

# *Hamlet*

by William Shakespeare

## Study Guide

THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE  
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES  
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## About This Guide

Portions of this study guide are formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They may be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes. Here is an outline of the contents of each page with suggestions on how it may be used.

### The Section Titled

**Hamlet Facts** - introduction to the significance and history of the play

**Plot Synopsis** - one-page summary of the action in the play

**Characters** - quick character sketches in a two-page hand-out

**Themes** - two-page summary of the play's major themes

**“Acting” as Thematic Focus** - one-page outline of a central idea in *Hamlet*

**Scenes to Explore** - detailed suggestions for study of selected scenes

**Advice to the Players** - one-page hand-out for scene study work

**The Nunnery Scene, III.1.88-155** - two-page hand-out for scene study

**What To Watch For in *Hamlet*** - aspects to focus on during the performance

**Split View of the NAC Theatre** - a graphic illustrating two configurations of the theatre

**Suggested Activities** - six classroom activities

**Hamlet - Famous Quotes** - a selection of famous quotations from *Hamlet*

**Hamlet – Set & Costume Designer John Pennoyer comments on Costumes** - period, style, colour and more

**A Production Who's Who** - program information

**Resources** - a list of recommended film, print, web and program resources

### May Be Used To

Provides background on the history and origins of *Hamlet*

Outline the story with a class

Familiarize students with the characters in *Hamlet*

Introduce students to the themes of the play

Delve more deeply into one aspect of theme

Interpret and critique sections of the play

Get students thinking about Elizabethan acting

Investigate motivation and interpretation

Guide student viewing  
Focus post-show discussion

Teach about different kinds of stages

Provide activity ideas for teaching *Hamlet*

Use with activity #1 or Display in the classroom

Teach about design

Aid students writing reviews

Extend learning possibilities

## ***Hamlet* Facts**

### **About the Play**

*Hamlet* was written sometime between 1599 and 1601 and is often considered the greatest achievement of the world's greatest playwright. It has been performed and translated more than any other play in the world. It has had more written about it – and has inspired more parodies and spin-offs -- than any other literary work. Its famous “To be or not to be” is the most quoted phrase in the English language. *Hamlet* has inspired 26 ballets, six operas and dozens of musical works. There have been more than 45 movie versions, including those by Laurence Olivier, Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh.

*Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play. Uncut, it would take between four and a half and five hours to perform. Hamlet himself has 1,530 lines -- more than any other Shakespearean character.

Three different texts of *Hamlet* were published in Shakespeare's time. *The Revenge of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* was entered in the Stationer's Register in 1603 and is now known as the First Quarto. It is considered to have been a pirated edition, assembled from the memories of actors, and is full of inaccuracies. A second Quarto appeared in 1604. Believed to have been printed from Shakespeare's own manuscript, it was inscribed: “*newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect Coppie.*” This version is the source of most modern editions. A revised, cut, version of the Second Quarto appeared in the First Folio of 1623. This version is believed to have been revised from a prompt book or actor's copy of the script, since the lines that have been cut are literary rather than dramatic.

### **Setting and Period**

Shakespeare's play takes place in Denmark in pre-Viking times. Some scholars locate the story during the time of King Canute (1014-1035). Our production follows the traditional Elizabethan-inspired staging, with minimal set and elaborate costuming. The thrust stage will be used in our newly renovated theatre.

### **Origins and Sources**

The story of *Hamlet* has no basis in historical events. Shakespeare's source, referred to by scholars as the “*Ur-Hamlet*”, was a lost play popular in London in the 1580s. It was believed to have been written by Thomas Kyd, who based it on a tale in François Belleforest's collection *Histoires Tragiques* (1580). That story was derived in turn from a ninth-century saga about a pre-Viking prince called Amleth.

The saga was recorded by Danish monk Saxo Grammaticus in his *Chronicles of the Danish Realm*, written around 1200 and first published in 1514. The word “amleth” means “dimwit” or “simpleton” -- a reference to the prince's feigned madness, which he assumed to protect himself from his uncle who killed his father. Feigned madness was a popular theme in Icelandic and Viking folk tales.

Some aspects of the play -- including its gloomy, introspective hero, its ghost urging revenge, its treacherous horrors and its violence -- belong to a tradition of revenge plays that can be traced back to Seneca, the first-century Roman playwright, whose complete works had been translated into English in 1571.

[Adapted with permission from materials originally prepared for the Stratford Festival's Education Department.]

## ***Hamlet -- Plot Synopsis***

After the death of his beloved father King Hamlet, a grief-stricken Prince Hamlet returns home from his studies in Wittenburg to the Danish court at Elsinore. Hamlet senior's brother, Claudius, has assumed the old king's place in more ways than one -- as ruler of Denmark and as a second husband to Gertrude, Hamlet's mother--with less than two months having passed since the king's death. The prince, profoundly disturbed by the shocking speed of these events, struggles to find meaning in his radically altered world.

The old king's ghost tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius and exhorts him to kill Claudius in revenge; Hamlet vows to think of nothing else, but his restless intellect soon plunges him into uncertainty about the rightness of the deed he's sworn to do. He comes up with a plan to act as if he is mad to conceal his true intentions from the new king while he seeks concrete proof of his guilt.

Hamlet had shown a romantic interest in Ophelia, but her father, Polonius, intervened, insisting she reject the prince's attentions. Hamlet's subsequent odd behaviour, especially with Ophelia, leads Polonius to conclude that he has been driven mad for want of her love. Claudius distrusts his step-son and sends to Wittenburg for two of his friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, hoping they will get Hamlet to reveal his true state of mind.

Self-doubting and guilt-ridden about his failure to act on his vow of revenge, Hamlet seizes on the opportunity presented by the visit of a band of traveling players and has them reenact the death of the old king in front of the new. Claudius reacts violently to the play, giving Hamlet his proof and a renewed resolve to act, which he does later that night in his mother's chamber when he mistakes an eavesdropping Polonius for Claudius, killing him.

Hamlet's murderous intentions now revealed, Claudius immediately acts to eliminate him. He sends Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; a secret letter Hamlet's former friends carry will ensure his speedy execution by that country's king. But Hamlet outsmarts his enemies and makes his way back to Denmark, only to find that Ophelia, driven mad by his rejection and her father's murder, has drowned under circumstances that suggest suicide. Laertes, her brother, returns from university in Paris for her funeral. He vows vengeance against Hamlet for the deaths of his father and sister.

Claudius and Laertes plot together against Hamlet, making arrangements for a duel between the young men that isn't what it appears to be: both Laertes's sword and a cup of wine to be offered by the king are poisoned. Hamlet is cut by Laertes's poisoned sword, but winds up exchanging his own sword for it as the duel progresses. Queen Gertrude accidentally drinks the poisoned wine and dies. Hamlet wounds Laertes with the poisoned sword; he reveals the plot and forgives Hamlet for the death of Polonius before he dies. In his last few moments of life Hamlet kills Claudius. Fortinbras, the valiant prince of Norway, is Hamlet's chosen successor to the Danish throne.

## *Hamlet* -- Characters (page 1 of 2)

THERE WILL BE 18 ACTORS IN THIS NAC PRODUCTION OF *HAMLET*, NINE OF WHOM WILL TAKE ON OTHER ROLES IN ADDITION TO BEING MEMBERS OF THE TROUPE OF TRAVELLING PLAYERS.

### **Major Characters: The Older Generation**

**Claudius:** The antagonist of the play and the new king of Denmark. Claudius is the “smiling, damned villain” of the piece, a devious, lustful, and corrupt politician and master manipulator of people and circumstances. Despite the darkness in his soul, his seemingly genuine love for Gertrude and his pangs of conscience over his crimes add a more sympathetic dimension to his personality.

**Gertrude:** The Queen of Denmark and Hamlet’s mother. Gertrude’s secret affair with Claudius, her brother-in-law, culminates in their very public marriage. While Gertrude is a loving mother to Hamlet, her excessive sensuality and desire for social status motivate her immoral behaviour.

**Polonius:** Lord Chamberlain of the Danish court and counselor to King Claudius. Polonius is the suspicious and controlling father of Ophelia and Laertes. He is a self-important, rather bumbling schemer and Claudius’ chief spy against Hamlet.

**The Ghost:** The spirit of King Hamlet, the prince’s murdered father. The Ghost calls upon Hamlet to avenge his murder by killing Claudius, his uncle/step-father/king, but the true origin of this spirit is never made clear. Hamlet fears it may have been sent by the devil to manipulate him into performing an evil act. Shakespeare is said to have played this role in the first production of *Hamlet*.

### **Major Characters: The Younger Generation**

**Hamlet:** The protagonist of the play and prince of Denmark. He is around 30 years old when the play opens. Hamlet is the natural son of Queen Gertrude and the recently deceased old king from whom he takes his name. As a result of his mother’s hasty remarriage to Claudius, her former brother-in-law, Hamlet’s former uncle is now also his step-father and the new king. Hamlet’s keen wit, intellectual gifts, and natural tendency to question things make him an ideal candidate for the studies he has pursued at university in Wittenburg, but the events that bring him back home to Elsinore Castle have left him cynical and embittered.

**Horatio:** Hamlet’s one true friend and trusted ally. They attended university in Wittenburg together. He has a calm, skeptical, and dispassionate outlook that helps to balance Hamlet’s intellectual and emotional excesses. Hamlet entrusts him with the task of telling his story to the world after his death.

## *Hamlet* -- Characters (page 2 of 2)

### **Major Characters: The Younger Generation** (continued)

**Ophelia:** Polonius' young, beautiful, and emotionally vulnerable daughter, sister to Laertes and Hamlet's love interest until he ruthlessly rejects her. Dutiful and obedient, Ophelia passively accepts her father's and brother's commands to reject Hamlet's advances. She allows herself to be used as bait in the trap Polonius lays to spy on Hamlet. Her madness and subsequent death fuel her brother's desire to take revenge on Hamlet.

**Laertes:** Son of Polonius and brother of Ophelia. Laertes' rash and action-oriented approach to seeking revenge against Hamlet in the last acts of the play contrasts sharply with Hamlet's brooding hesitancy over killing Claudius. In this way Laertes is a far more typical revenge tragedy figure than Hamlet.

**Fortinbras:** The young prince of Norway. His father, King Fortinbras, was slain by Hamlet's father in one-on-one combat on the day Hamlet was born. His fate is parallel to Hamlet's in that both have had their rightful place on the throne of their respective countries usurped by uncles. A military man of action whose name means "strength in arms," Fortinbras responds to his fate by raising an army and marching off to do battle. He becomes Hamlet's chosen successor to the Danish throne in the final scene of the play.\*

**Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:** Former university friends of Hamlet who are brought to Elsinore by Claudius to try to find out the true cause of Hamlet's apparent madness. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are pawns in a deadly game of political intrigue and revenge that they never fully comprehend.

### **Minor Characters**

**Reynaldo:** servant to Polonius sent by him to spy on Laertes at school in Paris

**Marcellus and Barnardo:** officers of the watch who first see the Ghost

**Francisco, Cornelius:** ambassadors to Norway who divert young Fortinbras impending attack through diplomacy and negotiation

**Osric, Lords, Gentlemen:** courtiers at Elsinore castle

**A Troupe of Players:** actors whose performance at court Hamlet uses to prove to himself Claudius's guilt

**First Clown, a gravedigger, and Second Clown, his assistant:** men who, unbeknownst to Hamlet, are digging a grave for Ophelia

**Captain in the Norwegian army:** tells Hamlet of Fortinbras valour

**Sailor**

**Messenger**

**Priest**

**English Ambassador**

**Lords, Attendants, Sailors, Soldiers, Guards**

\*Fortinbras' appearance in the final moments of the play was cut in film versions directed by Laurence Olivier (1948) and Franco Zeffirelli (1991). This gives Horatio the last word and makes it unclear who will rule over Denmark. Why do you think a director might want to take Fortinbras out of the picture at the end of the play?

## *Hamlet* – Themes (page 1 of 2)

### Revenge

*“If thou didst ever thy dear father love,  
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.”* The Ghost, I.5.23-5

Plays based on acts of personal revenge became very popular in Shakespeare’s day. This form came to be known as the **revenge tragedy**, a genre which most often included some or all of the following:

- the ghost of a murdered family member who demands that the hero take revenge
- the revenger must take the law into his own hands and commit an evil act to get revenge, which inevitably leads to his own death
- scenes involving real and/or pretended madness
- a play within a play
- a graveyard scene
- much violence and many deaths, (thus its alternate name “the tragedy of blood”!)

*Hamlet* contains all of these elements; in fact, the play is structured around a double revenge. Both Hamlet and Laertes seek to avenge a father’s murder, but while Hamlet is the revenger in the main plot, he is the target of Laertes’s revenge in the subplot, and this dual role for Hamlet makes it very difficult for us to tell the good guys from the bad guys. This is one way in which Shakespeare moves well beyond the usual revenge tragedy form in this play. It is completely dominated by his remarkably complex characterization of Hamlet, the brooding and brilliant Prince of Denmark, through whom the traditional form is opened up to become a meditation on the deep mystery at the heart of life. The recent film *Titus* from director Julie Taymor is a very original, stylized treatment of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, a much more conventional work in the revenge tragedy genre.

### Sexual, Moral, and Physical Corruption

*“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”* Marcellus, I.4.90

Actions and images on the theme of corruption abound in *Hamlet*. The relationship between Claudius and Gertrude that so disgusts and enrages Hamlet brings the taint of sexual infidelity and incest to the very center of life in the Danish court. Add to that Claudius’ additional sins of fratricide (killing of one’s brother) and regicide (killing of one’s king), and the moral corruption he embodies becomes truly monstrous. And his corrupting influence is contagious: Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all seem to lose their moral sense while doing his bidding, with fatal consequences for themselves. Hamlet compares the evil Claudius represents to a “*canker in our nature*” that must be removed.

Ideas about the physical decay and corruption of the body also constantly recur in much of the imagery in *Hamlet*. These include poison and its effects; sickness and disease in nature and in the body; maggots/worms breeding and feasting on flesh; and the famous meditation over Yorick’s skull in the graveyard scene.

## ***Hamlet – Themes*** (page 2 of 2)

### **Madness and Melancholy**

*“I am but mad north-north-west.”* Hamlet, II.2.347

Elizabethans found the wild and unpredictable behaviour of the insane entertaining both onstage and off. The infamous asylum St. Mary of Bethlehem (known as Bedlam for short) opened its doors so people in search of a diverting spectacle could pay to view the inmates. Many plays written at this time feature characters whose madness makes it possible for them to say and do outlandish things not normally permitted in polite society.

Hamlet’s “antic disposition” -- his make-believe madness -- is a pose he hides behind while he contemplates his revenge. But his actual state of mind seems terribly unstable at several points throughout the play and it is difficult to know for certain whether or not he ever actually slips over the edge into genuine madness. In a production the actor and director working together would have to make a decision about the extent of Hamlet’s madness. Hamlet does display the classic symptoms of another kind of mental disorder: melancholy, a pessimistic and cynical mindset, a tendency to ruthless self-criticism, depressed mood and persistent thoughts of suicide.

Ophelia’s madness in Act IV, scene 5 is indisputable. Having been given more than she can cope with when her father is murdered by the man she loves, she really does lose touch with reality. Her mad ravings suggest the deeper preoccupations that have claimed her mind: the death of a loved one and the utter thwarting of her longing to have her love for Hamlet returned. While Hamlet merely talks about taking his own life, Ophelia actually does allow her own to slip away while in the grip of the madness to which his actions have driven her.

### **Random Fortune or Divine Master Plan?**

*“There is a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will --”* Hamlet, V.2.10-11

Overwhelmed by his own grief and the apparent triumph of good over evil in this world, Hamlet, for much of the play, feels like a victim of a random, indifferent universe ruled by the whims of fortune. All human actions seem meaningless in a world governed by the perpetual, externally imposed cycle of successes and failures symbolized by the image of the goddess Fortune’s turning wheel in II.2. But Hamlet undergoes a spiritual journey during the course of the play; in Act V he confides in Horatio his belief in the existence of a divine order underlying events in the world, even *“the fall of a sparrow”* (V.2.215). He can accept the necessity of killing Claudius, finally, when he can believe he is acting as the instrument of a divine justice at work in the world, not in senseless and brutal retaliation. Whether Shakespeare himself shared this essentially Christian vision of human destiny is the matter of ongoing critical debate.

## ***Hamlet* -- “Acting” as Thematic Focus**

“...suit the action to the word, the word to the action...” *Hamlet*, III.2.16

The pun was Shakespeare’s favourite figure of speech, and in some ways *Hamlet* is a kind of extended pun on the verb “to act”. **Hamlet’s delay in killing Claudius, his failure to act on behalf of his murdered father and take revenge**, has been called the central problem of the play. There are volumes and volumes of scholarly and critical explanation to account for this delay. Like so much else in the play, it remains open to interpretation. Director Marti Maraden feels that perhaps too much has been made out of the problem of Hamlet’s inaction. His doubt over the Ghost’s veracity and his reluctance to kill Claudius while he is praying would have been completely understandable to an Elizabethan audience.

But “acting” in another sense pervades the world of the play and helps to create the sinister atmosphere of Elsinore Castle. **Many of the characters in *Hamlet* present a false front to others, hiding their true feelings and motives while acting out the role society has assigned them:** Claudius conceals his guilt behind his regal facade; Gertrude retains her place on the throne despite her adultery; Polonius defers to Hamlet’s higher rank while secretly conspiring against him with Claudius (and his son, Laertes, does much the same later in the play); Ophelia loves Hamlet but rejects him and then helps her father spy on him. And even Hamlet, who refuses to mask his grief behind a more socially acceptable exterior when we first see him in I.2, then fakes being mad for most of the play.

To complicate matters further, the play within the play – and Hamlet’s famous advice to the players that precedes it--focuses on **“acting” as an art form built on the idea that the best pretending is that which seems to be the most true-to-life!** But *Hamlet*, like most Elizabethan plays, is filled with conventions and devices that force both actors and audience members to acknowledge just how different the drama onstage is from real life, including:

- **asides** -- short remarks directed by a character to the audience, and unheard by the other characters onstage at the time;
- **soliloquies** -- a speech delivered directly to the audience by a character who believes he or she is alone onstage (there are seven major ones in *Hamlet*);
- **a play-within-a-play** -- turns the characters onstage into an audience watching actors, and confronts the actual audience with the fictional nature of what they are watching.

The NAC production will feature two other common Elizabethan stage conventions that contributed to the self-conscious theatricality of the drama of the period. Boys played all the female roles in Elizabethan theatre, and young actor **Jonathan Koensgen will take on the role of the Player Queen** in this production. Doubling -- having the same actor play multiple characters in the same play -- was standard practice in Shakespeare’s time. This production will make **symbolic use of doubling** by having the actors in the roles of the players take on other roles while retaining an identifying prop or costume piece to remind the audience that they remain, first and foremost, members of the players’ troupe.

## ***Hamlet -- Scenes to Explore*** (page 1 of 2)

### **1. Advice to the Players**

Divide your class into pairs or small groups and assign each a section of the text from the page herein titled **Hamlet's Advice to the Players**. This passage makes an excellent introduction to a lesson on different acting styles and techniques popular in Shakespeare's time. Have each group:

- a) put the text they have into their own words;
- b) suit actions to the words -- work out a gesture or two for their section of text; practice speaking the original text and performing the gesture in unison for in-class presentation;
- c) work out a list of the acting faults Hamlet finds particularly obnoxious and prepare a short scene in the style of an instructional video which illustrates each one;
- d) get a second opinion -- think about the different people who would have heard and responded to this passage when it was first performed onstage in 1600. Work out a scene that demonstrates the plausible reactions of each of the following potential listeners: the players to whom Hamlet is speaking onstage; the groundlings in the audience; the other actors in the show hanging out backstage, including Shakespeare himself lounging around in his ghost costume.

*NB: Heckling, mimicry, and the throwing of small soft objects may be called for.*

### **2. "Get Thee to a Nunnery"**

The true nature of the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is a riddle each successive generation of actors, directors, and critics who work with the play must answer. An in-depth study of the nunnery scene (III.3.8-155) will go a long way to helping your students understand the complexity of the choices that need to be made before a solid interpretation of the relationship can be developed. Approaches to consider include:

- a) **Staging.** Claudius and Polonius have intentionally thrown Ophelia into Hamlet's path in this scene and are spying on them as they interact throughout. While there is no indication of it in the text, many directors and actors have played the scene so that it is clear to the audience that Hamlet realizes he is being spied upon at some point. At what point would it make sense for this to occur? What effect would it have on your understanding of Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia? What happens if the scene is played in a way that makes it obvious that Ophelia knows that Hamlet knows?
- b) **Motivation.** Why do the characters behave as they do in this scene? Is Ophelia a willing accomplice of her father and Claudius, concerned for Hamlet's sanity and the safety of those around him? Or is she the reluctant betrayer of the man she passionately loves, driven to act against her own wishes by her own fear and sense of duty? And what about Hamlet? Does he love the woman he so cruelly berates in this scene? What motivates his behaviour?

## ***Hamlet -- Scenes to Explore*** (page 2 of 2)

### **b) Motivation** (continued)

Director **Marti Maraden** offers the following insights:

*“I played Ophelia opposite Neil Munro in the first production John Wood did as the former artistic director here at the NAC. On the first day of rehearsals Neil Munro said ‘Hamlet doesn’t love Ophelia’. And the director agreed with him. Two weeks into rehearsal Neil walked in when we were about to start the nunnery scene and said ‘Hamlet loves Ophelia’.*

*“Then I played the role again at Stratford opposite both Nicholas Pennell and Richard Monette, who were playing Hamlet on alternate nights. All three scenes were totally different, depending on the actor playing Hamlet. Nicky Pennell’s version of Hamlet made him more mentally cruel to Ophelia in the scene. The violence was more in the mind. Richard’s Hamlet was more physical; he actually struck Ophelia. In Richard’s version Ophelia was trapped on stage while Hamlet performed the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy. The scene can be performed very, very differently. My inclination is to say that Hamlet has genuinely loved Ophelia. There’s no question in my mind that Ophelia deeply loves Hamlet in a very vulnerable way.*

*“There are a number of ways to think about how Hamlet responds to Ophelia. One is that he loves her but he is so revolted by his mother’s conduct that it starts to colour his view of all women. Another way is to track Hamlet’s disillusionment with the duplicity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his friends. He already knows before the scene begins that Polonius plays two-faced games. He knows ‘something’s rotten in the state of Denmark’; and it has a lot to do with political and moral corruption. He sees this--and he knows how powerless Ophelia is. He realizes that no one can be trusted.*

*“Another possibility might be that he really does love her, but it is through her that he can convey the madness he is playing to Claudius and Polonius. Sometimes circumstances compel us to hurt even the ones we love. But he also may love her in a way that makes him want to hurt her so that she will break away from him. He has to distance himself from her, for her own protection. With a murdered father and a murderous uncle, it’s no time for Hamlet to be in love.”*

**c) Rehearsal exercises.** Here are three ways to explore the nuances of meaning in the scene:

**i. Bookend scenes.** Treat the nunnery scene itself as the middle in a series of scenes depicting the beginning, middle, and end of the relationship. Imagine the details of the moment when Hamlet first indicated to Ophelia his attraction for her. Create a stage picture (tableau) of that moment. Then create an image of the end of the relationship -- Hamlet returning on his own to Ophelia’s grave. Giving the scene a strong imaginative and emotional context will offer fresh insight into the characters’ motivations.

**ii. Dropping in.** Interrupt a rehearsal of the scene to focus on a particular word, like ‘father’. Give the actor who speaks the word a chance to run a free association on it for thirty seconds or so. Encourage the actor to keep the ideas flowing for the entire time. Then, consider how the personal associations and connections the actor makes with the word effect his or her understanding of the character. NB: This can also be used in an English classroom as a timed writing exercise during the discussion of a scene.

**iii. Interior monologue.** Write out the thoughts running through your character’s head while they are speaking the lines in the scene. Or have two actors read the scene line by line while two others speak the characters’ thoughts aloud after each line. To introduce an element of Elizabethan stage convention, you may want to consider selecting one or two of these spoken thoughts for each character and have the actors deliver them directly to the audience as asides. How does this change the dynamic of the scene?

**d) Film versions.** Compare and contrast the nunnery scenes in the Olivier and Branagh versions of the play.

## Hamlet's Advice to the Players (III.2.1-36)

1. Speak the speech I pray you as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines.
2. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.
3. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumbshows and noise: I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant; it out-herods Herod: pray you, avoid it.
4. Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature.
5. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.
6. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others.
7. Oh, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably. O, reform it altogether.
8. And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too; though, in the mean time, some necessary question of the play be then to be considered: that's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.

**I had as lief** it would be as agreeable to me that **acquire and beget** if the actors obtain this balance and control in themselves, they will be able to produce it in their speeches **robustious** rough and rude **peri-wig pated** wearing a wig **groundlings** those who stood in the open yard directly in front of the stage, the cheapest part of the theatre **are capable** have the capacity for; can understand; inexplicable; meaningless **Termagant** an imaginary deity supposed to be worshipped by Mohammedans; in a general sense, a violent person **Herod** a ranting tyrant in the medieval biblical cycles **modesty** restraints, limitations, measure **from** away from **mirror** a mirror which sets standards by revealing things not as they seem, but as they really are **the very...pressure** gives an impression of the shape of our times in the clearest detail **come tardy off** done inadequately or imperfectly **unskillful** ignorant or undiscerning **censure** judgment **your allowance** what you will permit or sanction, hence '*your scale of values*' **nature's journeymen** these bad actors must have been made not by God, but by some of Nature's hired men, little better than apprentices (which explains Hamlet's opening to the line '*Not to speak it profanely...*' **abominably** away from the nature of man **necessary question** essential part of the plot. (Notes are from the The New Cambridge Shakespeare edition, edited by Philip Edwards).



## The Nunnery Scene, III.1.88-155 (page 2 of 2)

Hamlet: them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them  
(continued) in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth  
and heaven? We are arrant knaves all, believe none  
of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where's your father?

Ophelia: At home my lord.

Hamlet: Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool  
nowhere but in's own house. Farewell.

Ophelia: Oh help him you sweet heavens!

Hamlet: If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry:  
be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not  
escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go. Farewell. Or if  
thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know well  
enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery go,  
and quickly too. Farewell.

Ophelia: O heavenly powers, restore him!

Hamlet: I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God hath  
given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig,  
you amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures, and  
make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't,  
it hath made me mad. I say we will have no more marriages.  
Those that are married already, all but one shall live, the rest  
shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go. *Exit*

Ophelia: Oh what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!  
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,  
Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite down,  
And I of ladies most deject and wretched,  
That sucked the honey of his music vows,  
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,  
Like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh;  
That unmatched form and feature of blown youth  
Blasted with ecstasy. Oh woe is me  
T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see.

**soft you** restrain yourself, leave off speaking and be cautious **Nymph** semi-divine spirit from mythology, probably used here sarcastically **remembrances** keepsakes, gifts **of so sweet breath composed** may refer to words either spoken or written **Their perfume lost** the sweetness of both the words and the gifts has disappeared because of the unkindness of the giver **honest** chaste, but with obvious ironic double meaning here **your honesty...your beauty** your virtue should not allow your beauty to converse with it **inoculate our old stock** an image from grafting fruit trees; we cannot so engraft a new stem of virtue onto the old sinful trunk as to eradicate all trace of our previous nature **relish** have a touch or tinge **Get thee to a nunnery** 'nunnery' had the slang sense of a brothel, but Hamlet probably means a convent **indifferent honest** moderately virtuous **calumny** slander **monsters** husbands whose wives had been unfaithful were portrayed with horns growing out of their heads **amble** to walk affectedly **make your wantonness your ignorance** pretend that your sexually provocative behaviour is girlish innocence **no more all but one shall live** "live" here means "remain" or "continue", but there is double meaning in the word as it pertains to Hamlet's plan to kill Claudius **glass...form** people shaped themselves and their behaviour after Hamlet's pattern **Th'observed of all observers** looked up to respectfully by all who turn to others for guidance, with an obvious double meaning given that Claudius and Polonius are spying on him here **blown youth** youth in full bloom **ecstasy** madness (The New Cambridge Shakespeare edition, edited by Philip Edwards)

## What to Watch For in *Hamlet*

1. How will this production stage the scenes with **the Ghost**? What kind of lighting, sound/music, costuming, movement, and acting do you expect to see?
2. **Is Tom Rooney's Hamlet ever truly mad?** Watch for a moment when Hamlet's feigned madness crosses over to become the real thing. How will the actor communicate his character's unstable frame of mind to the audience?
3. There are eight deaths in *Hamlet*, not counting the murder of the old king that sets the revenge plot in motion. **How does each character die?** Do any of the characters bring about their own deaths in some way?
4. Watch for the way in which **formal, ceremonial events fail or are left incomplete in the play**: the first royal procession; the play-within-a-play; the burial of Ophelia; and the fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet. What happens in each instance to disrupt the event? Why might Shakespeare have wanted to create this pattern of uncompleted events in *Hamlet*?
5. In Shakespeare's time all the female roles would have been played by boys. Young actor **Jonathan Koensgen plays a female role** -- the Player Queen -- in this production. Does this cross-gender casting have an impact on the way you respond to the play-within-a-play? Hear Jonathan Koensgen talk about what it's like to be a teen working in theatre in an online interview with the NAC's ArtsAlive.Theatre website. As well, students can follow Jonathan's creative process as an actor by checking out his online rehearsals diary at the ArtsAlive.Theatre website. Both the interview and the diary will be available in the new year at <http://www.artsalive.ca/en/eth/actor/interview.html>.
6. The design and staging of the NAC's production of *Hamlet* will take advantage of the **renovations to the Theatre**. The thrust stage will be used, as well as the vomitories\*, which have been reconstructed to improve their alignment with the stage and the auditorium seating. Now the voms and the aisles are angled on diagonal lines with the stage, creating much improved sightlines for audience members during scenes when actors are moving down the aisles and to and from the voms. A diagram of the theatre as it is configured for both thrust stage and proscenium performances follows. A 360° view of the theatre before and after the renovations may be accessed on the NAC web site at <http://www.nac-cna.ca/en/nacfoundation/theatrer renewal/index.html>.
7. As seen in **John Pennoyer's costume designs** for this production, why do you think black is the hands-down favourite choice of designers when it comes to dressing Prince Hamlet? Watch for ways in which costume pieces and props are used symbolically in this production.

\*Vomitory: An auditorium entrance or exit up through banked seating from below. Often abbreviated to Vom. The word dates back to Roman times, and was an architectural feature of coliseums, etc. The name comes from the way people were spewed forth through the openings the voms provided. (This listing is from the excellent glossary of theatre terms Theatrecrafts.com. Copyright © Jon Primrose/Exeter University Drama Department)

## A Split View of the NAC Theatre: Thrust Stage versus Proscenium Stage Set Up

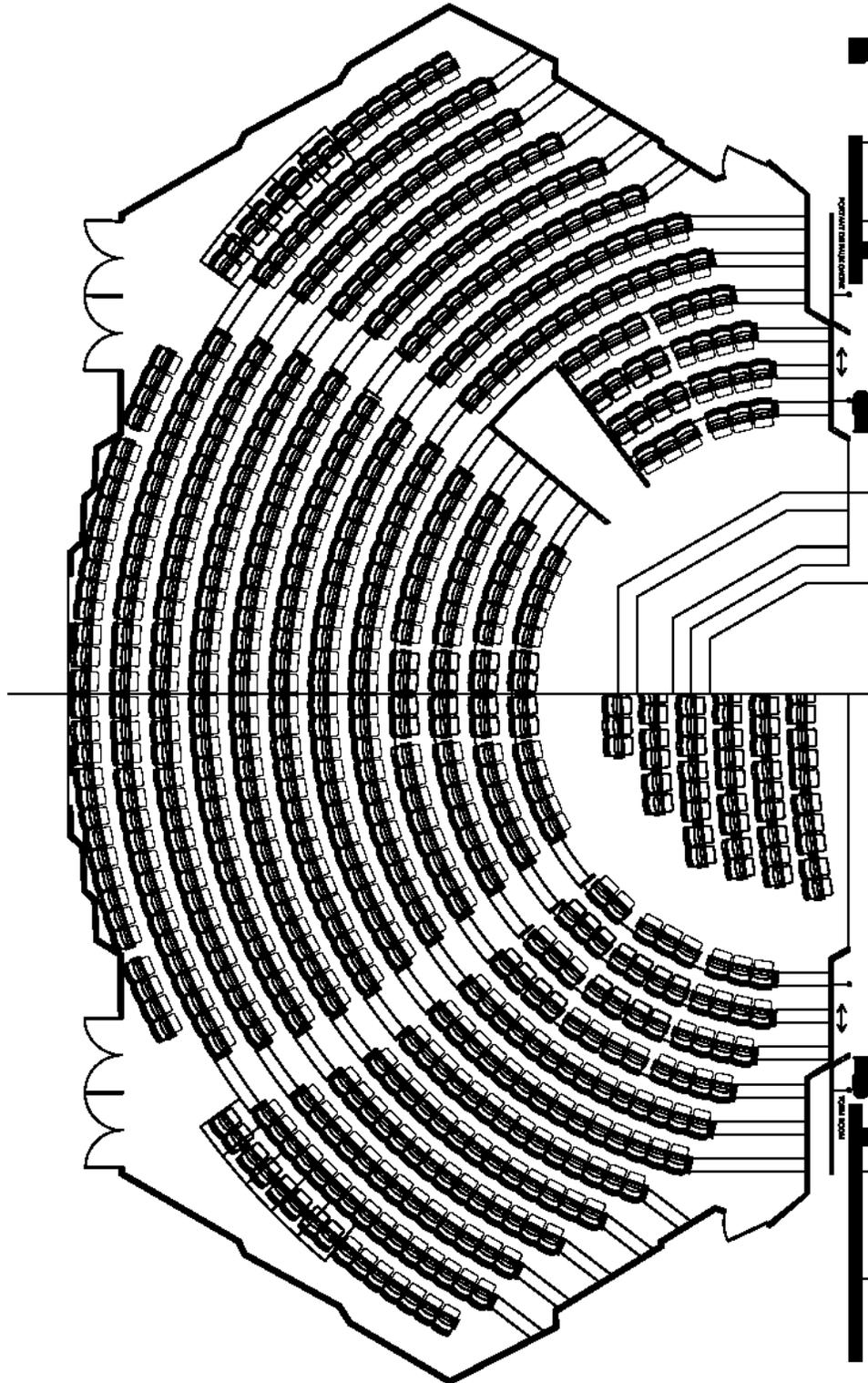
Top Section: Thrust Stage Configuration

Note the Open Vom in the Auditorium

Bottom Section: Proscenium Configuration

Thrust Stage replaced with Orchestra Seating

Voms are Hidden Beneath Seating Area



## *Hamlet* -- Suggested Activities (page 1 of 2)

### 1. Warming Up to *Hamlet*

**Focus:** a fun introduction to the language of the play and to basic interpretation.

Copy the phrases and lines from the *Hamlet -- Famous Quotes* page herein onto a number of cards, leaving out the names of the characters who speak them, and hand out a different card to each student. Ask the students to think about all the possible meanings of the phrase they have received and to experiment with all the possible ways it could be said, trying them as they walk around.

Then divide the students into small groups (4-6 people). Each group's task is to use the lines its members have been given to improvise a short scene, with any setting or characters they like, not necessarily from within the play. Any person can deliver any of the lines, and lines may be split up in any way the students wish, but very little adaptation or addition to the words on the cards is permitted. There can, however, be as much gesture and movement as they wish. Their final scene should make some kind of sense -- as if it were a fragment from a larger play. [Adapted with permission from materials originally prepared for the Stratford Festival's Education Department.]

### 2. Pass the Character

**Focus:** -introduction to stock characters similar to those in *Hamlet*;

-exploring the connection between props/costumes and character.

Bring in a box or bag in which you have assembled the following costume pieces and props: a love letter; a shovel; a crown; a small bottle marked "Poison"; a garland of flowers; a skull; a white sheet; a sword; and a set of prayer beads. Make sure your students have what they need to get their responses down on paper before you let them see what you have brought in. As you take an object out, tell them what it is and give them 30 seconds to write down everything they can think of about the person to whom the object belongs.

When all of the objects have been introduced, divide the class into small groups (3-6 people) and assign one or two objects to each. Working together, the members of each group must come up with a detailed description of the character they associate with the object they have been given, including his or her occupation, social class, historical era and leisure pursuits. As well, the group must be prepared to show the rest of the class how the character walks and talks.

When each group has had the chance to teach the class about the characters they have created, including how to walk and talk like them, you are ready to improvise two-minute scenes with any three of them (and their props) onstage. Take suggestions for locations in which to set the scene and try different combinations of these characters each time. At any point the action may be frozen and the command, "Pass the character!" given. The actors must then exchange props/characters and continue with the scene in the new role.

## *Hamlet* -- Suggested Activities (page 2 of 2)

### 3. Where's My Line?

**Focus:** -to become familiar with the major soliloquies in *Hamlet*;  
-finding meaning in the text in a non-threatening, hands-on way.

Divide the class into groups (5-6 people) and give each group a different soliloquy from *Hamlet*, cut into sections so that each group member has one piece of text, randomly distributed. The students do not show their texts to one another but must arrange themselves into the "right" order so that they make sense of the speech, assisted only by the speaking of the lines. The whole speeches are read to the rest of the class and compared with Shakespeare's text. [Adapted with permission from materials originally prepared for the Stratford Festival's Education Department.]

### 4. Dumbshows

**Focus:** -exploring alternate dramatic forms;  
-learning about key aspects of plot in *Hamlet* in a hands-on way.

The Elizabethan dumbshow was a dramatic form that used gestures, facial expressions and movement set to music to tell a simple story--but no dialogue; the shows were "dumb" in the sense that no speaking was permitted. Divide the class into small groups (3-6 people) and have them develop and perform a dumbshow set to music of their choice based on one of the following situations drawn from events in *Hamlet*: a king is murdered by his own brother while he sleeps; the widow at a funeral becomes the bride at a wedding; a father's ghost appears to a son and tells him shocking news; a young girl is brutally rejected by the man she loves and loses her mind; a funeral is interrupted when two enemies quarrel at the grave; a duel between two young men is rigged in favour of one of them, but the plan backfires.

### 5. Collecting a Character

**Focus:** -a more experiential and sensory approach to interpreting character;  
-laying the foundation for an understanding of the work of the designers.

Have your students create collections/anthologies to express their ideas about essential aspects of one of the characters in *Hamlet*. The project could include some or all of the following: poems; songs or instrumental music; sounds; still images -- drawings or photos, on their own or in a collage; an excerpt from a book or article; a colour scheme; fabrics; abstract patterns; a scent or smell. Have them explain how each item in the collection fits in with their interpretation of their chosen character.

### 6. What the Gravedigger Saw

**Focus:** -exploring alternate perspectives on the events and characters;  
-building the inner life of less developed characters.

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and the movie of same name, present a re-telling of *Hamlet* from the perspective of these relatively minor characters. Improvise scenes where an event in the play is retold from the perspective of a minor character, e.g. one of the players recounts the time he performed at Elsinore castle; a maid tells about the first time Ophelia received a love letter from Hamlet; the assistant gravedigger gives his account of the outlandish goings-on surrounding the burial of Ophelia.

[For some specific curriculum expectations satisfied by these activities, see pp.17 and 18 of the NAC Study Guide on *Arms and the Man* at [http://www.nac-cna.ca/en/allaboutthenac/publications/arms\\_guide.pdf](http://www.nac-cna.ca/en/allaboutthenac/publications/arms_guide.pdf)]

## ***Hamlet -- Famous Quotes***

*A little more than kin and less than kind!* Hamlet; I.1

*O that this too, too solid flesh would melt...* Hamlet, I.2

*Frailty, thy name is woman!* Hamlet, I.2

*This above all else: to thine own self be true.* Polonius, I.3

*Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.* Marcellus, I.4

*The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!* Hamlet, I.5

*... brevity is the soul of wit.* Polonius, II.2

*Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.* Polonius, II.2

*...there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.* Hamlet, II.2

*What a piece of work is a man!* Hamlet, II.2

*O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!* Hamlet, II.2

*The play's the thing  
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.* Hamlet, II.2

*To be or not to be, that is the question.* Hamlet, III.1

*Speak the speech, I pray you...* Hamlet, III.2

*O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven...* Claudius, III.3

*The lady doth protest too much methinks.* Gertrude, III.2

*How all occasions do inform against me,  
And spur my dull revenge!* Hamlet, IV.4

*There's such divinity doth hedge a king...* Claudius, IV.5

*Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio.* Hamlet, V.1

*There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.* Hamlet, V.2

*Now cracks a noble heart.* Horatio, V.2

## **Hamlet -- Designer John Pennoyer Comments on Costumes**

### **Period and Style**

*"This Hamlet is Elizabethan (a radical notion these days) because the director wanted it that way. I was of course happy to agree and have added my own twist to the classic concept of Elizabethan for financial reasons as well as creative ones. Museum style in this period is so expensive it's unimaginable. The Tudors and their descendants were the original conspicuous consumers -- and labour, if it was paid at all, was considerably cheaper then."*

### **Selecting the Colours**

*"The colours are based on blood; all shades of fresh to dried and blackened blood are used. The blood ties and resulting spilled blood are the basis for this choice. There is also a generous slathering of gold throughout. The Players are in a more neutral whitish palette for contrast and to reduce choices."*

### **An Alternate Approach**

*"I designed for a production of Hamlet once before. Robin Phillips directed that show, which was mounted by Stratford in 1976 and later played at the NAC. Robin's concept accented the student's point of view. Hamlet is after all an undergrad at Wittenberg. He wore a black student's gown a good deal of the time as did Rosencrantz, Horatio and other school chums."*

*"The Court was dressed in monotonous grey to black pinstripe businessmen's suiting further emphasizing the young prince's alienation from the adult world. The shape of the costumes was Renaissance to Elizabethan."*

### **Inspiration**

*It comes from the text, always.*

## A Production Who's Who

A production of a play in the professional theatre represents the collaborative efforts of many, many people, each with a specific job to do. The combined talents of the following people made this production of *Hamlet* possible:

### CREATIVE TEAM

Director:	Marti Maraden
Set/Costume Design:	John Pennoyer
Lighting Design:	Louise Guinand
Original Music/Sound Design:	Marc Desormeaux
Movement Direction:	Jo Leslie
Voice and Breath Specialist:	Louis Spritzer
Fight Director:	John Stead
Assistant to the Director:	Rachel Scott-Mignon

### CAST

starring Tom Rooney as **Hamlet** with

Lucianus/Servant/Courtier:	Ric Brown
1st Player/Grave Digger	Douglas Campbell
Horatio:	Ben Carlson
Barnardo/A Player-Musician/Sailor/ Clown/Courtier:	Todd Duckworth
Claudius:	Victor Ertmanis
Laertes:	Alessandro Juliani
Player Queen/Courtier/As cast:	Jonathan Koensgen
Player/Reynaldo/Guard/Fortinbras:	Paul Lemelin
Cornelius/Guard/Priest/Courtier:	David L. McCallum
Player/Osric:	Steven McCarthy
Rosencrantz/Francisco:	Patrick McManus
Ophelia:	Michelle Monteith
Marcellus/Courtier/Norwegian Captain:	Paul Rainville
Gertrude:	Fiona Reid
Polonius:	David Schurmann
Guildenstern:	Graeme Somerville
Ghost/Player King/Guard/Courtier:	Robin Wilcock

### STAGE MANAGEMENT TEAM

Stage Manager:	Laurie Champagne
Assistant Stage Manager:	Jane Vanstone Osborn
Apprentice Stage Manager:	Matthew Byrne

### NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE ([www.nac-cna.ca](http://www.nac-cna.ca))

Artistic Director, English Theatre:	Marti Maraden
Managing Director, English Theatre:	Victoria Steele
Production Director:	Alex Gazalé
Publicist & Media Relations Coordinator:	Laura Denker

## Resources

### Selected Movie Versions

1948. Directed by and starring Laurence Olivier. 155 minutes.  
1964. Richard Burton as Hamlet, directed by John Gielgud, filmed during a live performance on Broadway. 206 minutes  
1969. Nicol Williamson as Hamlet, directed by Tony Richardson. 114 minutes  
1979. Derek Jacobi as Hamlet, directed by Rodney Bennet for the BBC, Time Life Television as part of the series, "The Shakespeare Plays". 150 minutes  
1990. Mel Gibson as Hamlet, directed by Franco Zeffirelli. 135 minutes  
1996. Directed by and starring Kenneth Branagh. 238 minutes, with a 20 minute intermission  
2000. Ethan Hawke as Hamlet, directed by Michael Almereyda, set in present day New York. 111 minutes  
An excellent, detailed comparison of six of the above film versions can be found at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~mcniffpt/project/hamlet.html> Also noteworthy is *The Great Hamlets* -- Some of the greatest actors of the 20th century talk about their interpretations of Hamlet, including John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Richard Burton and Nicol Williamson. A 2-part series, each 56 minutes in length. More information available at [www.films.com/Films\\_Home/item.cfm?s=1&bin=6543](http://www.films.com/Films_Home/item.cfm?s=1&bin=6543)

### Print Resources

Adams, Richard and Gerard Gould. *Into Shakespeare: an introduction to Shakespeare through drama*. London: Wardlock Educational Publishers, 1977.  
Boyce, Charles. *Shakespeare A to Z: An Essential Reference to His Plays, His Poems, His Life and Times, and More*. New York: Roundtable Press, 1990.  
Gibson, Rex. *Teaching Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.  
McEvoy, Sean. *Shakespeare: The Basics*. New York: Routledge, 2000.  
*Shakespeare Set Free: Hamlet and Henry IV, Part 1*. Washington Square Press, 1995.  
For a nominal fee, **The Stratford Festival** offers information packages to teachers on all of Shakespeare's plays, including background information on plays and playwrights, supplementary material based on each play's production history at the Stratford Festival and, in many cases, practical teaching strategies. Teachers may also borrow slide packages for many of Shakespeare's plays for a period of 30 days. For more information, visit <http://www.stratfordfestival.ca/season/forschools.cfm>

### On the Web

-Amy Ulen's *Shakespeare High* site is an excellent place to visit for practical teaching ideas, chat rooms, and great links. <http://www.shakespearemag.com/fall96/hamlet.asp>  
-Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet <http://www.edu/Library/shake.htm>  
-Shakespeare's Life and Times <http://web.uvic.ca/shakespeare/Library/SLTnoframes/intro/introsubj.html>  
-TheatreCrafts.com--a very comprehensive glossary of theatre terms [www.theatrecrafts.com/](http://www.theatrecrafts.com/)  
-ArtsAlive.Theatre.ca <http://www.artsalive.ca/en/eth/index.html>  
-Theatre Ontario--a very rich site with many useful links for teachers; the 'How to Write a Play Review' link is [http://theatreontario.org/content/play\\_reviews.htm](http://theatreontario.org/content/play_reviews.htm)

### Programming

a) **The NAC offers several programs of interest to National Capital Region teachers and students:**  
-**The Skills Shop**—puts theatre professionals and students together for hands-on, in-school, group workshops.  
-**Workshops Plus!**—offers pre-student matinee workshops that allow for a full-day visit to the NAC.  
-**Teachers Play!**—offers one- and two-day workshops for teachers in areas like: Lighting, Voice, Movement, Acting Technique, and Design. See the *ArtsAlive* publication, available through the NAC, for more information, or contact Janet Irwin at (613) 236-2502.  
b) **The Playwrights in Schools** program offered by the **Playwrights Guild of Canada** ([www.playwrightsguild.ca](http://www.playwrightsguild.ca)) makes it possible, for a nominal fee, for playwrights to visit your class to do a reading, a workshop, or a chat about their background. A brochure on the program is available from PGC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor—54 Wolseley Street, Toronto ON, M5A 1A5 (416) 703-0201.