HAMLET
BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
DIRECTED BY JAMES BUNDY
As part of Yale Rep's educational initiative WILL POWER!, we are pleased to offer this Study Guide to accompany our production of Shakespeare's Hamlet, directed by James Bundy.

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This guide is yours.
Feel free to keep notes, doodle, and write throughout!
SYNOPSIS

The King of Denmark has died. His brother, Claudius, has assumed the throne and, within a month, married Queen Gertrude. Prince Hamlet mourns for his father and boils with rage over his mother’s rush to remarriage.

The play begins when Horatio, Hamlet’s best friend, and three palace guards encounter the ghost of the dead king on the castle walls. Horatio tells Hamlet of this extraordinary event. When Hamlet joins the nightly watch, the Ghost appears and tells Hamlet that Claudius poisoned him. He urges his son to seek revenge—but to spare Gertrude from harm. Meanwhile, Claudius’s advisor, Polonius, learns that his daughter Ophelia has become romantically involved with Hamlet. Because Polonius is wary of Hamlet’s intentions, he orders her to break off the attachment, and Ophelia reluctantly agrees.

Instead of seeking revenge immediately, Hamlet pretends to have gone insane, putting on an “antic disposition.” Everyone close to Hamlet tries to get to the bottom of his new, strange—and potentially dangerous—behavior. Claudius and Gertrude enlist Hamlet’s friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on the prince. Polonius, who believes that the break-up with Ophelia has caused Hamlet’s “madness,” tells his daughter to meet with Hamlet while he and Claudius secretly observe their conversation. Hamlet smells a rat and brutally rejects Ophelia.

At the same time, a theatre troupe appears at court. Hamlet, seeking firmer proof of Claudius’s guilt, asks the Players to perform The Murder of Gonzago, a play whose plot mirrors that of Hamlet itself. Claudius storms out in the middle of the performance, which Hamlet takes as further proof of his guilt. Gertrude, angry with Hamlet, asks him to meet with her privately. After Claudius leaves the play, he prays and confesses to his brother’s murder. Hamlet overhears the confession. He’s poised to kill Claudius but hesitates; if Claudius’s sins are forgiven right before death, he will go to heaven.

In Gertrude’s chamber, Polonius spies on her conversation with Hamlet from behind a curtain. Believing Gertrude in danger, he cries out, and Hamlet, mistaking him for Claudius, stabs him to death. The Ghost then reappears to Hamlet alone and chides him for not yet killing Claudius and for how cruel he was to his mother. Claudius, who has come to view Hamlet as a political threat, sends the prince away to England, where he plans to have him executed.

Laertes, Polonius’s son, returns from France. He holds Claudius responsible for his father’s death and, supported by a rowdy mob, charges into the castle intent on killing the king and threatens rebellion. Claudius forestalls Laertes by telling him that Hamlet murdered Polonius. Ophelia, driven insane by her father’s death at Hamlet’s hands, drowns herself. Her suicide only inflames Laertes’s determination to kill Hamlet in revenge.

A letter from Hamlet reaches the court: the ship carrying him to England was attacked by pirates, who, after first taking him prisoner, have brought him home to Denmark. When Claudius learns that Hamlet is still alive, he and Laertes conspire to murder Hamlet. After the prince reappears at Ophelia’s funeral, Claudius wagers that Hamlet could beat Laertes in a fencing match. However, the pair set up a trap for Hamlet—Laertes puts poison on his rapier tip. As a back-up plan, Claudius prepares a poisoned cup of wine. During the match, Gertrude falls dead after unwittingly drinking the wine, and both Hamlet and Laertes suffer fatal wounds from the poisoned sword. The dying Laertes confesses the poison plot to Hamlet, who then finally kills Claudius. After exchanging forgiveness with Laertes, Hamlet dies as Fortinbras, a Norwegian prince and son of Hamlet’s father’s arch-rival, appears fresh from the conquest of Poland. With virtually the entire Danish court dead, Fortinbras will assume the throne.

—MONICA ACHEN
Some scholars believe that Hamlet is fully cognizant of his actions throughout the play, putting on a purposeful mask of insanity to ensnare his uncle. However, there is also evidence to suggest Hamlet loses control of his own game and devolves into true madness as the play unfolds. This debate has been hotly contested for centuries, in an attempt to understand Hamlet’s complex psychology.

Before we look at the textual evidence, it’s helpful to understand how Elizabethan audiences would have understood madness during the time Hamlet was first written and performed. Until the beginning of modern medicine in the 19th century, European physicians believed that human temperament was based on four humors, which correlated to four different substances inside the body: blood, or sanguine; yellow bile, or choleric; black bile, or melancholic; and phlegm, or phlegmatic.

According to Elizabethan doctors, an excess or deficiency of any one of these fluids could account for every form of mental instability—from madness to melancholy. It was also believed that an imbalance of the humors left one’s soul vulnerable to evil forces and diabolic possession or could indicate a divine retribution for sins.

—WHITNEY DIBO

ACT II
Evidence for Sanity
In this conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet appears fully aware of the game he’s playing.

HAMLET
You are welcome. But my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived.

GUILDENSTERN
In what, my dear lord?

HAMLET
I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.
(2.2.312–16)

ACT I
Evidence for Insanity
When we first meet Hamlet at the start of the play, he’s consumed with anguish over his father’s death and his mother’s quick marriage to Claudius.

HAMLET
O, that this too too solid flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d
His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
(1.2.129–134)

Evidence for Sanity
This is one of the most important pieces of textual evidence in favor of Hamlet’s sanity: he tells Horatio that he plans to feign madness.

HAMLET
But come, here as before: never—so help you mercy,
How strange or odd soe’er I bear myself
(As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on)
(1.5.166–170)

Evidence for Insanity
In Ophelia’s account of her interaction with Hamlet, the Prince truly sounds like a man unhinged. In Elizabethan times, people really believed love could drive a person mad.

OPHELIA
Pale as his shirt; his knees knocking each other;
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors,— he comes before me.

POLONIUS
Mad for thy love?
Evidence for Sanity
In this quote, Claudius suggests that Hamlet’s mood seems more like melancholy than true madness.

CLAUDIUS
Love! His affections do not that way tend.
Nor what he spake, though it lack form a little.
Was not like madness. There’s something in his soul
O’d which his melancholy sits on a brood. (3.1.161–64)

Evidence for Ambiguity
After killing Polonius, Hamlet asks his mother if the slain man
is Claudius. While some readers see this confusion as further
evidence for Hamlet’s madness, some scholars suggest that Hamlet
is deliberately asking this question for Gertrude’s benefit—so she
will know that he wants to kill the king.

POLONIUS
O, I am slain!

QUEEN
O me, what hast thou done?

HAMLET
Nay I know not. Is it the king? (3.4.23–24)

Evidence for Sanity
Despite having just killed Polonius, Hamlet assures his
mother that he’s still only playing the part of a madman.

HAMLET
Make you to ravel all this matter out
That I essentially am not in madness
But mad in craft. (3.4.184–86)

Evidence for Ambiguity
Though Polonius clearly believes that Hamlet is insane, some literary
scholars suggest that Hamlet is deliberately mocking Polonius.

POLONIUS
Yet he knew me not at first, ’a said I was a fishmonger: ’A is far gone,
far gone; and truly, in my youth I suffered much extremity for
love, very near this. (2.2.185–7)

Evidence for Insanity
Here, Hamlet tells his friend Horatio that he’s been
suffering from internal conflict and sleepless nights—
an admission that could imply Hamlet has lost control
of his own game.

HAMLET
Was’t Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet…
Who does it, then? His madness. If’t be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged.
His madness is poor Hamlet’s enemy. (5.2.211–17)

In light of all the textual
evidence, Hamlet’s
mental health may lie
somewhere between
calculated sanity and
true madness.
For all his brilliance and ingenuity, Shakespeare also stole...a lot. The first line of the play—the question “Who’s there?”—could just as easily be posed to the play itself. Who are these characters? In what situations do we find them? Did Shakespeare invent these ideas, or can we trace them to other sources? The majority of his works borrow material from earlier literature as diverse as Greek mythology, English history, and Roman comedy, to name a few. Today, we might criticize a playwright for relying on existing stories, but for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, adapting well-known histories, sources, or stories was common—and often expected.

In Hamlet, scholars have identified various sources that may have been known to Shakespeare, including the writings of 13th-century Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, a 16th-century French version of Saxo’s tale by Frenchman François de Belleforest, and a mysterious play known as the Ur-Hamlet.

SAXO GRAMMATICUS
In his Historiae Danicae, Saxo relates the story of Amleth (Norse for “mad one”), whose father, the valiant Horwendil, and uncle, Feng, ruled Jutland. Most of the plot points are recognizable. Jealous of his brother’s success, Feng murders Horwendil and marries his wife, Gerutha. Fearing for his life, Amleth feigns madness, all the while making veiled threats to avenge his father. Members of the court try to discover his ruse by tempting Amleth with a beautiful woman who was his childhood friend. When the trap fails, Feng dispatches a courtier to eavesdrop on a conversation between Amleth and his mother in her chamber. Amleth discovers the spy, kills him, and proceeds to berate his mother about her marriage, thereby forcing her promise to repent. Still suspicious of Amleth’s madness, Feng sends him to England with two escorts and secret orders that the King there should have Amleth killed. Amleth discovers the plot and switches the orders, commanding the deaths of his escorts instead. He returns to Jutland to enact his vengeance and succeeds in killing Feng. When he defends his actions to the people, they proclaim him their new king.

FRANÇOIS DE BELLEFOREST
It is unlikely that Shakespeare read Saxo directly but instead came into contact with the tale of Hamlet in the Histoires Tragiques of Belleforest. Volume Five, published in 1570, recounts the story of Hamblet and follows the structure of Saxo’s story, though with considerable embellishments. Belleforest’s version is the first to contain the suggestion of a ghost, but it is not until the Ur-Hamlet that the ghost becomes directly significant to the plot. Belleforest also updates Saxo’s description of Amleth’s lethargy into melancholy, a condition written about extensively during the Renaissance.

THE UR-HAMLET
Scholars are divided about the origins of a late 16th-century play that they have come to call the Ur-Hamlet. No copy of it exists today, but performance records and other references from the period mention a revenge tragedy featuring a Danish hero and a ghost. Many scholars agree that the Ur-Hamlet was most likely written by Thomas Kyd, another Elizabethan playwright of the period and author of the important revenge tragedy The Spanish Tragedy. Other scholars have posited the possibility that the Ur-Hamlet was penned by Shakespeare himself, and the play that has come down to us in the quartos and folio represents a revised version of his own earlier text.

Perhaps Shakespeare’s great genius lies not in what he creates from scratch but in how he shapes existing material into something unique and wholly his own. Just as old King Hamlet is a ghost who haunts the younger prince, these earlier versions of the Hamlet story linger in the play we have today. But just as there is no confusing Prince Hamlet with his father, Shakespeare’s play outshines its predecessors in the subtlety of its plot and the deep inner lives of its characters.

—DANA TANNER-KENNEDY
The title of this article refers to a question posed by critic Ron Rosenbaum in his book *The Shakespeare Wars*, and it is the most significant question one can ask when beginning to work on a production of *Hamlet*. Because Shakespeare’s plays have been performed almost consistently for over 400 years, it is easy to assume that there is one standard version of the script that has been handed down over the centuries. The reality, however, is a little more complicated. None of the plays survive in Shakespeare’s original handwriting; all we have are printed editions that don’t match each other. So scholars over the centuries have worked to determine what exactly it was that Shakespeare wrote. Many of the plays, *Hamlet* included, survive in multiple versions in two different formats called *quartos* and *folios*. These names refer to how many times the sheets of paper were folded to form the final book.

**QUARTO**
A quarto is a sheet of printing paper folded twice to form eight separate pages for printing a book. To better visualize a quarto, hold before you a standard sheet of copy paper and fold it as you would a letter. You now have a rectangular piece of paper. Fold the paper again to form it into a square. Now unfold the paper and lay it flat before you. Notice that the sheet of paper now has four sections on one side and four on the other. In Shakespeare’s time, printing paper was folded in this way. Each of the four sections on one side became a page, and each of the four sections on the other side became a page. Thus, there were eight pages in all. Each of these pages was about a foot high.

**FOLIO**
A folio is a sheet of printing paper folded once to form four separate pages for printing a book. To better visualize a folio, hold before you a standard sheet of copy paper and fold it as you would a letter. You now have a rectangular piece of paper. Hold it so it opens from right to left. What you are looking at is page 1. Now turn the flap from right to left to open the rectangle. You are now looking at pages 2 and 3, separated by a crease. When you close the right flap over the left, you will be looking at page 4. A folio was considerably larger than a quarto.
There are three extant versions of *Hamlet*, and they are known as the First Quarto, published in 1603; the Second Quarto of 1604/05; and the First Folio, which was published in 1623, several years after Shakespeare’s death. The First Quarto is a much shorter text than the other two, and scholars have theorized that it might represent either an earlier draft, a flawed reconstruction of the play transcribed from memory by an actor, or a condensed script used by a touring company. The Second Quarto represents a more complete version of the play. The First Folio is from the original collected works of Shakespeare that was compiled and published by two of his company members around five years after his death. These three printings of the text overlap in many ways, but some passages feature words, lines, and even entire scenes that are different or missing from the others. So the first question to ask when you start work on a production of *Hamlet* is: which version of the play should we use? Take this example from Hamlet’s first soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 2:

**FIRST QUARTO**

*O that this too much grieved and sullied flesh Would melt to nothing*

**SECOND QUARTO**

*O that this too too sallied flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew*

**FIRST FOLIO**

*O that this too too solid flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew*

These three different word choices allow us a glimpse into the intensity of Hamlet’s emotion in this scene and offer three different responses to the backstory we have just learned. The First Quarto suggests that Hamlet is so disturbed by the death of his father, the sudden marriage of his mother and uncle, and his own melancholy that he feels physically dirty. Choosing the word “sullied” for this scene ties it into the other images of rottenness and garbage that permeate the play.

In the Second Quarto, the word “sallied” means “besieged.” Hamlet feels as if his whole sense of self is under attack by hostile forces, and he will spend the first half of the play figuring out how to respond. In his famous third act “To be or not to be” soliloquy, this same war image will return as he weighs whether it is more noble to quietly “suffer the slings and arrows” of the fate he has been dealt or “take up arms” against his problems and fight back.

The First Folio gives us a Hamlet who wishes that his solid body could dematerialize and transform into pure morning dew. This image picks up on Hamlet’s feelings of contamination but also foreshadows the immaterial body of his father’s ghost whom he will shortly meet and whose very presence will occupy Hamlet’s mind for the rest of the play. Each possibility lends a slightly different flavor and meaning to the moment.
Here’s another example taken from what is probably the most famous speech in all of Shakespeare:

**FIRST QUARTO**

To be, or not to be, ay, there’s the point.

**SECOND QUARTO**

To be, or not to be, that is the question.

**FIRST FOLIO**

To be, or not to be, that is the question.

The Second Quarto and the First Folio are in agreement, but what do we make of the First Quarto? Remember what the scholars have argued about the origins of this version.

Now, take a look at Hamlet’s last lines before he dies:

**FIRST QUARTO**

Mine eyes have lost their sight, my tongue his use.

Farewell, Horatio. Heaven receive my soul.

**SECOND QUARTO**

So tell him with th’occurrences more and less

Which have solicited.—The rest is silence.

**FIRST FOLIO**

So tell him with th’occurrences more and less

Which have solicited.—The rest is silence. O,o,o,o.

Again, the First Quarto is very different from the other two versions. But in spite of their similarities, the Second Quarto and the First Folio disagree about Hamlet’s very last word. Does he die silently after the word “silence,” or does he make a series of noises known to scholars as the “O-groans”? Which would you choose?

There are many other variant word choices throughout the play, and like us, most artistic teams use a combination of the two quartos and the folio to compose a particular cutting of the text. Listen for which words we chose, and see if you can hear how they echo throughout this production.

—DANA TANNER-KENNEDY
Hamlet may be one of the most famous—and coveted roles—in theatre history. To play the Prince of Denmark poses an irresistible challenge to the actor. Although Hamlet is peppered with a few textual clues to what the character might be like, Hamlet is so multi-faceted and malleable that a wide-range of actors can put on the Dane’s famous “antic disposition.” Thousands of the greatest actors over hundreds of years—young and old, male and female—have relished the opportunity to perform some of Shakespeare’s signature soliloquies. Below is a sampling of the ways in which the role has been cast on stage and screen.

FIRST HAMLET
Richard Burbage, who was part of William Shakespeare’s acting company the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, originated the role of Hamlet at the Globe Theatre in 1601. Burbage, who took on the role well into his 50s, often played young characters like Hamlet and older characters like King Lear in the same theatre season.

HAMLETS OLD AND YOUNG
For much of Hamlet’s storied production history, the eponymous role has challenged veteran actors—who have been in their 40s and 50s when tackling the role, just like Richard Burbage. In the mid-to-late 20th century, younger actors began playing the part.

In the late 19th-century, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson gained fame for his portrayal of Hamlet. He first tackled the role when he was 44, and a silent film of his Hamlet, made when Forbes-Robertson was 60, still exists.

One of the great Shakespearean actors of the 20th century, Sir Laurence Olivier was 41 when he took his turn as the Prince of Denmark in the 1948 black-and-white film. Set against an almost film noir landscape, Olivier’s Hamlet was no wavering, hesitant youth—but rather a calculating, intelligent adult with a specific plan in mind.

Sir Michael Redgrave was the next major British actor to play Hamlet at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1958 when he was 50. Instead of downplaying Hamlet’s age, Redgrave magnified his authority, maturity, and commanding presence. Redgrave was older than the woman who played his Gertrude, the 41-year-old actress Googie Withers.

Just a few years after Redgrave’s tour de force as the Prince, the Royal Shakespeare Company presented a radically different version of Hamlet in 1965. At the age of 24, David Warner became the youngest actor to play Hamlet at the theatre. Wearing a red scarf and corduroy jacket, Warner’s Hamlet was a scrappy university student disillusioned by the world around him, playing opposite a beatnik Ophelia.

In the second half of the 20th century and at the start of the 21st, many Hamlets were young in Warner’s model. At 29, Ethan Hawke became the youngest Hamlet on film in the 2000 movie directed by Michael Almereyda. Hawke plays Hamlet as a young film student in New York City, whose uncle has just become CEO of “Denmark Corporation” by killing Hamlet’s father.

FEMALE HAMLETS
Many women have uttered “to be or not to be” on stage and in film. By casting a woman as Hamlet, these productions have allowed either a virtuosic actress her turn at the role—or made a deeper political statement with the non-traditional casting.

In 1776 at the young age of 21, Sarah Siddons became the first woman to play Hamlet. Siddons’s talent and dignity paved the way for many other women to play Hamlet in 18th- and 19th-centuries. Her approach to the role aspired to make gender irrelevant, instead focusing on the character’s universality.

Danish silent movie star Asta Nielson formed her own production company to make her 1921 film. In Nielson’s version, Hamlet is actually a woman forced to masquerade as a man. With short black hair and dark eye makeup, Nielson’s Hamlet is a thin, mysterious, almost gothic figure.
In an abandoned London church in 1980, British actress Frances de la Tour played Hamlet in an avant-garde production. De la Tour said that she didn't set out to play Hamlet like a man or like a woman, but more like an androgynous being who had lost his (or her) way.

Polish director Andrzej Wajda’s 1989 production featured actress Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska as a female Hamlet in men’s clothing. At the start of the play, the audience could see Budzisz-Krzyżanowska behind a screen, changing (somewhat reluctantly) from her feminine garments into Hamlet’s decidedly male costume.

German actress Angela Winkler starred in Peter Zadek’s Hamlet 2000, which opened in Vienna and finished its run in Berlin. The play was closely tied to the politics of Germany after the Berlin Wall fell, and Winkler embodied a bruised and scrappy Hamlet, whose hopes had been dashed by years of violence.

**FAMOUS HAMLETS**
Regardless of age or gender, some of the most famous actors of a generation have played Hamlet to great success.

Edwin Booth, one of the leading actors of the 19th century (and the infamous John Wilkes Booth’s brother), played Hamlet in New York for 100 consecutive nights between 1864-1865. He played the role in the new naturalistic acting style of that period, giving the Prince a quiet, thoughtful demeanor.

At the age of 55, French actress Sarah Bernhardt, known as the First Lady of the Theatre, played Hamlet in a 1899 prose adaptation that she herself commissioned. Her performance was loved by French audiences, but the Brits did not look so fondly on her four-hour-long version of Hamlet.

British actor John Gielgud’s performances of Hamlet set the gold standard, according to many critics, for 20th-century actors, and he tackled the role in many different productions over the course of two decades. He began playing Hamlet at the age of 25, and the critical reception of his performance helped to make him a celebrity.

In 1934, at the age of 30, he directed himself in the role. His Hamlet of 1936 on Broadway helped the production break box office records. He last attempted the Prince of Denmark at the age of 41 in a touring production. Then, in the latter half of the century, he played the Ghost of Hamlet’s father.

Stage and film giant Richard Burton played Hamlet in 1964, under the direction of Gielgud. Burton’s Hamlet wore a simple black v-necked black sweater and slacks, as he did not like wearing period clothing. The show was conceived as a “rehearsal” setting, with an unfinished set and actors wearing street clothes.

Kenneth Branagh followed in the legacy of Gielgud, playing his first Hamlet in a radio production with Gielgud playing the Ghost. Branagh directed himself—and a cast of stage and movie stars—in a film version that featured the entire, uncut text. Branagh was 36 when the film was released in 1996.

Actor Jude Law took on the role in 2009 at the West End in London. Law’s Hamlet was very physical, frustrated, and self-aware. Despite naysayers who claimed Law only received the part due to his star status, critics (for the most part) agreed he captured the Dane with thoughtful precision.

Few plays in the literary canon allow for such a range of casting. Over time, these sometimes daring productions, featuring wild interpretations of the Prince of Denmark, show more than just the mettle of the actor or creativity of an auteur director. These many faces of Hamlet prove the depth and complexity of Shakespeare’s masterpiece—one that, in the hands of fine theatre artists, can continue to reveal new layers.

—WHITNEY DIBO
Almost two months before rehearsals began, Hamlet director James Bundy—who is the Artistic Director of Yale Rep and the Dean of Yale School of Drama—was already working on every element of the production. He sat down with Literary Manager Amy Boratko to talk about the process of building Hamlet—from working with Paul Giamatti on the title role to making choices about what the production will look like.

AMY BORATKO: This production began with your relationship to Paul Giamatti. How do you two know each other?

JAMES BUNDY: We’ve been friends since the 1990s. Paul was a year ahead of me when we were students at Yale School of Drama. I’ve phoned him periodically over the years about trying to get him to do a play with us here at Yale Rep, and he was able to make it work.

AB: Why did you choose Hamlet for this collaboration?

JB: It’s a monumentally exciting play to work on, and the prospect of doing it with a major talent like Paul made it seem like now is the right moment. The more you work on the play, the more pleasurable it is and the more challenging it is.

AB: How are you two working together to achieve that perfect fit?

JB: We sat together and read the play. We talked about what was clear in the play, what wasn’t clear in the play, and what our questions were. There are three substantively different versions of the script, and we sat down with a wonderful book that happens to have all three of them side by side. Then, we talked about what in those versions of the text felt good to Paul and good to me. A lot of it has to do with how an actor can live inside the language. Then, we were able to make some choices about the text. We’re going to start rehearsal, and we may change our minds. But one of the interesting tropes is that in the Second Quarto Hamlet repeats himself a lot—little tiny words are repeated. That doubling of language seemed comfortable to Paul.

AB: Recently, you assembled the rest of the acting ensemble. How did you make casting choices, and what were you looking for in the actors you chose?

JB: There are so many wonderful actors working in the profession, and for this play, I have been drawn to the ones who make the events of the play immediate and unapologetically and still draw people to him. If you’re going to spend three-and-a-half hours with a character, that combination of charisma and humanity is critical.
detailed. I want to work with actors whose approach to the language is so visceral that they simultaneously are inspired by what Shakespeare wrote but they manage to make it not sound “Shakespearean.” There are multiple traditions of the performance of Shakespeare in our culture, and some of them are more oratorical and declamatory than others. The actors I have cast all have terrific vocal instruments, but they’re not advertising their instrument in their work. They’re going immediately to the heart of the question at hand in whatever scene of the play they’re in.

**AB:** You’re currently hard at work with the designers on the production. Where are you now in building the visual world of Hamlet?

**JB:** We’re two months away from the first rehearsal. The designers and I have looked at a lot of visual research. I’ve seen some thumbnail sketches of some costumes and a first round of sketches of the set. All of the designers and I have sat in the room with Paul asking questions about the play and what we think are the key points in the action. It has been really exciting and helpful for everybody in the creative team to be in a conversation with the actor playing Hamlet.

**AB:** What research or ideas are influencing the production design?

**JB:** For many people, when they go see a play by Shakespeare, the part of the production about which they tend to bring the greatest number of expectations is the costume design. The designers and I noticed that European royalty over the past sixty or seventy years haven’t really changed their look very much. There’s a certain contemporary sensibility about what royalty is that seems helpful in terms of locating the play. By dressing the characters in contemporary clothes, it helps the audience understand what a character’s role is in the culture or what a character’s emotional or psychological characteristics might be.

Nobody knows for sure, but many scholars think that no matter what period Shakespeare’s plays were written about, the actors in his company were performing them in contemporary clothing. First of all, it had the advantage of being inexpensive because the garments could be gathered and did not have to be made. And second of all, it had the advantage of communicating very directly and very poetically in an immediate way with the audience about who the characters were in relationship to each other and who they were in relationship to contemporary society. So that’s a premise that we followed in using essentially contemporary costumes. The other nice thing about using contemporary garments is that every period of clothing contains all the periods before it.

**AB:** Thinking about these characters wearing contemporary clothing, how do you think the play resonates with today’s audiences?

**JB:** I think there are a number of reasons *Hamlet* is a really cool story. In a certain way, it’s a ghost story. It’s almost like an episode of the *Twilight Zone*, which is a television show from my childhood. The play fundamentally asks the question: what if you knew the answer to a mystery and you were the only person who knew because a ghost had told you the answer? Then, you had to decide whether to do something evil—like kill someone else—in order to attain justice.

Hamlet is an amazing character because he knows so much. We all struggle with these questions of what’s the right thing to do or not, but he has this special knowledge. I think that Hamlet’s problem is a bigger problem than we could possibly have, so it’s a cool problem to see on stage. But on the other hand, it’s just like our problem, which is to try to figure out what the right thing is to do. For anybody who is coming to see the play having read it, everybody knows that *Hamlet* is a tragedy. The real question is what that tragedy is. For me, the tragedy is that Hamlet doesn’t fully live his life until after he knows he’s dead already. It isn’t until Laertes tells him that he’s been poisoned, and that he will die, that he decides to do what he’s wanted to do for much of the play: take revenge on his uncle.
AB: You’ve studied Hamlet many times and seen many productions of the play. How has your relationship to the play changed?

JB: I thought—intuitively and incorrectly—when I was young that there was only one way to do Hamlet that could be meaningful and powerful. Now I see that you can take many exciting lines through the play: political, religious, familial, psychological, or any combination thereof. The play will let you do that because it’s so majestically written.

AB: Which lines will you take through the play?

JB: We’re going to continue to figure that out during rehearsal. But for me, the core of the play is at the intersection of the familial and the spiritual lines.

AB: What about the play lends itself to these different interpretations?

JB: One of the great things about Hamlet is that there are a huge number of given circumstances that are left open to the interpretation of the production. What was Hamlet’s relationship like with his father Hamlet? What was Gertrude’s relationship like with his father Hamlet? What was Hamlet’s relationship like with Claudius before? What kind of relationship did Hamlet and Ophelia have before the play begins? Those are really fun questions, and different answers to those questions will lead to different kinds of stage action.

AB: If you could tell a student reading this Study Guide one thing before coming to the production, what would it be?

JB: I think that one of the consistent traps of contemporary culture is that people go to see a play, and then they are encouraged to start thinking at the beginning of the experience whether they like it or not. It can be exciting to go to a play and immerse myself not in whether I like it but what is the story—what is the scene in front of me telling me about these people and how does that make me feel viscerally. Later, I am able to form an opinion, to decide whether I liked something or not. If I could tell a student coming to the show one thing, I’d say: lean in to the actors and the action—come to be in Hamlet’s world for a while, not to decide whether you like it. Decide whether you like it well after you leave the theatre.
In Act 3, Scene 2, of *Hamlet*, right in the middle of the play, Shakespeare holds a mirror up to the audience: the onstage characters watch a play. This play is *The Murder of Gonzago*, or "The Mousetrap," as Hamlet calls it. This scene, while marking a turning point in the plot, demonstrates Shakespeare’s use of *metatheatre* in the dramatic construction. Metatheatre is a theatrical device, such as a play-within-a-play or characters themselves play-acting, that self-consciously refers to itself as theater and, in doing so, raises questions about the relationship between theatre and reality.

Shakespeare frequently used metatheatrical devices or references in several of his plays, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (the play-within-a-play “Pyramus and Thisbe”), *The Tempest* (“We are such stuff as dreams are made on”), and *As You Like It* (“All the world’s a stage/And all the men and women merely players”). Yet in no other play does Shakespeare use theatre to forward his plot and question reality more intricately and comprehensively than in *Hamlet*. Renowned Shakespeare scholar Marjorie Garber notes that “the entire play is structured as a series of scenes each of which is a play-within-a-play.”

**HAMLET AS ACTOR**

From the beginning, Hamlet perceives the court of Elsinore as a tragic farce because his mother married his uncle less than a month after his father died. Initially, he refuses to take part in the court masquerade because of his excessive grief for his father. Nevertheless, after his encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet decides to “put an antic disposition on” (1.5.170). In other words, Hamlet begins to play a role and, by doing so, becomes both an actor performing for the court and an audience, or a critic, watching a performance.

**THE MOUSETRAP**

Shakespeare’s use of metatheatre culminates with the play-within-the-play. Hamlet asks the Players to stage a play for the king so that he can resolve his doubt about the Ghost’s message. He decides to watch how Claudius responds to the dramatic reenactment of what Hamlet thinks happened: “The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.539–540). “The Mousetrap” presents the most fundamental dynamics of theatre: the audience is watching a play on stage. However, the act of “watching” and “playing” here multiplies ad infinitum as the boundaries disintegrate between actor and audience member, stage and auditorium, and fiction and reality. Hamlet acts the part of a dutiful prince by (pretending to be) entertaining the king and queen, while he watches the king watch the play; and the king thinks he is watching a fictional play, but what he really sees is the truth of his deed.

**THE MIRROR IMAGE**

For the real audience members, the play-within-the-play becomes a doubled theatrical experience because they watch characters watching *The Murder of Gonzago*, while also watching *The Murder of Gonzago* (and *Hamlet*) themselves. Seeing themselves on stage also makes the audience aware that they are watching a play; Shakespeare is not allowing the audience to get lost in an illusion but reminds the audience that they’re in a theatre. In one respect, this scene moves the plot forward by confirming for Hamlet that the Ghost’s message was indeed true. In another, this scene makes more explicit the multiple levels of play-acting that pervades the world of Elsinore and, further, our own.

“*The Mousetrap,*” placed in the middle of the drama, provides us with critical questions that can enrich our understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare’s craft. What changes in Hamlet after the play-within-the-play in terms of his action, language, costume, and perception of his role? What changes in Claudius? How does *The Murder of Gonzago* affect the characters’ perception of what is real and what is illusion in the court of Elsinore? Most of all, how does it affect the audience’s experience of watching the play? The audience member may realize that reality and theatre are not so far apart.

—WALTER BYONGSOK CHON
How to Stage a GHOST

When the Ghost appears to Prince Hamlet, his call for vengeance helps set the dramatic action in motion. Hamlet must make the crucial decision: to act or not to act. In addition to his important dramatic function, the Ghost is a complicated figure that invites wide range of theatrical interpretations.

Before we delve into the different ways a director might handle the Ghost, it’s important to understand that when Hamlet was first written and performed, Elizabethan audiences did not take ghosts lightly. Back then, it was understood widely that the dead had real and substantial effects on the living—even more so when a person’s soul was not at rest. Though the Protestant Church had banned the Catholic idea of purgatory forty years earlier—along with ghosts, spirits, and other supernatural phenomenon—the Elizabethan population still believed in, craved, or feared communion with the dead. In fact, the elimination of the supernatural from sanctioned religious practice only created a ready void, one which Shakespeare skillfully filled with the Ghost of Hamlet’s father.

If you were a director staging Hamlet, what might your options be for staging the Ghost? The director must think about what type of actor would play the role, what the actor would look like, and what the actor would wear.

—WHITNEY DIBO

OPTION #1
THE WARRIOR GHOST: A SUIT OF ARMOR
If a director wants to stick closely to the text, he or she will costume the Ghost in a suit of armor, given Horatio’s remarks in Act 1, Scene 1, that the Ghost is wearing “the very armour he had on/When he the ambitious Norway combated” (1.1.56–60).

Clad in a noisy, hulking suit of armor, the Ghost becomes very real and physical, as opposed to an ethereal sprite.

The suit of armor could highlight the former King’s status as a war hero and make him more imposing (especially if Hamlet is dressed like a young student).

The armor might obscure the King’s face, which could account for Hamlet’s initial mistrust of the Ghost.
OPTION #2
THE HUMAN CHOICE: A PLAIN-CLOTHES GHOST
The director could choose to disregard the armor and dress Hamlet’s father like a civilian.

- With this choice the ghost is not a fleeting spirit (or possible hallucination), but he looks a “real” man, embodied in the flesh.
- Dressing the former King of Denmark in civilian clothing highlights the Ghost’s humanity and could make him a very empathetic, vulnerable figure.
- Some productions go a step further, dressing the Ghost in tattered, worn clothing—perhaps to demonstrate just how far the former king has fallen and how miserable he is wandering in purgatory.
- For both this option and the first option, a director might consider casting the actor who plays Claudius as the Ghost.

OPTION #3
THE APPARITION: THE GHOST AS A HAZY, SMOKY ILLUSION
If a director wants to highlight the Ghost’s eerie, otherworldly aesthetic, he or she may choose to obscure him in a haze of smoke or darkened, murky lighting.

- This theatrical choice makes the Ghost a more ethereal illusion, as opposed to a flesh-and-blood embodiment of the king.
- A more unearthly Ghost could invite questions around Hamlet’s sanity. If the Ghost is hidden by smoke or darkness, how can Hamlet be sure of what he’s seeing?
- This production choice might also depend on theatre technology: would the production need special lighting or smoke effects?

OPTION #4
THE VOICEOVER: NO GHOST AT ALL
A director could choose to do away with the physical Ghost all together and instead opt for a disembodied voiceover.

- Even more than the Option #3, this decision begs questions about Hamlet’s possible madness. Could it be that he is really just hearing a voice in his head?
- Without seeing a bodily image of the dead king, it might be easier to understand why Hamlet is hesitant to act, and why he initially mistrusts the Ghost.
- A voiceover raises fun theatrical questions: can Hamlet see the Ghost while we cannot? Or are we all listening to the same disembodied voice, but seeing nothing? If only Hamlet can see his father, the audience is forced to imagine what alarming figure could evoke such terror.
- It’s important to note that this option disregards two stage directions embedded in the text: the first being that the Ghost “enters.” If Hamlet’s father is an intangible voice, he will never really “enter” the space. The stage directions also specify that the Ghost “cries from under the stage” (1.5.148). A director would have to choose if the sound emanated from beneath the floorboards—or from another location.
“Hamlet...is the most popular play in our language. It amuses thousands annually, and it stimulates the minds of millions. Performed in barns and minor theatres oftener than in Theatres Royal, it is always and everywhere attractive.” So observed Victorian writer G.H. Lewes of Shakespeare’s great tragedy in 1855: an endorsement echoed by such contemporary scholars as Harold Bloom, who mused that the play “remains our most advanced drama...you cannot get beyond Hamlet.” From early controversies to canonical status, this play of “words, words, words” has sparked critical conversation.

THE NEOCLASSICISTS

The logical Neoclassical writers adhering to the values of unity, decorum, and poetic justice (i.e. goodness rewarded, bad behavior punished)—found admirable qualities in Hamlet, but also many lapses of good taste (to quote Voltaire).

Voltaire: It is a vulgar and barbarous drama, which would not be tolerated by the vilest populace of France, or Italy...Hamlet becomes crazy in the second act, and his mistress becomes crazy in the third; the prince slays the father of his mistress under the pretence of killing a rat, and the heroine throws herself in the river.... One would imagine this piece to be the work of a drunken savage.... It seems as though nature had mingled in the brain of Shakespeare the greatest conceivable strength and grandeur with whatsoever witless vulgarity can devise that is lowest and most detestable.

Samuel Johnson: The conduct (of the characters) is perhaps not wholly secure against objections.... Of the feigned madness of Hamlet, there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not have done with the reputation of sanity.

Voltaire: A cannon is fired at the rejoicings of the Queen Gertrude and her new husband...although the action is passing in the ninth Century, before the invention of the cannon.

THE ROMANTICS

In late 18th-century Germany and England, Hamlet became the touchstone of Romantic-era “Shakespeare Mania,” with Hamlet as the quintessential Romantic hero—a melancholy dreamer in conflict with society.

J.W. von Goethe: A lovely, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away.

William Hazlitt: It is we who are Hamlet. This play has a prophetic truth, which is above that of history.... Whoever has known the pangs of despised love, the insolence of office...he who has felt his mind sink within him, and sadness cling to his heart like a malady, who has had his hopes blighted and his youth staggered by the apparition of strange things; who cannot be well at ease, while he sees evil hovering near him like a spectre; whose powers of action have been eaten up by thought, he to whom the universe seems infinite, and himself nothing...this is the true Hamlet.

THE VICTORIANS

As the most popular play of the 19th century, Hamlet was a phenomenon in a Victorian era of both sentimental morality and scientific skepticism:

Matthew Arnold: [In Hamlet], the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust.

Charles Cowden Clarke: ...upon this giant of philosophical dramas; rise from it when we may, and as often as we may, our hearts are warmed by wiser and holier thoughts.

Emily Dickinson: Hamlet wavered for all of us.
THE MODERNISTS
While many late 19th- and early 20th-century writers were delighted with the Dane, some unfavorably measured the play against the era’s many political theories and artistic manifestos. Others saw *Hamlet* as a metaphor for modernity.

Sigmund Freud: *Hamlet* is] another of the great creations of tragic poetry…. What is it that inhibits him in fulfilling the task set him by his father’s ghost?... Hamlet is able to do anything—except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father’s place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of childhood realized. Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish.

Leo Tolstoy: During the whole of the drama, Hamlet is doing, not what he would really wish to do, but what is necessary for the author’s plan. One moment he is awestruck at his father’s ghost, another moment he begins to chafe at it...; one moment he loves Ophelia, another moment he teases her, and so forth. There is no possibility of finding any explanation whatever of Hamlet’s actions or words, and therefore no possibility of attributing any character to him.

T.S. Eliot: *Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art.

George Bernard Shaw: He took up an old play about the ghost of a murdered king who haunted his son crying for revenge, with comic relief provided by the son pretending to be that popular curiosity and laughing stock, a village idiot... Shakespear [sic], transfiguring this into a tragedy on the ancient Athenian level, could not have been quite unconscious of the evolutionary stride he was taking. But he did not see his way clearly enough to save the tons of ink and paper and years of “man’s time” that have been wasted, and are still being wasted, on innumerable volumes of nonsense about the meaning of *Hamlet*.

CONTEMPORARIES
Today, *Hamlet* still towers at the center of the English-language dramatic canon—endlessly revered, celebrated, debated, adapted, and interpreted.

Jan Kott: *Hamlet* is like a sponge.... It immediately absorbs all the problems of our time.

Harold Bloom: Overfamiliar yet always unknown, the enigma of Hamlet is emblematic of the greater enigma of Shakespeare himself: a vision that is everything and nothing, a person who was… everyone and no one, an art so infinite that it contains us, and will go on enclosing those likely to come after us.

—MAYA CANTU
“A man that studyth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well.” So said Shakespeare’s contemporary, the philosopher Francis Bacon. In Elizabethan England, exacting revenge for personal grievances was considered to be both a sin against God and a defiance of the state and monarch. Any citizen who sought private retribution for wrongs done to them would be treated as a criminal and subject to severe punishment by the law. Perversely, this helped to generate a great appetite among theatre audiences to see vengeance acted out onstage. A genre that would be classified by later scholars as revenge tragedy became extremely popular from the mid-1580s to the early 1640s.

Writers of revenge tragedy were strongly influenced by the works of the Roman playwright Lucius Annacus Seneca. Seneca’s plays, written in the first century CE, were first translated from their original Latin into English in 1559, and by 1581, Senecan tragedies were being widely read by the English literati. Works like his _Thyestes, Medea_, and _Agamemnon_ were particularly admired, all of which were based upon betrayal, murder, and a subsequent quest to exact blood vengeance upon the perpetrators. These Roman examples of revenge tragedy also featured intrigue, passionate emotions, and sensational elements such as supernatural phenomena, torture, and explicit descriptions of gruesome violence. These elements began to appear more frequently in plays written for the Elizabethan stage as the revenge tragedy grew in popularity.

_Hamlet_ is considered one of the most sophisticated incarnations of the revenge tragedy, but Shakespeare borrowed heavily from his contemporaries to create the world of the tortured Danish prince. Apparently, one of the most popular revenge tragedies was the so-called _Ur-Hamlet_, believed to have been written before 1589. Sadly, the text of _Ur-Hamlet_ has been lost—we can only conjecture its existence through second-hand sources. Many scholars credited authorship of _Ur-Hamlet_ to the playwright Thomas Kyd, who also wrote _The Spanish Tragedy_, or, _Hieronimo is Mad Again_ between 1582 and 1592.

The _Spanish Tragedy_, a dark tale of murder and conspiracy set in the Spanish royal court, was extremely popular on the Elizabethan stage and is clearly one of the strongest influences on the construction of _Hamlet_. The two plays share a telling number of plot devices:

- The motive of both plays is revenge for a murder.
- Both feature ghosts who urge the protagonists on to vengeance.
- Both feature madness and loss of control.
- Both protagonists suffer agonies of doubt about whether they should pursue vengeance: Hamlet is worried by the Elizabethan superstition that the devil could appear in likeness of a deceased loved one, and in _The Spanish Tragedy_, Hieronimo does not have proof of his suspicions as to who killed his son.
- Both use a play-within-a-play to prove the murderer’s guilt.
- Both feature a character named Horatio.
Shakespeare, always adroit at reading popular trends and recycling other stories, borrows heavily from *The Spanish Tragedy* to offer his audience a revenge tragedy steeped in intrigue, betrayal, and murderous retribution.

The pursuit of personal vengeance continued to be a popular theme on the English stage, with the representations of onstage revenge becoming increasingly gruesome and sadistic throughout the Jacobean period, such as in *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster (1613). But the rise of the Puritans (who deplored the theatre as frivolous and sinful) in Elizabethan government spelled doom for the revenge tragedy.

James Shirley’s *The Cardinal*—often regarded as the last revenge tragedy—was produced in 1641, and in 1642 parliament passed a law that suspended all public performances for five years. After that law expired, Oliver Cromwell’s government passed another law declaring that all actors were to be considered rogues. Many theatres were even dismantled. When Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, theatres were re-opened again.

However, the public appetite for revenge tragedy had waned after those 18 years. In its place rose new genres, such as the style dubbed *heroic drama* (written in verse, celebrating powerful male protagonists in pursuit of glory, such as Roger Boyle’s *The Black Prince* in 1669), the genre known as *she-tragedy* (which focused on the sufferings of an innocent and virtuous woman, such as Thomas Otway’s *The Orphan* in 1680), and the *Restoration comedy* (known for its wit, aristocratic ethos, and sexual explicitness, e.g. in William Wycherly’s 1675 play *The Country Wife*). But although revenge tragedy waned in popularity during the Restoration, it has proved its enduring appeal with modern audiences, as exemplified by *Hamlet*.

—TANYA DEAN
B E F O R E

1. Hamlet is one of the most coveted roles in Western theatre, and many actors have tackled the part. (See "The Many Faces of Hamlet" on pages 8–9) If you were directing the play, whom would you cast in the role? What qualities would you look for in your Hamlet, and what evidence in the text would lead you to making that choice? (Also, see the interview on pages 10–12 with James Bundy on what he looks for in actors.)

2. In the interview with director James Bundy on pages 10–12, he discusses the different “lines” that one can take through Hamlet: religious, political, familial, and spiritual. Based on reading the play, which of these four themes is strongest to you and why? When you watch the production, track how these themes carry through in the creative team’s choices—the cutting of the script, character approaches, and design elements.

3. In Act 4, Scene 3, Claudius sends Hamlet to England as punishment for killing Polonius. Scholars have debated how long Hamlet is away from Denmark before returning just in time for Ophelia’s funeral. No matter the length of the trip, what’s important to consider is how Hamlet—and the court—may have changed during that absence. In this production, how is Hamlet different when he comes back? How does the actor communicate those changes through his voice, body, and interactions with other actors?

A F T E R

1. “How to Stage a Ghost” (see pages 14–15) offered some of the options a director might choose when directing Hamlet. As you reflect on Yale Rep’s production, be prepared to discuss the choice made by director James Bundy regarding his staging of the Ghost and whether it met your expectations.

2. Our first look at Claudius is in Act 1, Scene 2, a formal court scene meant to establish him in his capacity as the new King of Denmark. How did the actor playing Claudius establish the character’s newfound leadership? Recall the reactions of the other members of the court: who was convinced of Claudius’s right to be on the throne?

3. There are several choices for the director and the actor playing Hamlet in regards to the delivery of the first soliloquy (1.2.129-158). The speech can be delivered directly to the audience; performed as if Hamlet’s speaking to himself; or, as has been done in film versions, heard as a voice-over. In this production, what choice was made? How would you have staged this moment and why?
# RESOURCES

## BOOKS

## WEBSITES
- **NEA Shakespeare in American Communities**
  shakespeareinamericancommunities.org
- **In Search of Shakespeare: Shakespeare in the Classroom**
  pbs.org/shakespeare/educators
- **Royal Shakespeare Company**
  rsc.org.uk/education
- **Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet**
  shakespeare.palomar.edu
- **Hamlet on the Ramparts**
  shea.mit.edu/ramparts/welcome.htm

## STUDY GUIDES
- **Arkansas Repertory Theatre**
  therep.org/userfiles/Hamlet%20Study%20Guide.pdf
- **Arts Alive**
  artsalive.ca/pdf/eth/activities/hamlet_guide.pdf
- **Court Theatre**
  courttheatre.org/season/guide/hamlet/
- **Folger Shakespeare Library**
  folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=3480
- **Guthrie Theater**
  guthrietheater.org/sites/default/files/hamlet.pdf
- **McCarter Theatre**
  mccarter.org/education/hamlet/index.htm

## YOU TUBE
Clips from some of the most famous productions of *Hamlet* can be found on YouTube. Try searching for the following Hamlets:

**Actors**
- Laurence Olivier (1948)
- Richard Burton (1964)
- Kenneth Branagh (1996)
- Ethan Hawke (2000)
- David Tennant (2009)

**Directors**
- Grigori Kozintsev (1964)