

REDUCED SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

THE COMEDY OF HAMLET! (a prequel)

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **REED MARTIN & AUSTIN TICHENOR**

STUDY GUIDE BY **ALLISON BACKUS**

DESIGNED BY **EMILY BOYER**

MARCH 12-30, 2025



MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

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PRESENTS

THE COMEDY OF HAMLET! (A PREQUEL)

WRITTEN BY

REED MARTIN & AUSTIN TICHENOR

STARRING

GEOFFREY BARNES*
DOUG HARVEY*
AUSTIN TICHENOR*

BACKDROP DESIGNER

TIM HOLTSLAG

COSTUME DESIGNER

FREYA MARCELIUS

SOUND DESIGNERS

MATTHEW COWELL, ZACH MOORE

STAGE MANAGER

ELAINE RANDOLPH*

DIRECTED BY

REED MARTIN & AUSTIN TICHENOR

MARCH 12-30, 2025

THE COMEDY OF HAMLET! (A PREQUEL) WAS WORKSHOPPED AND DEVELOPED AS HAMLET'S BIG ADVENTURE!
(A PREQUEL) AT SHAKESPEARE NAPA VALLEY (JENNIFER KING, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR). DIRECTED BY THE
AUTHORS, THE CAST WAS PETER DOWNEY, JESSICA ROMERO, AND CHAD YARISH.

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AND MORE!



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and Stage Managers in the United States.



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are represented by United Scenic Artists (USA) Local USA-829, IATSE.



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Directors and Choreographers Society), and USA (United Scenic Artists).

LEARNING STANDARDS

GRADES 9-12

SYNOPSIS, ABOUT THE REDUCED SHAKESPEARE COMPANY, & FROM THE PLAYWRIGHTS

Theatre Arts – *Responding*

T.R.07, T.R.08, T.R.09

RECOMMENDED SCENES FROM *HAMLET* & TIMELINE

English Language Arts – *Reading*

R.3, R.10

HAMLET: A LITERARY AND CULTURAL PHENOMENON & A BRIEF HISTORY OF *HAMLET*

English Language Arts – *Reading,*

Reading Literature

R.9, RL.3

AFTER THE SHOW: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & MAKING CONNECTIONS: PHILIP H. CALDERON'S *THE YOUNG LORD HAMLET*

English Language Arts – *Reading Literature,*

Speaking and Listening, Writing

RL.1, RL.3, SL.1, SL.3, W.10

LISTEN: RSC'S PODCAST: *HAMLET'S PREQUEL ADVENTURE & WHAT IS A DRAMATURG?*

Theatre Arts – *Responding, Creating*

T.R.07, T.R.08, T.R.09, T.Cr.01, T.Cr.02

English Language Arts – *Reading Literature,*
Speaking and Listening, Writing

RL.9, SL.2, SL.4, W.7, W.8, W.9

PERFORMING COMEDY: TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES, ACTIVITY: IMPROV EXERCISES & ACTIVITY: PACING AND PAUSING

Theatre Arts – *Performing, Creating*

T.P.04, T.P.06, T.Cr.02, T.Cr.03

VERSE AND METER & CLOSE READING AND ANALYSIS

English Language Arts – *Reading Literature,*
Speaking and Listening, Language

RL.1, RL.4, RL.5, RL.9, SL.1, SL.4, L.3, L.5

TOPICS, THEME STATEMENTS, AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

English Language Arts – *Reading Literature, Writing*

RL.1, RL.2, RL.3, W.1, W.4, W.9, W.10

THE COMEDY OF HAMLET! (A PREQUEL) SYNOPSIS

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, hears the haunting pleas of a ghostly figure in the dark. The figure bounds out in a sheet before revealing himself to be Hamlet's father, very much alive and very keen on regularly pranking his son, much to his son's displeasure.

The king bemoans the endless drudgeries that come with ruling a nation and reveals to Hamlet that he would have rather been a writer or an actor than a king. Hamlet says he's never considered being anything other than a king, and his father encourages him to try new things and explore his options before he one day takes the crown. The king calls in his jester, Yorick, and advises him to take Hamlet under his wing and teach him everything there is to know about being an actor. Hamlet says he'd prefer to study



THE RSC PERFORMING "THE COMEDY OF HAMLET" AT WHARTON CENTER FOR PERFORMING ARTS. | WHARTONCENTER.COM

philosophy than be an actor, but his father, using his power as king, declares that he will study theatre.

Ophelia correctly infers that the grumpy Hamlet has had "another debate" with his father. She rants about her own parents: her mother won't let her take swimming lessons, and she is so overbearing that Ophelia's father can never get a word in edgewise. Ophelia asks Hamlet to promise her that they'll be better parents when they have children – separately, of course. Embarrassed and clearly smitten, they try to convince each other that their love for each other is purely platonic.

Lilith, Ophelia's mother, enters, and Hamlet hands Ophelia a note on his way out. Lilith urges her daughter to be careful with her show of "love and affection" for the prince, and when Polonius tries to speak, she talks right over him. She snatches the note Hamlet gave her daughter, revealing it to be a short, crass poem. Ophelia swoons and tells her mother she's going to swimming class and that her mother can't stop her.

Lilith and the king flirt (they seem to have a history). Lilith tells him that the nunnery under her patronage is in disrepair and asks for 1,000 kroner for renovations. The king tells her he's financially overextended and

can't manage it, but he offers to make Lilith his first Lady Knight. He moves to knight her but accidentally impales and kills her instead. He panics about what to tell Polonius before dragging his lover's body off the stage to hide it away.

Hamlet has an existential crisis about trying a new sandwich from his favorite deli. Ophelia enters in goggles and flippers and again complains about her mother, who she says she

wishes was "dead." Lilith's ghost appears and tells Ophelia to replace her as patron to the nunnery and convince the king to give the money needed for repairs. Polonius enters, inquiring if Ophelia has seen her mother. He begins to lecture his daughter, and Lilith tries to silence him, but unaware of her presence, he prattles on. Lilith tells her daughter that her mistreatment of Polonius stems from her own shame at her behavior. She tells Ophelia to be smarter than she was and warns her not to be "seduced by the glamor of royalty."

Hamlet weighs the pros and cons of being an actor, and Yorick suggests they play-act – Hamlet as himself and Yorick as the king. This proves unhelpful, and the two switch roles. Hamlet, playing his father, criticizes Yorick, playing Hamlet, for acting "sensibly and responsibly." Yorick, playing Hamlet, whines about being unable to make up his



REED MARTIN AS YORICK.
RESTONCOMMUNITYCENTER

mind. The king enters, pleased to see Hamlet "rehearsing." Yorick declares that the prince has talent, but Hamlet is still adamant about studying philosophy. The king coldly accepts Hamlet's decision but tells his son he shouldn't expect his love. He then advises Hamlet to comfort Ophelia, who has lost her mother in a "freak needlepoint accident."

Ophelia explains her mother's ghostly predicament to Hamlet and

Yorick. Her two friends promise to help her convince the king to provide the funds, but Hamlet declares that his father is terrible with money and will likely be unable to help. Yorick and Ophelia convince Hamlet to perform in a one-time show to raise the money.

Ophelia welcomes the audience to the performance fundraiser and introduces two nuns, Sister Angelica and Sister Erotica. Angelica and Erotica tell a series of lewd jokes before imploring the audience in song to donate to their cause. Ophelia introduces the next act, the comic Delver the Gravedigger, who laughs at his own jokes.

Backstage, Hamlet joins Yorick and Ophelia. He over-dramatically performs the monologue he's written for the show, which is received poorly by his two friends. At Yorick's request, Hamlet and Ophelia rehearse their

THE COMEDY OF HAMLET! (A PREQUEL) SYNOPSIS

love scene, and they woodenly perform a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. Yorick advises them to “keep it real” and lean into the obvious sexual tension between them. Hamlet glumly reveals that his father won’t be attending the show and that his mother is vacationing with his uncle Claudius. Ophelia tries to cheer him up, reminding him that the show is going well and that they just need to have fun.

Lilith discovers she has new powers and spins Hamlet around in circles before sweeping him offstage. The king enters looking for his son but is horrified to find Lilith’s ghost instead. He apologizes for killing her and reveals that he’s been spying on Hamlet and Ophelia during their love scene rehearsals. Lilith reveals to the king that Ophelia is not Polonius’s daughter but his. Together, they agree to keep the two budding lovers apart, and the king promises to somehow acquire the funds for the nunnery.

Lilith reveals herself to Polonius and makes him promise to keep Hamlet and Ophelia apart, revealing her affair with the king in the process. Polonius promises to “try to love” the girl he believed to be his daughter. Lilith says if he neglects Ophelia, she’ll ensure that he is killed. On stage, Ophelia encourages the audience to keep their donations coming. Yorick and a Scottish servant perform a comedy bit.

The king tells Yorick that they need to stop the love scene from happening. On stage, Hamlet introduces Laertes, who performs a mimed sword fight with Yorick. Backstage,

Rosencrantz and Garfunkel – two of Hamlet’s friends – tell Ophelia they are keen to sing and perform, but she dismisses them, telling them there isn’t room in the program. Ophelia enters the stage for her love scene with Hamlet. Yorick tries to stop her, but Hamlet enters, and the scene begins. Hamlet and Ophelia try to embrace each other as they speak their lines, but the invisible forces of Lilith keep them apart before forcing them both offstage. Yorick performs next, but he dies of a heart attack in the middle of his routine. Hamlet eulogizes Yorick through song and encourages the audience to be themselves, reminding them that life is short. Unseen by Hamlet and Ophelia, Yorick, now a ghost, beams with pride and leads the audience in a round of applause. The king enters and tells his son he’s a great performer. Hamlet convinces his father to end the song with him.

Yorick ponders why he’s still around, assuming he has “unfinished business” on earth. His puppet, Lil’ Yorick, informs him he is stuck until the actors finish a “fairly complicated costume change.” Ophelia calls from backstage that they’ve finished changing, and Yorick is drawn away into the afterlife. Hamlet enters in all black. Confident and smooth, he promises Ophelia he’ll find the remaining money for the nunnery before sweeping her into his arms.

Lilith enters, and Hamlet assumes she is his father playing another prank. She makes him slap himself until he realizes otherwise. With her business settled on earth, Lilith departs to the afterlife. Before she’s swept away, she

tells her daughter that Hamlet is her brother. Unknowing, Hamlet flirts, and Ophelia rebuffs his advances. She pushes the prince onstage to finish the show, and the king announces he’s acquired the remaining 400 kroner to save the nunnery by selling Claudi-

us’s castle and firing his wife’s contractor. He exits to take a nap in the orchard, and Hamlet happily declares the fundraiser to be a hit. In song with Sister Angelica and Sister Erotica, he ends the show.

ABOUT THE REDUCED SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

The Reduced Shakespeare Company is a touring comedy troupe known for performing “fast-paced, seemingly improvisational condensations of huge topics.”¹ Since its founding in 1981, the Reduced Shakespeare Company has written, produced, and performed eleven shows, including *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*, *William Shakespeare’s Long Lost First Play (abridged)*, *The Bible: The Complete Word of God (abridged)*, *The Complete History of America (abridged)*, and *The Ultimate Christmas Show (abridged)*. They’ve performed off-Broadway at Lincoln Center, the Folger Shakespeare Theatre, and regional theatres nationwide.



“THE COMPLETE WORKS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (ABRIDGED).”
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The company’s first three shows ran for nine years at London’s The Criterion Theatre, making them the longest-running comedies in West End history. The company has toured internationally in the UK, Belgium, The Netherlands, China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Barbados, Bermuda, and Qatar. The RSC is frequently featured on NPR and BBC Radio, and they’ve hosted the *Reduced Shakespeare Company Podcast* – the longest-running theatre podcast – since 2006. Dubbed “intellectual vaudeville” by *The New York Times* and a “trio of modern Marx Brothers” by *The Boston Herald*, the Reduced Shakespeare Company is renowned for their clever, rollicking comedies.

¹ “About Us,” The Reduced Shakespeare Company, n.d., accessed October 12, 2024, <https://www.reducedshakespeare.com/about/>.



FROM THE PLAYWRITERS: AN INTERVIEW WITH AUSTIN TICHENOR AND REED MARTIN

Austin Tichenor (left) and Reed Martin (right) are the co-artistic directors of The Reduced Shakespeare Company, for which they have written, directed, and performed. Their plays include *William Shakespeare's Long Lost First Play (abridged)*, *The Complete History of America (abridged)*, *The Bible: The Complete Word of God (abridged)*, *All the Great Books (abridged)*, and *The Ultimate Christmas Show (abridged)*. They have also co-written several books, including *Reduced Shakespeare: The Complete Guide for the Attention-Impaired (abridged)* and *Pop-up Shakespeare: Every Play and Poem in Pop-up 3-D*.

WHAT'S YOUR WRITING PROCESS LIKE? WHAT DO YOU DO FIRST WHEN YOU SIT DOWN TO WRITE A NEW PLAY? WHAT IS THE COLLABORATION PROCESS LIKE?

REED MARTIN: Once we've decided what the new play will be about, Austin and I start to kick around ideas. Most frequently, we each settle on some scenes or sketches that we have ideas for, and then we each write those on our own. Then, we come back together to read the scenes aloud and discuss rewrites. Sometimes, we'll rewrite our own scenes, and sometimes, we'll rewrite each other's scenes. Once we begin rehearsals, we usually do some public readings for feedback. We'll do Q&A with

the audience after the read-through, and sometimes that's helpful, but what is most helpful is just listening to the audience as they hear and react to the play. That tells us what's funny and what isn't. Then, we do workshop performances where we are constantly rewriting, cutting, and tweaking. Since we perform our plays for years, that tweaking process never completely stops.

AUSTIN TICHENOR: Our usual process differed slightly for *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*, partly because it's a different kind of play than our previous collaborations and partly because of scheduling. Reed and I decided that we

wouldn't use our typical vaudeville framing where the three members of the RSC introduce the large task they'll be taking on; instead, we'd just write a play with a beginning, middle, and end. I know, how old-fashioned!

Reed took the first pass of writing the entire script, and it was wonderful to discover we both had the exact same idea that the play should start identically to *Hamlet*. I then took the next pass, and I tried to figure out how we could tell this story with only three actors. This was one factor in determining why we didn't include Gertrude and Claudius as onstage characters.

WE KNOW MANY OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE *COMEDY OF HAMLET* WELL FROM *HAMLET*, BUT SOME OF YOUR CHARACTERS ARE NOT SEEN IN THE ORIGINAL TRAGEDY, AND OTHERS ARE BARELY SEEN OR ONLY REFERENCED. HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT DEVELOPING CHARACTERS LIKE LILITH, YORICK, AND KING HAMLET?

RM: We just thought it would be really fun to explore these sorts of characters - people we don't see in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but who must have been around earlier in young Hamlet's life. And in seeing these characters in *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)* we learn a lot of background. Why does a royal like Young Hamlet know so much about theatre? Because the court jester Yorick was his good friend and mentor and taught him all about show biz. Why does Ophelia drown? Because it turns out that her parents wouldn't let her take swim lessons.

AT: The thing that got me excited to write *The Comedy of Hamlet!* was the formal challenge of figuring out what would happen if Tom Stoppard wrote *Muppet Babies*. When

WHY DOES OPHELIA DROWN? BECAUSE IT TURNS OUT THAT HER PARENTS WOULDN'T HER TAKE SWIM LESSONS.

we decided we wanted our prequel to take us almost right to the beginning of Shakespeare's play, our leading characters, Hamlet and Ophelia, became older teens, which meant we needed to explore their relationship not only with each other but with their parents. The notion that Lilith never lets Polonius speak is funny because he never shuts up in Shakespeare's play, but it led to the more interesting question of why Ophelia's mother never even gets mentioned in Shakespeare's play. What could have possibly happened? Though Shakespeare uses more than once the punchline of a father confirming that a child is his because "her mother hath many times told me so," we thought it would be fun to make the truth behind that joke a huge revelation...and the subsequent reveals a running gag.

And in Yorick and King Hamlet, Reed and I got to draw on our own experience as fathers who know the perils and the pitfalls, as well as the glory and the power, of a life in the theatre - and we got to express those feelings in frequently rhyming iambic pentameter couplets.

THE *COMEDY OF HAMLET* FEATURES ALLUSIONS TO SOME OF SHAKESPEARE'S OTHER PLAYS, LIKE *HENRY IV PART 1* AND *MACBETH*. HOW DID THESE ALLUSIONS MAKE THEIR WAY INTO THE PLAY?

AT: When we were writing *Comedy of Hamlet*, the parallels between young Hamlet and Prince Hal, and Ophelia and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* leapt out at us as something we'd be fools not to lean into. Our young Hamlet is torn between two paternal figures - his actual father and his mentor and friend Yorick - though, interestingly, they switch places in our play. King Hamlet assumes Falstaff's

FROM THE PLAYWRIGHTS: AN INTERVIEW WITH AUSTIN TICHENOR AND REED MARTIN

influence, arguing that Hamlet should pursue passion and revelry, while Yorick argues for a more Henry IV-like life of duty and responsibility.²

The allusions to *Macbeth* were more of a red herring, but we do love the idea – explored more thoroughly in our previous play, *William Shakespeare's Long Lost First Play (abridged)* – that all of Shakespeare's characters exist in the same world, a sort of STU – Shakespeare Theatrical Universe.

ASIDE FROM THE SHAKESPEAREAN CANON, WHAT ELSE INFLUENCED YOU WHILE WRITING *THE COMEDY OF HAMLET!* (A PREQUEL)?

RM: Oh, gosh. We have so many influences. Mel Brooks. *Looney Tunes*. Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. The Marx Brothers. Tom Lehrer. *Mad Magazine*. Carol Burnett. Monty Python. Tom Stoppard. *The Muppet Show*.

AT: In addition to Reed's list, my influences for this script include the patter songs of Gilbert & Sullivan and the Danny Kaye film *The Court Jester*, arguably the most well-known jester in pop culture next to Yorick, particularly the famous “pellet with the poison's in the vessel with the pestle” sequence.

And the mixing of tones, particularly moments of seriousness in what's otherwise a comedy, is very Shakespearean, though I discovered it first in sitcoms like *All in the Family* and *M*A*S*H*. We definitely put moments of poignance in all of our shows – in this case, the death of Yorick and

Hamlet's follow-up song of epiphany – and they always catch the audience by surprise in a lovely and memorable way.

SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* IS SOMEWHAT OF A CULTURAL OBSESSION, AND MANY SCHOLARS REVERE IT AS SHAKESPEARE'S GREATEST PLAY. WHAT DO YOU THINK IT IS ABOUT *HAMLET* THAT MAKES IT SO COMPELLING TO SCHOLARS, THEATRE-MAKERS, AND AUDIENCES?

RM: Interesting characters. Compelling story. Timeless themes. Beautiful poetry. Plus, sex and killing.

AT: *Hamlet's* fruitful fodder for us because his character and story are so present in high school curricula (and pop culture) around the world. Even people who don't think they “know” or “get” Shakespeare know the basics of *Hamlet* and can be entertained by our show and feel smarter without even realizing it when they understand the jokes.

[HAMLET IS SO COMPELLING BECAUSE OF] INTERESTING CHARACTERS. COMPELLING STORY. TIMELESS THEMES. BEAUTIFUL POETRY. PLUS, SEX AND KILLING.

SINCE ITS FOUNDING IN 1981, RSC HAS TACKLED HUGE TOPICS AND TOMES, INCLUDING THE SHAKESPEAREAN CANON, THE BIBLE, AND AMERICAN HISTORY. WHAT ARE THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES THAT COME WITH ABRIDGING, SPOOFING, SATIRIZING, DIRECTING, AND PERFORMING THESE CHOSEN TOPICS? HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT TACKLING THESE CHALLENGES?

RM: Making people laugh is deeply satisfying. It sure feels like the world could use a few more laughs nowadays. The challenge we set for ourselves with all our shows is to try to make them play to experts and novices alike. You don't need to know anything about Shakespeare to enjoy our Shakespeare-themed shows, but the more you know, the more fun it is. For kids, the shows are fast and funny and silly. For Shakespeare aficionados, there are all kinds of easter eggs to enjoy. Ideally, they play like the best *Looney Tunes* cartoons - like Bugs Bunny in *The Rabbit of Seville*. Bugs as the crazy barber is hilarious to kids. But all kinds of fun opera references will fly over the kids' heads that the grown-ups can enjoy.

AT: The biggest *challenge* is grounding the comedy with sufficiently high stakes; even when I'm directing a comedy, I'm never worried about Finding the Funny, I only want to make sure the cast is invested in the reality of the situation, no matter how silly it is. In fact, the sillier the situation is, the more seriously the cast has to take it. If the characters don't care about what's going on, why should the audience?

IMAGINE YOU HAVE A COMEDY TOOLBOX OF YOUR MOST USED PERFORMANCE SKILLS, ITEMS, AND TRICKS. WHAT'S IN YOUR BOX?

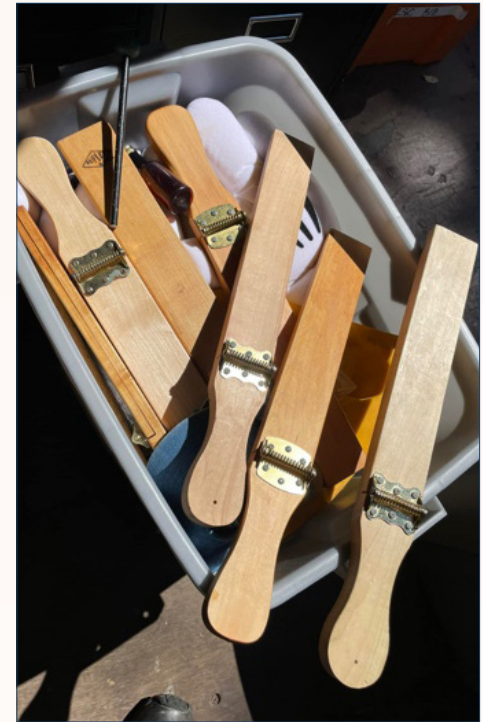
RM: Funny you should ask. I came across the box of RSC slapsticks in our storage unit just a couple of months ago.

AT: The biggest toys in my comedy toolbox are certain technical abilities like diction and movement combined with a strong sense of music and rhythm. The rhythms of comedy, whether the jokes are verbal or physical, are very specific and demand a different rigor than drama. A dramatic moment can sometimes work multiple ways; a comic moment frequently only works one way.

IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDY, *HAMLET* FAMOUSLY REMARKS THAT THE PURPOSE OF THEATRE IS “TO HOLD, AS 'TWERE A MIRROR UP TO NATURE.” DO YOU AGREE?

RM: I'm going to agree. I mean, who are we to argue with Shakespeare?

AT: That's arguably the purpose of all art: to show us who we are and maybe make us see ourselves and the world around us in a new way. But Hamlet's line about holding a mirror up to nature is probably the main reason we chose to explore the backstory of how this young Danish prince came to his amazing understanding of the power of theatre. Theatre and playacting are the central metaphor Shakespeare returns to again and again (more evidence, if any were needed, that he was a true man of the theatre).



THE RSC'S COLLECTION OF SLAPSTICKS, RECENTLY FOUND IN STORAGE. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF REED MARTIN.

² For more on the father-son triangle in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1*, see Austin Tichenor's essay for the Folger Shakespeare Library. Austin Tichenor, “The King, Prince Hal, and Falstaff: Shakespeare's father-son triangle onstage and onscreen,” *Shakespeare and Beyond: The Folger Shakespeare Library*, (October 29, 2019), <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/the-king-prince-hal-falstaff-father-son-triangle-onstage-onscreen>.

RECOMMENDED SCENES FROM SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

At over 4,000 lines, *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play. Short on time? The following scenes are the most crucial to the plot of the tragedy, and reading, watching, or listening to any of these scenes can help students glean context for *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*.

ACT 1, SCENE 2 – The newly crowned king of Denmark, Claudius, thanks his courtiers for their support. He sends ambassadors to Norway, hoping to fend off an invasion from the prince, Fortinbras. Hamlet mourns the recent death of his father and laments his mother's too-hasty marriage to his uncle. Horatio tells Hamlet that what appears to be the ghost of his father, the former king, is haunting the castle.

ACT 1, SCENE 5 – The ghost of King Hamlet reveals to his son that Claudius murdered him. The late king implores his son to avenge his murder.

ACT 2, SCENE 2 – Claudius and Gertrude, concerned about Hamlet's recent odd behavior, ask his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on him. Polonius infers that Hamlet's madness is due to his love for Ophelia, and he shows Claudius a love letter Hamlet wrote to his daughter. A troupe of actors arrive at the castle. Hamlet persuades them to perform at court. He hopes that the depiction of murder on stage will disquiet his uncle and prove his guilty conscience. Alone, Hamlet expresses his shame at his inaction towards his uncle.

ACT 3, SCENE 1 – Polonius and Claudius spy on a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia.

Hamlet denies ever loving Ophelia, disparages the female sex, and tells her to join a nunnery. Convinced that Hamlet's erratic behavior has nothing to do with Ophelia, the king sends Hamlet to England.

ACT 3, SCENE 2 – Hamlet instructs the players before their performance and instructs Horatio to watch Claudius's reaction to the staged murder. Hamlet rudely addresses Ophelia. The players perform *The Mousetrap*.

ACT 3, SCENE 3 – Angry and unnerved by the performance, Claudius orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort Hamlet to England. Alone and struck with remorse, Claudius laments murdering his brother. Hamlet discovers his uncle in prayer and contemplates killing him before deciding against it. If killed while praying, Claudius will go to heaven, and Hamlet wishes to see his uncle doomed to hell.

ACT 3, SCENE 4 – Polonius hides behind a curtain in Gertrude's bedroom to spy on her and her son. Hamlet enters and kills Polonius, mistaking him for Claudius. Hamlet berets his mother for marrying his uncle and implores her to stay away from Claudius's bed.

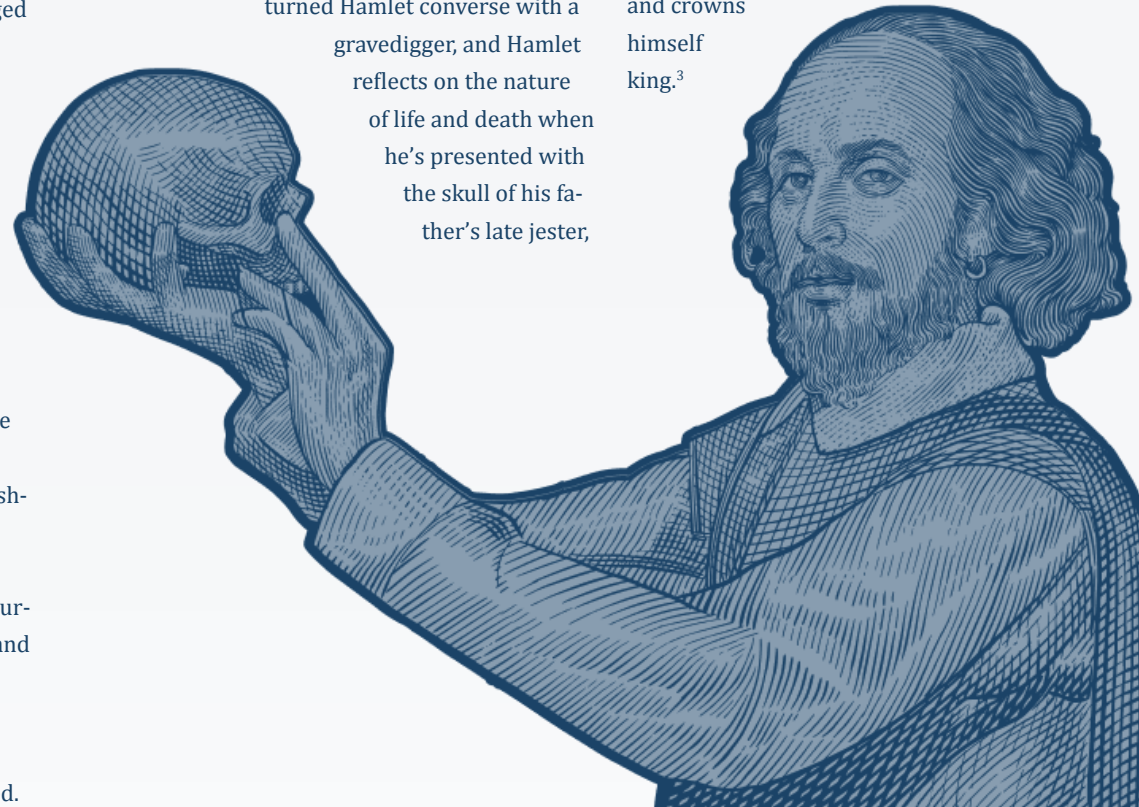
ACT 4, SCENE 5 – Gertrude learns that Ophelia has gone mad. Ophelia approaches the king and queen and sings of love, death, and betrayal. An enraged Laertes enters, looking for answers regarding his father's death, and Claudius asserts his innocence.

ACT 4, SCENE 7 – After learning that Hamlet has escaped execution and is returning to Denmark, Claudius enlists Laertes' help in killing the prince. Claudius plans to have Laertes fence Hamlet with a poisoned blade. If that fails, Claudius will kill his nephew with poisoned wine. Gertrude enters, informing them that Ophelia has drowned.

ACT 5, SCENE 1 – Horatio and the newly returned Hamlet converse with a gravedigger, and Hamlet reflects on the nature of life and death when he's presented with the skull of his father's late jester,

Yorick. The funeral procession for Ophelia enters, and Hamlet learns that the grave being dug is hers. Distraught, Hamlet says he loved her, and he and Laertes argue.

ACT 5, SCENE 2 – Hamlet knows of Claudius's plot to kill him, but he decides to fence Laertes anyway. During the match, Gertrude drinks from the poisoned goblet Claudius had set aside for Hamlet. Laertes successfully nicks Hamlet with the poisoned sword, but Hamlet manages to wrangle the blade away from Laertes, injuring him with the blade as well. Gertrude dies, as does Laertes. Hamlet kills Claudius before collapsing. Before he dies, he urges Horatio to tell his story. Fortinbras arrives and crowns himself king.³



³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles, eds. Folger Shakespeare Library, accessed October 18, 2024, (Washington DC: Folger Shakespeare Library), <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/read/>.

HAMLET: A LITERARY AND CULTURAL PHENOMENON

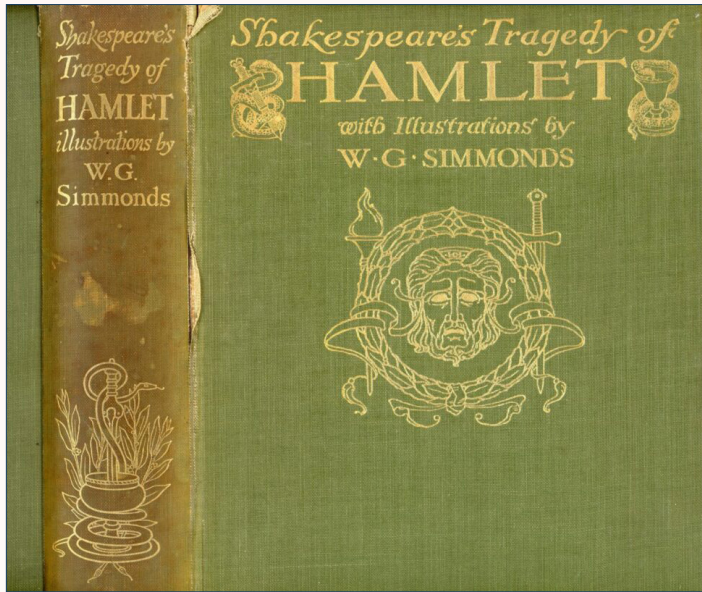
“YOU CANNOT GET BEYOND HAMLET, WHICH ESTABLISHES THE LIMITS OF THEATRICALITY, JUST AS HAMLET HIMSELF IS A FRONTIER OF CONSCIOUSNESS YET TO BE PASSED. I THINK IT WISE TO CONFRONT BOTH THE PLAY AND THE PRINCE WITH AWE AND WONDER, BECAUSE THEY BOTH KNOW MORE THAN WE DO.”⁴ —HAROLD BLOOM

Of Shakespeare’s 38 plays, *Hamlet* is arguably the most famous and esteemed. *Hamlet* has inspired more literary criticism and discourse than any other English text, with the exception of The Bible.⁵ It has been subject to psychological, Marxist, existential, feminist, historical, and cultural criticism, and *Hamlet*’s plot, language, characters, and motifs have been depicted, adapted, and explored by many poets, artists, novelists, filmmakers, and playwrights. Considered

by the critic and scholar Harold Bloom to be the world’s “most advanced drama,” *Hamlet* is embedded in much of the world’s cultural memory: a young man holding a skull, a mad young woman clutching flowers, the ghost of a murdered king crying for revenge, the words “to be or not to be,” and “to thine own self be true.”⁶ While Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was originally written as a form of entertainment, its dynamic story and characters linger well beyond the stage and the

page. *Hamlet* raises questions about life and death, grief and morality, love and power. It presents readers and audiences with a stark depiction of the human condition that remains relevant and compelling four hundred years since it was first written and staged.

THE STORY OF HAMLET |
[DERRICKJKNIGHT](#)



⁴ Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, (2003), 6-7.

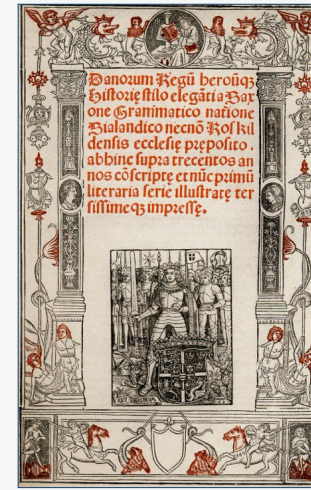
⁵ Michael Neill, “A Modern Perspective: Hamlet,” Folger Shakespeare Library (Folger Shakespeare Library, 2012), <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/hamlet-a-modern-perspective/>.

⁶ Harold Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), 6-7.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAMLET

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was likely written at some point in 1599, and it was first performed the following year. The story of the young Danish prince seeking revenge was not original to Shakespeare; as with many of his other plays, Shakespeare’s iconic tragedy drew inspiration from older, existing work. The story’s origins are regularly traced back to the 12th century when the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus penned *Gesta Danorum* (“Deeds of the Danes”). A collection of sixteen books, *Gesta Danorum* recounted the histories and legends of ancient Danish history. In this account, Horwendil, king of the Jutes, is murdered by his brother Feng, who then marries his brother’s widow, Gerutha. Amleth, Horwendil and Gerutha’s son feigns madness in the hopes of avoiding his father’s fate and goes on to eventually kill his uncle.⁷

In 1572, the tale was adapted and translated into French by Françoise de Belleforest in *Histoires Tragiques*. Shortly after Belleforest’s publication, the story of the Danish prince – now called Hamlet – made its way to the English stage. Around 1589, a revenge tragedy known today as *Ur-Hamlet* became a popular, often-produced play across London. No print version of this play



AN EARLY 16TH-CENTURY EDITION OF SAXO'S GESTA DANORUM. | [WIKIPEDIA](#)

survives today, and scholars are divided regarding its author. Some believe *Ur-Hamlet* was written by Elizabethan playwright Thomas Kyd, while others believe it was simply an earlier version of *Hamlet* written by Shakespeare himself.

Perhaps the most significant difference between Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and its precursors is the complexity of its characters. The people in Shakespeare’s

tragedy are riddled with flaws, quirks, questions, and desires. Shakespeare’s protagonist is not the revenge hero depicted in Saxo or Belleforest; he is reflective and grief-stricken and struggles with doubt, indecision, and inaction.

There is also more ambiguity in Shakespeare’s tragedy. Saxo and Belleforest make clear in their accounts that the young prince only feigns madness, but *Hamlet*’s true mental state is uncertain in Shakespeare’s tragedy. Shakespeare also leaves us to question Gertrude’s complicity. It is unclear whether or not she knows of Claudius’s murderous actions, just as it is unclear if her relationship with Claudius began before her late husband’s death.⁸

⁷ Marvin W. Hunt, *Looking for Hamlet* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 13-14.

⁸ David Bevington, “Hamlet: Sources and Analogues,” Internet Shakespeare Editions (University of Victoria, n.d.), accessed October 29, 2024, https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Ham_Sources/complete/index.html#about.

TIMELINE

1550	The English Renaissance begins, giving way to an abundance of new literature, art, and philosophy.
1559	Following the death of her half-sister Queen Mary I, Elizabeth I is crowned Queen of England.
1564	William Shakespeare is born in Stratford-upon-Avon.
1572	Françoise de Belleforest adapts and translates Saxo's story of Amleth into French. He renames the protagonist "Hamlet."
1582	Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway.
1583	Shakespeare's first daughter Susanna is born.
1585	Anne Hathaway gives birth to twins Hamnet and Judith Shakespeare.
1589-1592	Shakespeare leaves Stratford-upon-Avon for London, pursuing a career as an actor and a writer with the troupe Lord Chamberlain's Men. He pens his first plays, <i>Henry VI Part 1, 2 & 3</i> , <i>Titus Andronicus</i> , and <i>The Taming of the Shrew</i> . Ur-Hamlet is staged numerous times in London.
1592-1593	An outbreak of Bubonic Plague forces all London theatres to close their doors. With no money to be made in the theatre, Shakespeare turns to poetry. He writes and publishes <i>Venus and Adonis</i> .
1595-1596	Shakespeare writes <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> and <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> . Hamnet Shakespeare dies in the summer of 1596 at the age of 11.
1597-1598	Shakespeare writes <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> , <i>Henry IV Part 1 & 2</i> , and <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> . He purchases New Place, the largest house in Stratford-upon-Avon.
1599-1600	Shakespeare writes <i>Julius Caesar</i>, <i>As You Like It</i>, <i>Henry V</i>, and <i>Hamlet</i>. The Globe Theatre opens in London.
1603	Queen Elizabeth I dies. King James I ascends the throne and becomes the patron of Shakespeare's company, changing their name from Lord Chamberlain's Men to The King's Men. Another outbreak of plague forces London theatres to close.
1606	Shakespeare writes <i>Macbeth</i> , <i>King Lear</i> , and <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> .
1609	Shakespeare's sonnets, written during the 1590s, are published for the first time.
1611	Shakespeare writes his last solo play, <i>The Tempest</i> .
1613	Shakespeare co-writes <i>Henry VIII</i> and <i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i> with John Fletcher. The Globe Theatre burns down.
1616	Shakespeare dies in Stratford-upon-Avon at the age of 52.
1623	The First Folio is published with the help of Shakespeare's friends and colleagues.

AFTER THE SHOW:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following discussion questions are designed to encourage students to think critically about both *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)* and *Hamlet*. These questions can be used to facilitate class discussion and debate, or they can be used as writing prompts.

- In his book *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, scholar and literary critic Harold Bloom argues that throughout Shakespeare's tragedy, Hamlet "comes to understand that he has been mourning the idea of fatherhood/sonship rather than the actual King Hamlet" and that the ghost of the late king views his son as nothing but a "sword of vengeance."⁹
 - Do you agree? Why or why not?
 - How might Bloom's argument be applicable to *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*?
- For centuries, literary critics have debated whether Hamlet is truly mad or only pretending to be mad.
 - In your opinion, is Hamlet's madness feigned or real?
 - What view do you think *The Comedy of Hamlet!* supports?
- In Shakespeare's tragedy, Hamlet famously remarks that the purpose of theatre is "to hold, as 'twere a mirror up to nature."
 - Do you agree? Why or why not?
 - Consider the characters of Yorick and the King in *The Comedy of Hamlet!* Do you think these characters would agree with this sentiment? Why or why not?
- Consider Tichenor and Martin's choice to make Hamlet and Ophelia half-siblings.
 - In *The Comedy of Hamlet!* How deep do Hamlet and Ophelia's feelings for each other go? Is it true love? Infatuation? A crush? What about in *Hamlet*?
 - How does this decision inform a reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? Consider Hamlet's assertion in Act V: "*I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/ Could not with all their quantity of love/ Make up my sum...*"
- In *The Comedy of Hamlet*, Claudius and Gertrude, who both play a significant role in the action of *Hamlet*, are referenced but notably absent.
 - What effects does this have on the play?
 - How might the play be different if these two characters were featured?
- Consider the tragic nature of *Hamlet* and the comedic nature of *The Comedy of Hamlet!*
 - Do these genres move us in different ways? What are the strengths and limitations of these two dramatic genres?
 - Are there tragic moments in *The Comedy of Hamlet!*? Are there comedic moments in *Hamlet*? What do these moments achieve?

⁹ Harold Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), 130-131.

PHILIP H. CALDERON'S THE YOUNG LORD HAMLET

Philip H. Calderon (1833-1898) was a British painter of the pre-Raphaelite movement. Like many other pre-Raphaelite painters, Calderon's subjects were often biblical, historical, or literary. Calderon's 1868 painting, *The Young Lord Hamlet*, depicts Hamlet as a child riding on the back of his father's jester, Yorick. While many artists have reimagined *Hamlet's*



PHILIP H. CALDERON'S "THE YOUNG LORD HAMLET" (1868) | [WIKIMEDIA](#)

characters and plots, most of these artistic depictions showcase events that happen within the timeline of the tragedy. Like *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*, Calderon's *The Young Lord Hamlet* imagines Shakespeare's characters before the play's action. As a class or in small groups, have students examine and analyze Calderon's painting and compare Calderon's Hamlet and Yorick to the Hamlet and Yorick in *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*.

DISCUSS

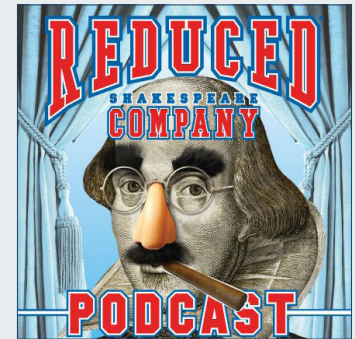
1. What do you notice about this painting? What strikes you as interesting?
2. How are Yorick and Hamlet depicted in this painting?
3. Examine the three women and the child in the background. Who might these characters be? How are they depicted?
4. What characters are absent from this painting? Why do you think the painter chose to exclude them?
5. How does Calderon portray the relationship between Hamlet and Yorick? Is this depiction similar to their depicted relationship in *The Comedy of Hamlet!*?
6. What is the mood of the painting? How does the painter evoke this mood?
7. What do you think the artist is trying to convey? What is the main idea of the painting?
8. How does your knowledge of *Hamlet* and *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)* inform your interpretation of this painting?

LISTEN: RSC'S PODCAST: HAMLET'S PREQUEL ADVENTURE WITH DRAMATURG KATE PITT

While writing *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*, the Reduced Shakespeare Company worked with the dramaturg Kate Pitt, who "in scholarly terms, helped define and articulate the intertextual conversation with Shakespeare's classic tragedy."

In March of 2021, Austin Tichenor discussed *The Comedy of Hamlet!* (previously titled *Hamlet's Big Adventure*) with Pitt on the Reduced Shakespeare Company podcast. This episode gives students insight into the writing process for Tichenor and Reed's prequel and insight into what production dramaturgy often entails. Listen to the podcast [HERE](#).¹⁰

A suggested clip of the podcast runs from the start to the 18:05 mark.



THE RSC'S PODCAST | [SQUARESPACE](#)

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

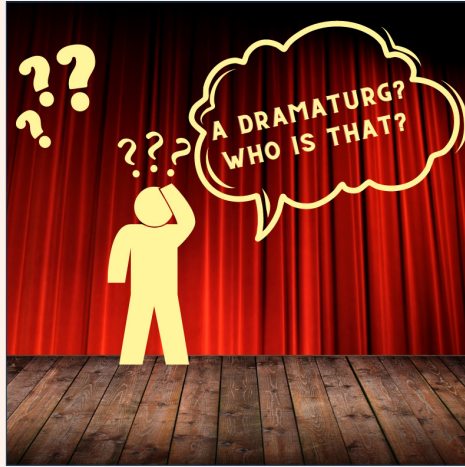
1. Hamlet's age is a conundrum many scholars have poured over. Pitt explains why she has a preference for older Hamlets as opposed to younger Hamlets. Why does she have this preference? To her mind, what makes a great, interesting Hamlet?
2. To Austin Tichenor's mind, what is the danger of "every Shakespeare play?"
3. What were some of the leading questions Tichenor and the RSC had that led them to write the prequel?
4. How did Tichenor, Pitt, and the RSC approach the character of Ophelia? How do they challenge and/or embrace the "reductive" depiction of her as simply "mad"?
5. The actress Harriet Walter once stated that Ophelia needed to have some sort of "essential fragility" at the beginning of *Hamlet*. How and why do Pitt and Tichenor disagree? How does *The Comedy of Hamlet!* portray Ophelia differently?
6. What was Pitt's dramaturgical process like? How did her input help to shape the script?
7. Tichenor says that the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is the "fundamental thing that makes them who they are" and that these characters' relationships with their parents are "fundamental to who they become." Based on what you know about *Hamlet* and *The Comedy of Hamlet!*, do you agree? Why or why not?

¹⁰ Austin Tichenor, host, "Hamlet's Prequel Adventure!" The Reduced Shakespeare Company Podcast (podcast), March 29, 2021, accessed October 11, 2024, <https://www.reducedshakespeare.com/2021/03/hamlets-prequel-adventure/>.

WHAT IS A DRAMATURG?

“DRAMATURGS CONTEXTUALIZE THE WORLD OF A PLAY; ESTABLISH CONNECTIONS AMONG THE TEXT, ACTORS, AND AUDIENCE; OFFER OPPORTUNITIES FOR PLAYWRIGHTS; GENERATE PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS; AND CREATE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT PLAYS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES”¹¹

Dramaturgy is challenging to define, in part because dramaturgy, the study, practice, and analysis of dramatic composition and performance, is embedded in nearly every aspect of theatre-making. The role of the dramaturg is similarly challenging to pin down. Dramaturgs take on many roles within the worlds of theatre-making, literary management, and education. Production dramaturgs like Kate Pitt frequently aid directors, playwrights, actors, and designers by providing substantial research, feedback, and textual analysis, often in the form of a dramaturgy packet. As a part of the collaborative and creative process, dramaturgs regularly serve as research experts, helping to shape productions of both contemporary and classic plays, providing invaluable insight that benefits theatre-makers and audiences alike.



[STATEAGENT.ORG](https://stateagent.org)

Ask students to do some basic research on dramaturgy and the role of the dramaturg. Here are some excellent resources to kick-start their research:

[LITERARY MANAGERS OF THE AMERICAS WEBSITE](#)

[BEEHIVE DRAMATURGY'S WEBSITE¹²](#)

[“WHAT A DRAMATURG DOES” — AN INTERVIEW WITH KEN CERNIGLIA¹³](#)

[“WHAT IS DRAMATURGY? ALL ABOUT CRAFT AND CAREER” — AN ARTICLE BY NATALIE CLARE¹⁴](#)

¹¹ “What is Dramaturgy?” Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, LMDA, accessed October 20, 2024, <https://lmda.org/what-is-dramaturgy>.

¹² “WHAT IS DRAMATURGY?,” Beehive Dramaturgy Studio, accessed October 28, 2024, <http://www.beehivedramaturgy.com/whatisdramaturgy>.

¹³ Ken Cerniglia, “What a Dramaturg Does: Meet Ken Cerniglia,” interview by Craft Patty, November 3, 2021, <https://dramatics.org/what-a-dramaturg-does>.

¹⁴ Natalie Clare, “What Is Dramaturgy?: All About Craft and Career,” Dramatics, June 8, 2023, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://dramatics.org/what-is-dramaturgy/#:~:text=The%20basic%20definition%20of%20dramaturgy,context%2C%20characters%2C%20language%2C%20and>.

DISCUSS

1. In your own words, how would you define *dramaturgy*? How would you define *dramaturg*?
2. What are some of the responsibilities of a production dramaturg?
3. What are some of the skills and techniques readily used by dramaturgs?
4. How might actors, directors, or designers benefit from utilizing some of these same skills and techniques?
5. Imagine you were hired as the dramaturg for a new play that served as a prequel to another one of Shakespeare’s plays (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, etc.) What might some of your research questions be? What topics might you research?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Have students create a table of contents and a list of possible research sources for a dramaturgy packet of their imagined Shakespeare prequel.

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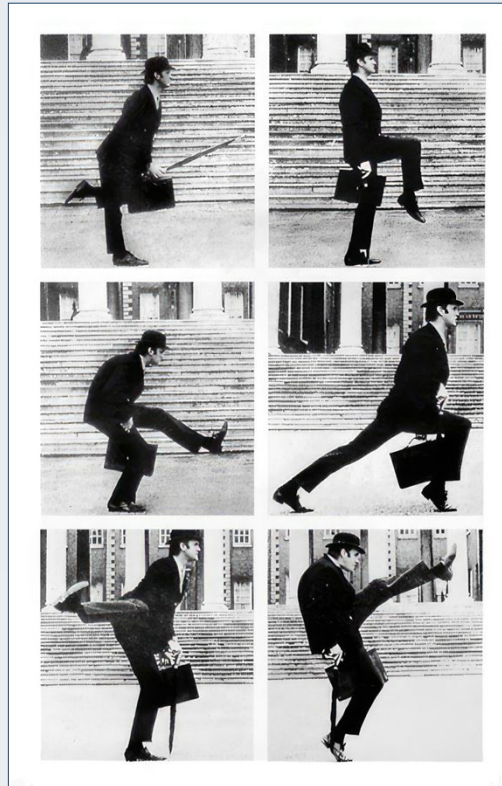
PERFORMING COMEDY: TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

PHYSICALITY Common in the comedy genres of slapstick and commedia dell'arte. Physical comedy involves using your body and face for comedic effect. Comedic stunts like slipping on a banana peel, knocking over a tower of cans at the supermarket, and taking a pie to the face are all examples of physical comedy, as are exaggerated movements and facial expressions. Lucille Ball, Buster Keaton, and Rowen Atkinson are all celebrated as iconic figures in physical comedy.

IMPROVISATION Improvisation involves creating dialogue, movement, characters, and plots on the spot. Imagination, quick thinking, and strong collaboration and listening skills are crucial in improv comedy.

PACING AND PAUSING Pacing and pausing are crucial things to consider when performing theatrical texts. The pace of speech can drastically affect the mood of a performed play. Similarly, pausing can be used to show emotion, tension, and thought and for comedic (or dramatic) emphasis.

JUXTAPOSITION Juxtaposition is a literary device whereby two drastically different characters, objects, or ideas are represented together, often for comedic contrast. In Neil Simon's play *The Odd Couple*, for example, two vastly different best friends move in with each other following the breakdown of their romantic rela-



JOHN CLEESE IN THE MONTY PYTHON'S FLYING CIRCUS SKETCH, "THE MINISTRY OF SILLY WALKS" (1970). A PRIME EXAMPLE OF PHYSICAL COMEDY. | [CLOSEUP.DE](https://www.closeup.de)

tionships. One friend is anxious and particular, while the other is disorganized and easygoing.

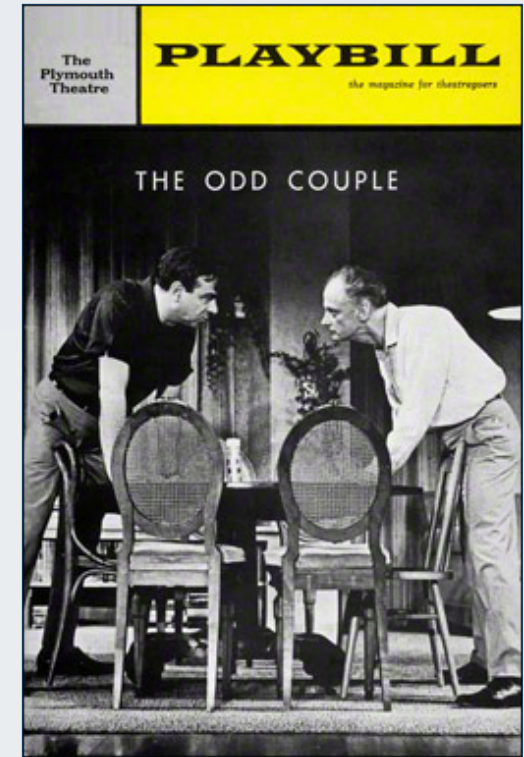
CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

While comedic characters often follow certain archetypes, the best comedic characters are often complex, flawed, and dynamic. Don't skimp on in-depth character analysis just because it's a comedy!

REACTION As the renowned actor and acting teacher Stella Adler once said, "acting is re-acting." As in real life, reacting to events, surroundings, and other people reveals much about who we are and how we see the world around us. Additionally, reacting while performing encourages performers to fully engage with their own characters, the other characters, and the world of the play.

HYPERBOLE AND UNDERSTATEMENT Hyperbole (or overstatement) and understatement are frequently used in comedic texts. Both are utilized in the play-script for *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*.

SERIOUSNESS This may seem counterintuitive, but taking comedic roles as seriously as dramatic ones leads to greater laughs from the audience. Characters featured in comedies generally don't recognize that they're *in* comedies—keeping the stakes high and your characters invested leads to comedy gold. In Austin Tichenor's words, "the sillier the situation is, the more seriously the cast has to take it. If the characters don't care about what's going on, why should the audience?"



THE 1965 PLAYBILL FOR THE ORIGINAL BROADWAY PRODUCTION OF NEIL SIMON'S "THE ODD COUPLE." | [PLAYBILL](https://www.playbill.com)

ACTIVITY: PACING AND PAUSING

When performing dramatic texts, it's easy to focus on the words. Through speech, characters reveal their relationships, personalities, desires, and quirks to audiences. Great playwrights use dialogue and monologues to paint elaborate portraits of characters we can love, hate, pity, and laugh at. However, great actors can embody what's said in a script and what isn't. One of the greatest acting challenges is utilizing silence in different ways.

Discuss as a class what pacing and pausing can reflect and achieve when performing. (Consider:



WIKIPEDIA



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tension, emphasis, genre, subtext, emotion, thought, language, beat changes, etc.). Next, have students read and rehearse short comedic scenes in pairs or groups. Students should then experiment with different pacing and pausing and discuss what works best. Groups and pairs should try their scenes multiple ways before selecting what they believe to be the strongest version of their scene to perform for the class. Suggested comedic two-person scenes from *Hamlet* and *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)* can be found to the right.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What is being said? Is it a story? A conversation? What is the topic? Is it a heavy, important topic? Or something lighter?
2. What is the language like? Is it poetic? Realistic? Minimalistic? What does your gut tell you about how fast/slow the lines should generally be read?
3. Who is speaking? Who are the characters? Are they old? Young? Are they tired? Excited? Angry? How does their age/mood affect their speech?
4. What are the characters' relationships like? How does this affect their speech? Are you on good terms? Bad terms? Is there an underlying conflict? Are you well-known to each other, or are you strangers?
5. What are your lines' most important words ("ten-pound words")? Why are they important? How can you show their importance?
6. What is comedic about this scene? How might pacing and pausing maximize its comedic effect?

FROM HAMLET, ACT 5, SCENE 1

HAMLET: Whose grave's this, sirrah?
GRAVEDIGGER: Mine, sir
[Sings. ♪ (O,) a pit of clay for to be made
(For such a guest is meet.)

HAMLET:
I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in 't.
GRAVEDIGGER:
You lie out on 't, sir, and therefor 'tis not yours. For my part, I do not lie in 't, yet it is mine.
HAMLET:
Thou dost lie in 't, to be in 't and say it is thine. 'Tis for the dead, not for the quick, therefore thou liest.
GRAVEDIGGER:
'Tis a quick lie, sir; 'twill away again from me to you.
HAMLET: What man dost thou dig it for?
GRAVEDIGGER: For no man, sir.
HAMLET: What woman then?
GRAVEDIGGER: For none, neither.
HAMLET: Who is to be buried in 't?
GRAVEDIGGER:
One that was a woman, sir, but, rest her soul, she's dead.
HAMLET:
How absolute the knave is! We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us. By the Lord, Horatio, this three years I have took note of it: the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe.—How long hast thou been grave-maker?
GRAVEDIGGER:
Of all the days i' th' year, I came to 't that day that our last King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras.
HAMLET: How long is that since?
GRAVEDIGGER:
Cannot you tell that? Every fool can tell that. It was that very day that young Hamlet was born—he that is mad, and sent into England.
HAMLET: Ay, marry, why was he sent into England?
GRAVEDIGGER: Why, because he was mad. He shall recover his wits there. Or if he do not, 'tis no great matter there.
HAMLET: Why?
GRAVEDIGGER:
'Twill not be seen in him there. There the men are as mas as he.

FROM THE COMEDY OF HAMLET! (A PREQUEL), ACT 1

KING: (*Ghostly howling*) Hamlet....!
HAMLET: (Terrified) Who's there? Stand and unfold yourself!
KING: Mark me, Hamlet...!
HAMLET: I will!
KING: My hour is almost come, when I to Sulfurous and tormenting flames must render Up myself.
HAMLET: Alas, poor ghost!
KING: Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing To what I shall unfold.
HAMLET: Speak; I am bound to hear.
KING: So art thou -- to release thy bowels when I am near!!

The Ghost leaps into the light, wearing a sheet. Hamlet screams and tears off the sheet.

KING: Boo.
HAMLET: Dad!
KING: (*laughing*) Oh Hamlet...I wish you could see thy face!
HAMLET: O God!
KING: So shaken as you are, so wan with care, Find you a time for frighted peace to pant And breathe, Hamlet. Breathe!
HAMLET: Can I not to the kitchens for a glass Of water go without being accosted By mine own father?
KING: Every time, sweet prince. You fall for it every time!
HAMLET: 'Twas not as bad, dear father, as the time, Whilst asleep, alone in my bedchamber, My hand you placed in a bowl of warm water.
(The King laughs)
Of the bedclothes, there was a great soiling.
KING: When we were boys, I used to do that to Your Uncle Claudius! So angry was he That he swore he'd kill me! What canst I say? Look you, Hamlet, it fits my humor well.
HAMLET: Thou art a lover of practical jokes. Are there not enterprises of great pitch And moment the king my liege should tend to?
KING: Don't remind me. Today, and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow... You'll know when thou becomest king, Hamlet: Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.
HAMLET: Fear not, Father. I shall be ready when The time doth come, for tis as the song says, O, I just cannot wait to be king!

Improv games are an excellent way for students to practice performance skills like quick thinking, collaboration, physicality, listening, and reacting.

THE AD GAME

Select a group of 3-5 students. Give the groups 20 seconds to come up with a simple item they must advertise (this can also be done by pulling a slip of paper). Without discussing the object or its capabilities, the students take turns describing and hyping up the object to potential buyers (the audience). After every comment, the other group members enthusiastically respond with “Yes! And...” The selling points should become increasingly ridiculous. After 5 minutes, repeat the exercise with a new group.

DRAW A SLIP!

Set aside two piles of paper slips, one with locations/scenarios and one with brief character descriptions. Select a group of 3-5 students. Each group selects one scenario, and each student selects a character slip. Based on the information acquired from the slips, students then perform a brief improv scene for the class. For beginners' classes, give each group five minutes to prepare and discuss.

POSSIBLE SCENARIO SLIPS	POSSIBLE CHARACTER SLIPS
Stranded on a desert island.	You gave great news you want to share.
On a hike.	You're convinced the FBI is after you.
Arriving at summer camp.	You're obsessed with Shakespeare.
In school detention.	Mosquitos keep biting you (and only you).
Learning a dance routine.	You keep fishing for compliments.
In the kitchen baking cookies.	You're incredibly shy.
Working on a science project.	You've lost your wallet.
At intermission for a terrible play.	You're desperately trying to hold your temper.
Waiting in line at a taco truck.	You're trying to be cool.

KNIFE, BABY, ANGRY CAT

Have the class stand in a circle. Make eye contact with someone in the circle before throwing an imaginary knife at them. The student on the receiving end of the knife can either catch it “ninja style” or pretend to be stabbed before pulling the knife out and throwing it to someone else. Once a rhythm is established, introduce the imaginary baby, which is to be gently tossed or handed off. Last, introduce the imaginary angry cat, which students should cower from and quickly throw to avoid being scratched. Remind students that eye contact must be made with the receiver, regardless of whether the item being thrown is the knife, the baby, or the angry cat. As leader in the circle, only you (or a selected student) can change the thrown imaginary item.

VERSE AND METER

In most of his plays, Shakespeare wrote in both prose and verse. In most editions of Shakespeare's plays, lines spoken in prose run in thick blocks of text from one margin to the other. Shakespeare's verse, on the other hand, is presented in a narrower column set to the left of a page. While Shakespeare utilized rhyme schemes from time to time (often in the form of rhyming couplets), his most used verse was blank verse, or verse that does not rhyme.

Shakespeare does, however, rely heavily

on rhythm. Shakespeare's most commonly used rhythm is iambic pentameter, a rhythm that occurs naturally in human speech. An iamb is a set of two syllables, the first unstressed and the second stressed. Pentameter, from the Greek word *penta*, meaning five, means that there are five iambs in each line and a total of ten syllables. A stressed syllable has more prominence than an unstressed syllable and is often spoken slower than an unstressed syllable. Some say iambic pentameter sounds like a horse galloping:

Da-DUM-da-DUM-da-DUM-da-DUM-da-DUM

- / - / - / - / - /

When breaking down meter, the symbol “-” denotes an unstressed syllable, and the symbol “/” denotes a stressed syllable.

Iambic pentameter is everywhere in Shakespeare's plays, but like other great writers, Shakespeare occasionally broke the rules. Sometimes, his lines have more than ten syllables, and sometimes, they have fewer. Sometimes, these lines end on an un-

stressed syllable rather than a stressed one.

Like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the majority of *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)* is also written in iambic pentameter. Instead of blank verse, however, the Reduced Shakespeare Company's play relies heavily on rhyme, most frequently in the form of rhyming couplets.

CLOSE READING AND ANALYSIS

In small groups or as a class, read aloud, examine, and discuss the use of iambic pentameter in the two excerpts below. In the first, Claudius, at the end of Act 3, scene 3 of *Hamlet*, tortuously reflects on the guilt he has for murdering his brother. In the second, the king ponders what to do with Lilith's body after accidentally impaling her in *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*.

CLAUDIUS	THE KING
<p>O, my offense 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? Where to serves mercy But to confront the visage of offense? And what's in prayer but this twofold force, To be forestallèd ere we come to fall, Or pardoned being down? 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...</p>	<p>Am I in earth, in heaven or in hell? All's well has definitely not ended well. Oh, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven! What am I going to say to Kevin? I have to ask: What if this cursèd hand Were thicker than itself with lover's blood? Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens To wash it white as snow? Curse my clumsy foil! Lilith has shuffled off this mortal coil; Well, to be fair, I shuffled it for her -- Now her family must prepare for the horror. But what will I tell them? What can I say? <i>(realizing; first things first)</i> Hey! I've got to hide my love away. I must conceal this evidence gory 'Til I can make up a really great story. <i>(he starts to drag her off)</i> O, good lady, my love for you was great, But you give new meaning to the term 'dead weight.'</p>

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What is being said? Summarize each text.
2. What lines have the traditional ten syllables? Which lines have fewer than ten syllables? Which lines have more than ten syllables? Annotate the text.
3. Which lines end on an unstressed syllable as opposed to a stressed one? What effect does this have on the passage?
4. Tichenor and Martin directly reference Claudius's soliloquy in the king's soliloquy. Where are these direct references? Are there any indirect references?

GUIDING QUESTIONS (cont.)

5. Many scholars believe that Shakespeare uses irregular iambic pentameter to reveal something about the characters' emotional states. What might the irregularities in some of these lines reveal about the emotional states of these characters?
6. Do these irregularities draw your attention to specific words or lines in the text? Which ones?
7. Claudius's soliloquy is written in blank verse, while the king's soliloquy is written mainly in rhyming couplets. How do these different styles affect pace and rhythm? Does one seemingly read at a faster pace?
8. What effect do these different verse styles have on the reader/audience? Consider mood, tone, ideas, and character.

NOTE: Reading aloud is the best way for students to understand and master the complexities of rhythm, verse, and meter. After analyzing these soliloquies, allow students to perform them and bring them to life!

YORICK (CHAD YARISH), HAMLET (REED MARTIN), AND THE KING (AUSTIN TICHENOR) PLAN THE PRINCE OF DENMARK'S BIG ADVENTURE! (PHOTO BY JULIE MCCLELLAND.) | REDUCEDSHAKESPEARE.COM



TOPICS, THEME STATEMENTS, AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Analyzing topics and themes in a literary/artistic work is an excellent way for students to ease their way into more complex literary analysis. A literary topic is a primary idea within a specific text. A theme is what a piece of literature or art says about that topic. A theme statement is a short statement (1-2

sentences) that makes a clear argument about a particular theme presented in a given text. In this exercise, students practice writing theme statements for both *Hamlet* and *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*, honing their skills in thesis writing, essay organization, and comparative analysis.

EXAMPLES

"In Hamlet, revenge is depicted as a destructive and futile human endeavor."

"In Shakespeare's Hamlet, the Danish court's reliance on spying and surveillance depicts Denmark's ruling class as paranoid and insecure, reflecting how those with power are often susceptible to corruption and dishonesty in their desperation to retain it."

INSTRUCTIONS

After seeing *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)* and reading/watching/listening to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, have students reflect and discuss the topics they think are most relevant to these plays. (Consider: family, parenthood, duty, madness, mortality, thought vs. action, appearance vs. reality, romantic love, friendship, gender roles, theatre, identity, justice, ambition, and power). Individually or in groups, have students reflect on the guiding questions below before crafting theme statements for both plays. If time allows, have students/groups swap theme statements so they can offer feedback to their peers before editing their own theme statements and turning in a final draft. This exercise can serve as a short class activity and/or as a jumping-off point for student essays.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the topics explored in *Hamlet*?
2. Select a theme from *Hamlet*. What does the play say about this topic?
3. What is the evidence? Find at least two points in the play to support your argument.
4. What are some of the topics explored in *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*?
5. Select a theme from *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*. What does the play say about this topic?
6. What is the evidence? Find at least two points in the play to support your argument.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

For more advanced classes, have students choose a topic addressed in both *Hamlet* and *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*. Their theme statements should address how this topic is explored in each of these plays.

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