, while mist and projections create new and interesting textures as they move over the surface.

The wall revolves in a full circle to reveal new rooms, winding staircases and darkened doorways, offering characters a variety of vantage points from which to spy or eavesdrop. Two more tall sections of slatted wall stand separate and in front of the main structure on either side.

The rest of the palace is suggested by a split-level black marble floor that extends in front of the wall. The first level is two metres deep, with two shallow steps descending to a lower level, 3 metres deep. The floor is laid with glossy tiles marked with diagonal lines which connect to form diamond patterns. On either side of the lower level are a pair of wide arches.

When we meet Hamlet a projector beams television images onto a partly transparent curtain, in front of the walls at the top of the steps. A switch in lighting reveals a tableaux of the cast standing behind, dressed in theatrical Venetian masks as an official state room is revealed.

When characters speak directly to the audience, the wood panelled wall darkens to black, illuminated by a border of bright fluorescent strip lighting. Later speeches are backed by projections showing the passing of clouds or jagged, shifting lines resembling electrical brain-waves.

The wall revolves in a clockwise direction to reveal another room in the castle. There is a dark open doorway on the right hand side which is bordered by industrial style granite grey panels.

The wall returns to its previous configuration, representing an exterior platform. There is a doorway, 2 metres off the ground in which the ghost of Hamlet's father watches. A subtle shift in lighting allows the doorway to disappear, replaced once more by wood panels.

Another revolution takes us to a new room in the castle. On the left hand side there are two flights of steps, leading to a largely obscured doorway in the wall. To the right there is another opening at ground level.

When a play is performed in the palace hall, the royal household watches from a raised vantage at the top of the steps. They sit on chairs as the players act out the drama below.

Another turn reveals a new room with a gap in the centre of the wall. A long, steep staircase fills this gap, leading to an unseen doorway halfway up.

Queen Gertrude's private rooms are represented by a single wooden trunk placed front left. Hanging above is a light fitting shaped like a bull's horns. The back wall is covered by black curtains with space in the centre for a mirrored door.

The story moves to a churchyard represented by a 2 and a half metre long grave, dug front centre. When the gravedigger stands inside only his top half is visible.

Hamlet climaxes in the great hall where the lower level is kept clear for a duel. At the top of the steps there is a long wooden table with wine bottles and glasses, next to it is a stand holding four fencing blades.

## **CHARACTERS AND COSTUMES**

Now a description of Hamlet's sixteen characters, ten major and six minor, beginning with Hamlet's family.

Hamlet, a Prince of Denmark, is a white man in his early 30s. He has tousled, auburn hair which matches his generally casual appearance. Hamlet has light blue eyes with expressive eyebrows and a wide mouth. He is six feet tall and has a slim build - his movements are generally relaxed and he walks with a slight swagger. When roused to anger or excitement, his gestures become exaggerated with flamboyant use of his body and limbs.

Throughout several costume changes he remains entirely dressed in black. First appearing in a denim jacket and skinny jeans, paired with a black t-shirt decorated with jagged white lines. He later

changes into a long-sleeved satin shirt and a vintage leather jacket along with black Chelsea boots.

**Gertrude** is Hamlet's mother and the Queen. A white woman in her early 60s, she is 5 foot 5 inches tall and of medium build with wavy grey blonde hair worn in a chignon bun. Gertrude is graceful and confident and presents herself elegantly at all times, with flowing silk dresses and wide legged trousers paired with low heels. She always appears interested in those around her, standing close to her companions during conversations. She moves with enthusiasm, taking long strides and often throwing her arms out wide.

**Claudius** is the new King of Denmark and Hamlet's uncle. A white man in his early 60s, he is 5 foot 8 inches tall, slim and wiry. Claudius has a bald head and is clean shaven, accentuating his craggy features. He presents himself with quiet authority, standing with legs apart and leaning into conversations. His clothes are smart suits in sober colours which are well cut and give the impression of wealth and power.

**The Ghost** of Hamlet's father is a mostly spectral figure who dresses in typical black hooded garb disguising his face.

### ***The House of Polonius***

An advisor to Claudius, Polonius is a black man in his mid-50s, 5 foot 8 inches tall with a rounded body shape. He has a jovial

demeanour, often smiling broadly, with twinkling brown eyes. Polonius wears black framed glasses and has a shaved head with salt and pepper stubble. His clothes are smart but sharply tailored, wearing suits in slate blue and dark grey, with a maroon tie and pocket square. His shoes are brown leather.

**Ophelia** is Polonius's daughter and Hamlet's love interest. A woman in her early 20s, she has pale, white skin and long, wavy, light brown hair which she wears in a low bun. Her hair becomes looser as the play progresses until her final scenes where it is completely down. Ophelia's eyes are large and vivid green, her mouth bow-shaped and her cheeks and chin slightly dimpled. She is 5 foot 6 inches tall and has a slim build. When anxious she hugs herself and fidgets with her hand and rings.

When we first meet Ophelia she is dressed in an elegant navy blue halterneck dress, silver strappy heels. She later appears in a bright green crochet top with short sleeves, blue jeans and light pink high-top trainers. Ophelia's final appearance sees her barefoot, wearing shorts over a large shirt covered in mud.

**Laertes is Polonius's son, and the brother of Ophelia.** He's in his mid 20s, tall and long limbed with a medium build and dark curly hair. He has a reserved manner but when pushed into action his physical actions are swift and muscular. Laertes dresses in smart-casual clothes, light brown loafers and a loose fitting muddy

brown suit worn with an blue open necked shirt and later a maroon polo neck.

### ***Friends of Hamlet***

**Horatio** is a woman in her late 20s, 5 foot 6 and slim. She is of mixed African and white heritage with brown skin. Her hair is styled in thin waist length braids worn in a high ponytail and later a bun. Horatio dresses in modern, youthful clothing, with bright lime green tops, baggy washed out blue jeans and high-top trainers, later changing into a more formal baggy trouser suit. She has an enquiring face and moves with quick, alert movements.

**Rosencrantz** is tall with a shy and awkward demeanour and moves slightly stiffly. He wears tortoiseshell framed glasses and a loose fitting green jacket, navy blue trousers and black leather shoes.

**Guildestern** is a white woman, five foot four inches tall and slim. She has a relaxed manner and an open face. Her light brown hair is shoulder length and she wears a light blue cotton jacket, tan trousers and black loafers.

### ***Palace servants and staff***

**Reynaldo**, who acts as a spy to Polonius, stands with a straight back and looks attentive at all times, communicating through plentiful hand movements. She is a petite woman in her late 20s,

professionally dressed in a black trouser suit, white shirt, black loafers and clear frame glasses. Her hair is twisted up and held in a clip.

**Osric**, a courtier of Claudius is slightly camp and affected in his mannerisms and dress. 5 foot 8 inches tall and slightly overweight, he wears a purple smoking jacket over a pink shirt with cravat.

***The Players** are a pair of actors who visit Elsinore to perform at court with Hamlet.*

**The Player Queen** has quick bird-like movements. She is dressed in period costume, wearing a cream coloured Elizabethan dress with long sleeves, petticoats and a deep pink sash across the body with cream ballerina slippers.

**The Player King** has slicked back, slicked back, black grey hair and the beginnings of middle aged spread. Upon arrival, he is drably dressed in blue jeans and brown jacket and moves a little ponderously, but bursts to life when he acts. His stage costume is traditional Tudor doublet, hose and cape. The player king and queen wear gold Venetian masks for their performance.

The **Gravedigger** dresses in black and wears a knitted cap, gilet and black combat boots. He is a weary looking soul, always clasping a shovel, a cup of tea or pressing a hand to his chest.



## CREDITS

Billy Howle plays HAMLET

Niamh Cusack is GERTRUDE

CLAUDIUS is played by Finbar Lynch

Mirren Mack is OPHELIA

Jason Barnett plays POLONIUS and OSRIC

LAERTES and ROSENCRANTZ are played by Taheen Modak

Isabel Adomakoh Young is HORATIO

Catrin Stewart takes on the roles of GUILDENSTERN, REYNALDO  
and the PLAYER QUEEN

The PLAYER KING, GHOST and GRAVEDIGGER are played by  
Firdous Bamji

*The creative team for Hamlet is*

Director - John Haidar

Set Design - Alex Eales

Natalie Pryce is the Costume Designer

Lighting Design is by Malcolm Rippeth

Composer & Sound Design - Max Pappenheim

Video Design - Jack Phelan

Lucy Cullingford is the Movement Director

Casting Director - Sam Stevenson

Fight Director - Bret Yount

The Costume Supervisor is Zoe Hammond

And Elinor Lower is the Assistant Director

## **ACCESS INFORMATION**

The Bristol Old Vic is accessible through the theatre's main entrance on King Street - please note that the street is cobbled. Full access information for the Bristol Old Vic can be found at <https://bristololdvic.org.uk/your-visit/access/general-access-information>

If you need any further assistance, for example if a visit to the Theatre in advance of the show would help, then either contact the Box Office on 0117 987 7877 (1pm to 6pm Monday to Saturday) or email [access@bristololdvic.org.uk](mailto:access@bristololdvic.org.uk)

## **CONTENT WARNINGS**

Hamlet contains violent scenes (including stabbing and choking), murder and suicide. There are two live gunshots and strobe lighting is used during the performance. Cigarette smoke is also featured.

That is the end of this audio introduction.