



# NT Education Workpack

## Hamlet

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**Hamlet**  
by William Shakespeare

First preview at the Lyttelton Theatre 15 July 2000, opening in the National's Lyttelton Theatre on 5 September 2000 after visiting Malvern and Epsom

See [www.nt-online.org](http://www.nt-online.org) for further production details

**Director**  
John Caird

**Designer**  
Tim Hatley

**Lighting Designer**  
Paul Pyant

**Music**  
John Cameron

**Fight Director**  
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# The play

## Introduction

Is this the most famous play in the world? Probably. At 4,042 lines, it's certainly the longest that Shakespeare wrote. Like that of Robinson Crusoe, Robin Hood, or King Arthur, most people recognise the name "Hamlet" even if their knowledge of the play is confined to a hazy memory of a man in black holding a skull. The role has offered the actor an unrivalled opportunity to "strut and fret" his (or sometimes her) stuff upon the stage ever since Richard Burbage created the part at The Globe in 1601. Hardly surprisingly, great actors of both sexes cannot resist the lure of the "inky-cloaked" Prince of Denmark. The role of Hamlet has up to 1,507 lines (more than any other in Shakespeare), many of them spoken directly to the audience in soliloquy. In a full text version of the play, Hamlet is on stage for nearly two thirds of the time and is often the sole focus for the audience's attention. He confesses his innermost thoughts, and reveals himself to be an often insecure, vacillating, and far from perfect man.

In the twentieth century, Hamlet has, on the whole, been played as a heroic failure, sometimes almost as a Chaplinesque figure, the "little man" struggling against injustice and an oppressive regime. Like Chaplin's Tramp, Hamlet is unlucky in life, and unlucky in love. What happens to him in the course of the play is extraordinary, but his response to the "slings and arrows of outrageous

Simon Russell Beale  
photo Catherine Ashmore



fortune" is very recognisable. Hamlet's inability to play the role of decisive leader continues to appeal to societies still wary of the abuse of power.

## Hamlet and popular culture

The image of Hamlet has become an icon embedded in the collective consciousness. People recognise him in the most diverse situations – on advertisements for beer and cigars, or as a figure in operas, paintings and novels. Phrases from the play have entered into common usage: "hoist with his own petard", "neither a borrower nor a lender be", "brevity is the soul of wit" and "when sorrows come, they come not single spies but in battalions". Above all, the image of a solitary man in black focusing intently on a skull is instantly recognisable. A friend, travelling to New York to present a paper at an academic conference, carried with him a plastic skull (he was going to talk about *Hamlet*). When he came through customs he was stopped for a routine search. The somewhat startled customs officer saw the skull and took it up in one hand. He held it at arm's length before exclaiming loudly, to the amusement of fellow travellers, "Alas, poor Yorick!"

If you visit Stratford-upon-Avon via the ancient Clopton Bridge, you can see the well-known Shakespeare statue in the memorial gardens by the river Avon. Amongst the figures surrounding it is Hamlet, cast in bronze, and unmistakable in posture – leaning forward to contemplate the skull that he is holding. That skull is different from the rest of the green-tinged metal because it is bright and shiny, worn smooth by the touch of thousands of Shakespeare pilgrims whose hands have lingered in symbolic communion.

# The play

## **A Memento Mori**

If you have ever visited an ancient church or cathedral you will almost certainly have stopped to admire an ornate funeral monument or tomb, often found in a tiny private chapel. There, often painted in rich colours, are the effigies of rich and powerful people, dressed in their very finest clothes, looking as if frozen in time, eternally magnificent and impressive. However, once your gaze has shifted from the figures that adorn the tomb, you will notice a very different image competing for attention. Usually at the base of the tomb, sometimes behind iron bars, you will see a ghastly figure of a naked dusty skeleton, topped by a sometimes grinning skull. This is the Memento Mori, a reminder that death is both inevitable and the great leveller; we are all reduced to dust no matter what our station in life. Yorick's skull is just such a reminder, both to Hamlet, and to the audience.

Simon Russell Beale  
photo Catherine Ashmore



## **Hamlet in Prison**

In contrast to John Caird's relatively rich production for the National, the last time this play was produced by the NT (1995), it was staged in the nineteenth-century Gothic chapel within the razor-wired walls of Brixton Prison. There, a group of inmates and two women actors from the National (playing Ophelia and Gertrude) performed an extraordinarily powerful abridged version, directed by Stephen Powell. As soon as their work on the text started, the ideas and issues, and above all the situation in which Hamlet found himself, began to resonate with the prisoners. The fictional Denmark is described by Hamlet as "a prison". Here Hamlet, like so many men in Brixton and other prisons, finds himself at the mercy of powerful and persuasive forces that he barely understands. As in HMP Brixton, people at the Court of King Claudius are bullied both physically and, especially in the case of Ophelia, verbally. Privacy is hard to find and intimate moments are often observed. The scene in which Hamlet tells Ophelia, "get thee to a Nunnery" (Act 3 Scene 1), surreptitiously observed by Claudius and Polonius, was played at Brixton as if it were taking place as part of a prison visit.

Hamlet, like so many of the men inside Brixton and other British gaols, comes from a dysfunctional family where betrayal of trust is a familiar experience. His letters are intercepted and read, an everyday occurrence in prison. Above all, Hamlet, is isolated, and tortured by his inability to act.

# The play

## John Caird's Production

Tim Hatley's design for John Caird's production shows high, dark metallic walls surrounding the stage, suggestive both of a prison and the lofty space of a cathedral. Dozens of small chandeliers are raised and lowered from the ceiling during the performance (used to full effect by Ophelia in her mad scene when she sets them swaying). They are reminiscent of the lights in catholic churches (tabernacle lamps) that burn to signal the location of the Blessed Sacrament, or the incense burners that are swung when High Mass is celebrated. In the final scene when the back wall of the set divides, light shines through to reveal a cruciform of dazzling, almost heavenly light. There are waves of holy music, and many of the characters cross themselves at moments of tension. John Caird's production emphasises the Christian theme of sin and redemption. His *Hamlet* suggests a reality beyond that of Denmark, beyond the fictional world of the play, and even the corporal life that we, the audience know. This other realm, this space for the supernatural, perhaps even of eternal life, can only be glimpsed and hypothesised, but this production suggests that its existence is not in doubt – a surprising conclusion perhaps, to a largely agnostic audience, reared on scepticism and mistrust of the non-rational. This reading is based firmly in the text however. Remember that Hamlet does not kill Claudius at prayer because this would send his hated

Denis Qulley  
Simon Russell Beale  
photo Catherine Ashmore



stepfather's soul to heaven:

Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying,  
And now I'll do't – and so a 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.

(Act 3, Scene 3)

In Hamlet's meditation on life and death "To be or not to be" (Act 3, Scene 1), what prevents his suicide is "the fear of something after death". He cannot doubt this "something" since he has so recently experienced its presence. The Ghost of Hamlet's father (played in this production to emphasise its physical reality and actual presence) confirms the existence of that "undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns".

## Design and Lighting

The idea of life as a journey, a pilgrimage, is also important in this production and signalled through Tim Hatley's design. The production itself is touring to towns and cities outside London, and from the beginning of the performance, suitcases and trunks are used continually to suggest locality, and even to provide seating at the play-within-the-play. They appear as reminders not only that the play is only temporarily in residence on the stage, but that all the characters in the drama are visitors – not only the travelling players, but the entire cast and audience, are also travellers, passing through this theatre and this life.

Lighting designer Paul Pyant lights only the heads of each of the actors in the opening and closing moments of the performance. The effect against the dark background is funereal; they burn with intensity like brief candles, before going out.

# The play

## **The Text: to cut or not to cut...**

If the full text of *Hamlet* were played it would take well over four hours. For this touring production, it was decided to make some major cuts. In doing so, John Caird followed an established tradition. Actors in Shakespeare's own company cut, rearranged and even added to the text, as circumstances and audiences required. There is a reference to such practices in *Hamlet* itself when, following the arrival at court of the players (Act 3, Scene 2), Hamlet warns them to stick to the text he has written for them: "And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them." Caird's cuts exclude all references to the wider political drama portrayed by Fortinbras, Prince of Norway and his invading army, and focus instead on the claustrophobic world of the court. It is always interesting to note which text has been used (in this case, the Arden edition) and what cuts have been made.

There are no remaining manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays. All we have are the earliest printed versions. In some cases there is only one edition, but in the case of *Hamlet* there are three: two individual versions of the play (Quarto 1, 1603 and Quarto 2 1604), and the text contained in the First Folio of 1623 (the collected works published shortly after Shakespeare's death). Modern editors spend an inordinate amount of time deciding which of the three texts to follow. Most use the second Quarto and the Folio. But it is not a straightforward choice. For example, Hamlet's famous reference to Denmark as a prison only exists in the Folio text. It is important to remember this, if only to recognise that there is no definitive Shakespeare text, no "gold standard" to which all subsequent versions can be compared. There are some interesting differences, particularly, in the case of *Hamlet* between Q1 and Q2 where the contrast is far greater than between Q2 and the Folio.

This, for example, is Q1's version of perhaps the most well known Shakespeare soliloquy of them all. It is very different from the text spoken by Simon Russell Beale:

To be, or not to be, I there's the point,  
To Die, to sleep, is that all? I all:  
No, to sleep, to dream, I marry there it goes,  
For in that dream of death, when we awake,  
And borne before an everlasting Judge,  
From whence no passenger ever returned,  
The undiscovered country, at whose sight  
The happy smile, and the accursed damn'd.  
But for this, the joyful hope of this,  
Who would bear the scornes and flattery of the world,  
Scorned by the right rich, the rich cursed of the poor?  
The widow being oppressed, the orphan wrong'd,  
The taste of hunger, or a tirants reign,  
And a thousand more calamities besides,  
To grunt and sweat under this weary life,  
When that he may his full quietus make,  
With a bare bodkin, who would this indure,  
But for a hope of something after death?  
Which pusles the brain, and doth confound the sense,  
Which makes us rather brave those evils that we have,  
Than fly to others that we known not of.  
I that, O this conscience makes cowards of us all...

The play is wonderfully malleable; Caird's production of *Hamlet* makes for a very different experience to that of Stephen Powell's production in Brixton prison. *Hamlet* will go on being made and re-made by every new generation of theatre-makers, and the melancholy Dane will, in all probability, continue to be seen as one of the ultimate acting challenges, while the play continues to delight, frustrate, confuse and amuse.

# For discussion

## 1

Identify the main parts of the text that are omitted from John Caird's production and discuss what that directorial decision foregrounded and what it marginalised.

## 2

Discuss alternative strategies for making an edited version of the play.

Consider what is absolutely essential to the plot and what is dispensable. Which of the characters can be cut entirely?

## 3

Make a storyboard for a filmed version of *Hamlet* showing the key moments in the development of the narrative. How do your storyboards differ?

## 4

Take one of the minor characters (Osric perhaps) and try to see the events of the play through his eyes; what does he see and what sense does he make of it?

## 5

Look at the painting 'Ophelia' by Sir John Everett Millais (1851–2) held at the Tate Gallery, London (see [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)).

What does this picture seem to tell us about Ophelia, about the play, and the artist who painted it?

While you look at the painting, read Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death in Act 4, Scene 7.

## 6

Consider the costume design for a production of *Hamlet*. What clues can you find in the text to assist in designing costumes for a modern dress version of the play? Does Hamlet wear an Armani suit or a black T-shirt and black jeans? What properties do they carry? If Claudius were, for example, to drink from a small hip flask, what might it suggest about his character?

Simon Russell Beale  
Cathryn Bradshaw

photo Catherine Ashmore



# Practical exercises

## 1

Look at some of the potentially hurtful words and phrases that are said to Ophelia by her father, brother, and Hamlet. You will find them in Act 1 Scene 3, Act 2 Scene 2, and Act 3 Scene 1. Give a different word or phrase to everyone in the group and then call for a volunteer to stand surrounded by the rest. They can then use their words or phrases in any order (and repeated as often as they like) to try to intimidate the volunteer. How does it feel to be the victim and how does it feel to be one of the speakers?

## 2

In a largely sceptical age, representation of the supernatural presents difficulties for both performers and audiences. In Caird's production the ghost is very real, bathed in a haunting blue light. Look closely at the Ghost's language in the speech beginning "I am thy father's spirit..." (Act 1, Scene 5). Read the speech around the group one word at a time, and then ask the group to speak in unison the first and last words of each line. Finally, use a highlighter to mark any word (or words) that appeal to the group or that stand out from the others.

## 3

There are a lot of long soliloquies in *Hamlet*. However as an acting exercise it can be very useful and enlightening to work on them in the following way:

In pairs, alternating between speaking and listening – begin with one line at a time and when the language and the ideas have become familiar, ask one person to speak the whole thing whilst the other listens. Use the exercise to focus on the presence of the non-speaking partner. S/he can react to what is said to them by sighing, nodding, even by laughing. Ask those speaking Hamlet's text how the physical presence of a listener (it might be, for example, Horatio) affects the way in which they speak the lines.

Give the actors a challenge by asking them to locate the speech in a specific, modern context. For example, Hamlet is waiting with his friend Horatio at a bus stop. The bus is very late and lots of people are waiting. Speak the speech and decide to whom it is addressed. You could decide to keep this scenario but add another dimension: Hamlet has had too much to drink. These exercises freshen the language for the actor and may well help him or her discover new things about it.

Sara Kestelman  
Simon Russell Beale

photo Catherine Ashmore



## Related materials

As you would expect from the most well known play in world literature, there are thousands of titles by hundreds of authors all jostling for attention. The following were useful in preparing this workpack.

Dawson, Anthony B, *Hamlet* (Shakespeare in Performance), Manchester, 1998

Haggood, Robert, *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark* (Shakespeare in Production), Cambridge, 1999

McGee, Arthur, *The Elizabethan Hamlet*, New Haven, USA, 1987

Pennington, Michael, *Hamlet: A User's Guide*, London, 1997

Taylor, Neil and Thompson, Ann, *Hamlet* (Writers and Their Work), London 1996

Many teachers will have used one or more of the filmed versions of *Hamlet* now available on video and DVD. There is a useful discussion of filmed versions of the play by Neil Taylor in *Shakespeare and the Moving Image*, eds. Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells, pp180-195, Cambridge, 1994

Simon Russell Beale has also played Hamlet on audio cassette: *Shakespeare's Stories: Hamlet* by Leon Garfield, Clivers Children's Audio Books, 1999