



HAMLET

By William Shakespeare

11 September - 25 October 2014

Director Sarah Frankcom
Designer Amanda Stoodley
Lighting Designer Lee Curran
Sound Designer Peter Rice
Composer Alex Baranowski
Movement Director Imogen Knight

Performed by Ashley Zhanghaza (Laertes), Barbara Marten (Gertrude), Ben Stott (Osric/Player Queen/Barnardo), Claire Benedict (Marcella/Player King), Dean Gregory (Lucianus), Gillian Bevan (Polonia), Jodie McNee (Rosencrantz), John Shrapnel (Claudius/Ghost), Katie West (Ophelia), Maxine Peake (Hamlet), Michelle Butterfly (First Gravedigger), Peter Singh (Guildenstern), Tachia Newall (Reynaldo/Priest/Francisco) and Thomas Arnold (Horatio).

TEACHER RESOURCE

This resource has been written for use with Key Stage 4 and 5 Drama, Theatre Studies and English students, but many of the activities can be adapted for younger age groups. The activities aim to help students explore significant features of the rehearsal process and production.

The adjoining Trans Awareness resource can be used in conjunction with a theatre visit or as a separate activity.

OTHER RESOURCES

You can find more information about the production here:

- royalexchange.co.uk/hamlet (Royal Exchange Theatre HAMLET production page)
- thetimes.co.uk/to/life/article4194603.ece (Maxine Peake talks to Janice Turner about class, infertility and playing Hamlet)
- bbc.co.uk/radio4 (*Hamlet Undressed*, which will be broadcast on BBC Radio 4, Sunday 28 September, 1.30pm)
- exeuntmagazine.com/features/design-in-the-round (HAMLET Designer Amanda Stoodley talks to Exeunt Magazine about the challenges of designing for the Royal Exchange Theatre's unique space)

SYNOPSIS

HAMLET tells the story of the young Prince of Denmark whose father has recently died. The ghost of his father (Hamlet Senior) appears and explains that he was murdered by Hamlet's Uncle, now King Claudius of Denmark. King Claudius has not only claimed his brother's crown, but he has married his widow (Hamlet's mother).

Hamlet promises to revenge his father's death but, because he is contemplative and thoughtful by nature, he delays, entering into a deep melancholy and even apparent madness.

WHY NOT?

For a full summary of the plot, as well as an analysis of the characters and themes, visit sparknotes.com/shakespeare/hamlet

TO BE (A MAN) OR NOT TO BE (A MAN)...

Traditionally, HAMLET only has two female roles; Ophelia, who is Hamlet's troubled love interest, and Gertrude, who is his mother.

Director Sarah Frankcom has changed this, however, with her radical re-imagining of the play that has placed Maxine Peake centre-stage in the title role. Talking about the challenge of playing Hamlet, Maxine Peake said: "It's a bit of a dream come true; I'm doing a sword fight and then I'm punching someone in the head! I get it now why men get [so] excited about wanting to play Hamlet. You do everything: every emotional base is covered. It is... the ultimate part".

So, is Hamlet male or female in this production? The answer is, both! Maxine is playing Hamlet as a woman that "presents" as a man. This means that Hamlet will be referred to as a 'he' throughout the play, but that Maxine will be free to emphasise both the male and female aspects of the character at different points in the story. In a world that is gradually opening up to alternative perceptions and expectations of gender, this fresh approach aims to get audiences thinking differently about the play and transgender issues.

Excitingly, 7 of the 14 actors in the Royal Exchange's production are women. Characters such as Rosencrantz and Polonius have been made into female roles (you may notice that Polonius's name has been changed to Polonia to make this clearer), whilst other characters, such as the Player King, are being performed by women who are obviously cross-dressing and pretending to be men; further underlining that sex and gender are not clear-cut or straightforward in this play

WHY NOT?

Have a look at our Tans Awareness resource (royalexchange.co.uk/resources) and ask your students to have a go at some or all of the exercises.

To link this work to an analysis of HAMLET, you might ask your students to identify points in the play when they felt that Maxine was emphasizing the 'masculine' or 'feminine' aspects of Hamlet. They could present their ideas verbally, through sketches or even freeze frames and discuss how Maxine's use of gender stereotypes helped to tell the audience about the character and the story.

A METAPHORIC SPACE

Instead of finding a realistic setting (such as a place or a historical period) for the Royal Exchange's production, director Sarah Frankcom and designer Amanda Stoodley wanted to create a 'metaphorical space' for the play, which would develop naturally out of the play's action and emphasize their ideas about it.

Below is some more information about the concept and the design that Sarah and Amanda came up with, with some accompanying pictures.

THE BLACK HOLE (Fig 1)

The first scene is set in a sort of 'black hole', with black paintwork and a shiny black vinyl floor. The blackness is only interrupted by bare light bulbs, hanging down from the ceiling to suggest a night sky. The colour black serves to create a dark and foreboding atmosphere for the start of the play. It is symbolic of death, calling attention to the fact that the royal family is still in mourning for King Hamlet (Hamlet Senior).



Fig 1

THE THEATRE (Fig 2)

Amanda Stoodley was keen to use as much of the architecture of the theatre as possible in her design. Hamlet is a play about artifice- all of the characters are playing a 'role' and hiding something of their true selves - so it is fitting to call attention to the theatre that it is being performed in.



Fig 2

The empty stage, the dark, polished surfaces and the fact that the audience is sat in-the-round, staring at each other, all helps to create an environment for the play that feels dangerous and claustrophobic.

THE FLOOR

The gap between appearance and reality is one of Shakespeare's favourite themes: things aren't what they seem; people aren't what they appear to be. The polished vinyl floor acts as a metaphor for the theme of artifice, acting as a 'false mirror' on top of the true Elsinore, which lies beneath.

As Hamlet tries to find the truth about his father's murder, the floor is peeled away by the actors, revealing layers of rotten-looking floorboards (representing moral corruption and decay) and finally, the bare theatre floor.



Fig 3

CLOTHES (Fig 3)

Clothes are used in the second half of the show to represent the bodies of those that have died. Laertes enters cradling Ophelia's dress, as opposed to her dead body, for example, and Hamlet speaks to a hat, as opposed to a (traditional) skull. Clothes are also used to represent earth, with the gravediggers creating Ophelia's grave out of a pile of clothes. The use of clothes brings a splash of colour onto the stage for the second half of the play and furthers the theme of 'performance' – the characters are remembered more for their costume than for who they truly were.

MUSIC

Music has been composed specifically for the Royal Exchange's production by award-winning composer, Alex Baranowski. The aim of the music is to create a foreboding atmosphere for the play, conjuring up a world full of fear. Alex says: "The starting point for the music was for it to be chaotic and fragmented, just as Hamlet becomes in the play. We decided to go down a jazz route as it is a genre that can sound very chaotic and deconstructed yet still have some sort of form to it - like the inside of Hamlet's head (think of his feigned madness to Polonia). I worked alongside a brilliant trumpet player called Mark Kavuma, and in my studio recorded a number of percussive and electronic instruments including a theremin, which all contributed to the sound of the music. A lot of it was improvisation which I brought together to create new pieces of their own." Here is a link to a sound file: <https://soundcloud.com/alexbaranowski/hamlet-music-excerpt-alex-baranowski/s-PjlnQ>.

WHY NOT? Design a Metaphorical Space

This exercise aims to help students understand that Shakespeare's plays are written to be interpreted in the theatre and to appreciate how directors and designers go about that process.

1. Hand out a description of the concept for the Royal Exchange's production of HAMLET (you could use the previous page of this document or create your own). Explain what we mean by a 'metaphorical space' - a design that functions symbolically or metaphorically as opposed to one that tries to mimic a real place or time period.
2. Discuss how the concept supports ideas within the play.
3. Using the photo gallery (attached), look at set designs for two or three different productions of HAMLET. Ask your students to identify how each production created a unique world by making specific interpretative choices. Discuss what ideas in the text these design concepts might support.
4. Students are now ready to design their own metaphorical spaces. They can do this individually or in small groups. Ask them to start by deciding what ideas in the text they particularly want to emphasise. They should include in their design:
 1. The type of stage and audience/actor relationship (thrust, proscenium, promenade, etc.)
 2. The placement of the entrances/exits
 3. The period and location of the production (if any)
 4. How other elements (e.g. sound & lighting) might add to the conceptThe designs may either be illustrated or performed. If performed, players can use either a scene from the text or improvised dialogue. The behaviour of the characters in the space should give the audience a sense of the location.
5. As part of their presentations, the groups should explain how their design concept fulfils the requirements of metaphorical space:
 - How does it come naturally from the play's action?
 - How is it metaphorical? What ideas in the play are echoed and emphasised by the design concept?

IN REHEARSAL: BACKSTORY

Looking back at other productions of HAMLET highlights the range of interpretative choices, not only in terms of design concept, but in terms of how to play the title character. There are also many ways to play other characters. Gertrude can be sexy and glamorous or a dowdy middle-aged mum. Ophelia can be fragile but she can also be very tough. Even Horatio, seemingly the archetype of the honest, devoted friend, can be played in various ways. In making these interpretative choices, the **backstory** plays a crucial role. The backstory is the character's personal history up until the start of the play's action. It is an important tool for fleshing out a role and making the actor feel more fully connected to the character.

To create a backstory, actors must behave like detectives: searching the text for clues about their character and also asking lots of questions. For example, an actor playing the role of Gertrude might ask important questions such as 'Why did I marry Claudius so quickly?' 'How did I feel about my first husband?' 'Am I still in mourning?' 'Does it show?' and so on.

In the Royal Exchange rehearsal room, backstory was an important part of creating the production. The actors frequently stopped to talk about their character's backstory and they would collectively make decisions that would affect how all of the characters were played. For example, the cast decided early on that Ophelia had been unwell, which meant that the other characters would treat her carefully.

WHY NOT? - EXPLORE THE IDEA OF BACKSTORY

This activity is designed to deepen your students' appreciation of the wide range of interpretative choices available for actors.

1. Divide your group into four teams and assign each team a character: Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude or Claudius.
2. Give each group the worksheet for their chosen character (worksheets are attached).
3. Ask the groups to add to the worksheet with facts and questions about their character.
4. Ask the groups to answer their questions, making decisions about their character.
5. Next ask the groups to create a 'still-image' of the character they have built – this should be as dramatic and distinct as possible. The straightforward way to do this is to have one person play the character while the rest of the group are 'directors', coaching the actor as s/he creates the image. Alternatively, the whole group can create an image which captures the spirit of the character.
6. Next, ask the groups to work together: the Hamlet group should work with the Ophelia group, and the Gertrude group to work with the Claudius group.
7. Each group should share their still image and discuss their character. Some new decisions might now need to be made, for example, the Ophelia group might believe that she has had a passionate love affair with Hamlet, while the Hamlet group might think that isn't the case. Encourage the groups to allow their characters 'evolve' with the new information, and make new decisions with their paired group.
8. Now try this exercise the actors did in the rehearsals for this production: speed-dating!
9. Ask 'characters' to meet in pairs and give them two minutes to learn as much as they can about one another. You can extend this exercise by asking the pairs to make a still-image of their feelings about each another at the end of the two minutes.
10. With your students, reflect on this practical work. You could describe the extremes to which each role could be played and still be supported by the text.

PHOTO GALLERY

Royal Exchange 2014:



Maxine Peake as Hamlet, Katie West as Ophelia (top right) and Barbara Marten as Gertrude (bottom left) in HAMLET.

Photos - Jonathan Keenan

OTHER PRODUCTIONS OF HAMLET

RSC 1965:



Washington National Opera 2010:



National Theatre 2010:





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HAMLET WORKSHEET

FACTS	QUESTIONS
<p>He is the Prince of Denmark. He is the son of the (now dead) King of Denmark and Queen Gertrude, and the step-son of King Claudius. He's been romantically involved with Ophelia.</p>	<p>Does he want to be King one day? Did he get on well with his father? Has he always disliked his Uncle? Is he in love with Ophelia?</p>



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OPHELIA WORKSHEET

FACTS	QUESTIONS
<p>She is the daughter of King Claudius's chief advisor, Polonia</p> <p>She is the sister of Laertes</p> <p>She has been romantically involved with Hamlet.</p>	<p>Does she get on well with her mother?</p> <p>Is she in love with Hamlet?</p> <p>Is she well-educated?</p>



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CLAUDIUS WORKSHEET

FACTS	QUESTIONS
<p>He is the King of Denmark He is married to Queen Gertrude, his brother's widow He is the step-father of Hamlet</p>	<p>Does he feel guilty about stepping into his dead brother's place? Is he guilty of murdering his brother? How does he feel about Hamlet?</p>



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GERTRUDE WORKSHEET

FACTS	QUESTIONS
<p>She is the Queen of Denmark She has recently married Claudius, the brother of her late husband (King Hamlet) She is the mother of Hamlet</p>	<p>Does she feel guilty about marrying Claudius? Is she still grieving for her last husband? Does she get on well with her son, Hamlet?</p>