William Shakespeare’s
Hamlet

Directors
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Designers
Kate Foley & Benn Isacksen
Directors’ Note

William Shakespeare’s Hamlet is perhaps the most well-known and frequently performed play in the history of the theatre. However, we have chosen to stage the classic drama in a way that it has likely never before been performed, and a way that will certainly make you reconsider what you actually know about the play. Our production of Hamlet takes place in the small town of Denmark, South Carolina during the cocaine epidemic of the 1980’s and 1990’s in a crack house called “Elsinore.”

The original idea for Hamlet in a crack house came somewhat out of the blue, but we realized very quickly that it works, really makes sense, and adds a whole new dimension to the play. In our fictionalized version of the real city of Denmark, South Carolina, the illegal drug trade is the primary source of economy, and Elsinore is at the top of the food chain. Claudius kills his brother King Hamlet so he can run the house and sleep with Hamlet’s wife Gertrude. The ghost of King Hamlet is a hallucination seen while Prince Hamlet, Horatio, and the guards are under the influence of drugs. Hamlet’s and Ophelia’s madness can be attributed to drug overdoses. Everything fits, and suddenly, without changing so much as a word of the original Shakespearean text, we are telling a completely new story.

Productions of Hamlet often strive to pull the play into a modern context. However, these productions consistently show us the exact same Hamlet, but with modernized costumes and set pieces. Setting Hamlet in a crack house allows us to bring something entirely new to the story, and even to the characters themselves. In our staging of the play, “revenge tragedy” becomes an unimportant theme. Our version instead brings original and contemporary themes to the forefront: irrational and violent struggles for power. Family values and personal relationships. Incest. Drug abuse. Murder. Hamlet becomes less about revenge and more about real and serious problems that are alive in the present. The traditional becomes edgy, and the classic, controversial. Even the characters themselves drastically change in this setting. If Ophelia’s madness can be attributed to drug overdose, is she still a sympathetic character? If Laertes returns to Denmark as the one who was able to escape and succeed, and Hamlet is a cocaine addict obeying the commands of a hallucination, who is the real protagonist? And again, all of this is done without even a punctuation mark changed from Shakespeare’s original text.

Hamlet has survived for so many years because of its ability to adapt to any culture or time period. By setting Hamlet in a crack house in South Carolina, we are taking this concept even further. Our production does not simply provide a modern context for a play that is otherwise difficult for modern audiences to relate to. It provides a relevant and vital commentary on issues that people of Shakespeare’s time could have never imagined.

Plot Summary

The action of Hamlet takes place at Elsinore Castle in Denmark, where Claudius reigns as king after the mysterious death of King Hamlet. The play opens with the two guards seeing a ghost of the late king. Prince Hamlet, King Hamlet’s son, is informed of the ghost and comes to see it himself. With Prince Hamlet present, the ghost speaks for the first time, revealing Claudius as his murderer. King Hamlet commands that Prince Hamlet get revenge on Claudius for murdering the King and stealing his wife, Gertrude. Though Hamlet initially agrees, he soon questions whether this ghost can be trusted, and whether Claudius is at fault. He then begins questioning the purpose of life itself – is it even worth the struggle to live? Hamlet slowly descends into a state of depression, and, eventually, madness.

Hamlet finally concocts a plan to determine if Claudius is guilty. He and a group of players put on a play that directly mirrors Claudius’ murder of King Hamlet. If Claudius does not react, he must be innocent, but if he has a strong negative reaction, he is guilty. When Claudius reacts to the play with immense anger, Hamlet is convinced that the ghost spoke the truth. Hamlet rushes to his mother, Gertrude, who is now married to Claudius, to tell her what he has learned. While speaking to her, he hears a noise behind a curtain and Hamlet strikes at the source of the sound, killing who he thinks is Claudius. When he draws back the curtain, he realizes he has actually killed the Lord Chamberlain Polonius, who had been spying on the conversation hoping to confirm his suspicion that Hamlet’s madness was the result of his love for Polonius’s daughter, Ophelia.

The murder of Polonius sends Ophelia into madness. She is unable to bear the grief and eventually drowns herself in a river. Laertes, Polonius’s son who had been away from the country, hears of the murder and returns to Denmark seeking revenge. Claudius, now afraid that Hamlet is dangerous, comes up with a plan to kill the prince. Claudius organizes a duel between Laertes and Hamlet, which Laertes happily agrees to, as he hopes to kill the murderer of his father. Claudius poisons the end of Laertes’s blade so that even the smallest scratch will be fatal. As a backup, he poisons a drink to offer Hamlet as a congratulatory gesture if he is successful.

At the duel, Gertrude mistakenly drinks of the poisoned cup and dies. Laertes wounds Hamlet, thus poisoning him, but Hamlet does not die immediately. Laertes is then wounded by his own blade, and before his death reveals that the king is behind this murderous scheme. Hamlet kills Claudius with the same blade, and then finally dies himself from the poison. Only Horatio, Hamlet’s friend who was present at the first sighting of the ghost, remains to explain the truth about King Hamlet. Hamlet is carried off as a hero, more revered in death than he could ever be in life.
**Themes**

**CONSIDERED TO BE ONE OF SHAKESPEARE’S GREATEST WORKS,**

*Hamlet* surpasses preceding revenge tragedies by the immense detail and apprehension delivered by its themes of obsession, death, and vengeance. Hamlet’s inability to take action and his meditative tendencies begin at the very start of the play.

Once the King of Denmark has been slain, Hamlet develops a compulsive fascination with the idea of death, and begins to consider the many forms and faces death reveals as the story unfolds. Initially, the prince reflects upon death’s ethereal condition, such as the ghostly personification of his father. This apparition serves as the incident that invokes Hamlet’s obsession and vengeful cravings in the first place. Hamlet furthermore ponders the meaning behind such a pain-stricken existence as his, and wonders whether or not killing himself would be justified to heaven. "Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing end them?" (3.1.56-59) Though he repeatedly asks that death be delivered, Hamlet worries that taking his own life would send him to Christian hell, a hideously wretched place of eternal pain and suffering.

While concluding this soliloquy, Hamlet determines that no one would suffer through life were they not fearful of what came after it. In the end, Hamlet avoids suicide so as to wreak vengeance upon his treacherous uncle and keep safe from hell’s doorway, though it is this same fear that keeps him from taking instant action. As he observes the rotten remains of decaying corpses within a cemetery, Hamlet considers the more earthly aftermath of the dead, and what is left behind other than sheer bones and dirt. "To what base uses we may return Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till 'a find it stopping a bunghole?" (5.1.189-191). Ultimately, Hamlet hopes that the great mystery behind death and the hereafter will bring him answers on how to seek justice in a world with such indefinite morals. In this way, death is closely tied to the theme of justice, in that it serves as both the cause and solution to Hamlet’s predicament.

**Symbolism**

**ROTTING FLOWERS**

*Larded with sweet flowers
Which bewept to the grave did go
With true-love showers.* (OPHELIA, ACT IV, SCENE V)

The theme of decay is seen in various areas of *Hamlet*. Flowers symbolize basic goodness, the idea of the tendency of nature towards good. The decay of these flowers represent Hamlet’s disillusionment with the world. Flowers also represent the pure idea of femininity. Within Hamlet’s mind, this pure form of femininity is slowly decaying as he witnesses his mother, a major definition of femininity in his life, lose all of her supposed purity when she enters into a relationship with Claudius. Finally, the flowers represent female sexuality. When Ophelia goes mad, she makes a speech about flowers, and the meaning of each of these flowers reflects on sexuality. Ophelia mentions the withering of violets, a flower that represents love. She also gives herself rue, a flower that represents regret, which is Ophelia’s regret towards her love, and possible sexual relationship, with Hamlet. Ophelia also gives away various flowers with meaning varying from distrust to innocence, all of which are associated with sexuality. The decay of these flowers would represent the paradox of sexuality as something destructive rather than creative, a view Hamlet himself takes.

**A CROWNED SKULL**

*That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once:
how the knave jowls it to the ground, as if it were
Cain’s jaw-bone, that did the first murder! It
might be the pate of a politician, which this ass
now o’er-reaching; one that would circumvent God,
might it not?* (HAMELT, ACT V, SCENE 1)

*Hamlet* encompasses not just family drama, but political drama as well. The crown is the universal symbol of political power. The skull signifies fatality. These two symbols combined create the idea of the inability of those with power to escape death. Hamlet makes a speech concerning this in Act V, Scene I, upon finding Yorick’s skull. The crown on a skull also symbolizes the dangers of power. The majority of the characters with any sort of power within *Hamlet* are murdered. The skull once again refers to the theme of decay that is seen throughout the play. The crowned skull also represents the political inefficiency of those in power, meaning that the political leaders assist the country as much as a corpse would if in their position. Finally, the crowned skull signifies that in spite of man’s claims of power, death is the ultimate king, and that man’s power is merely an illusion.
A BOOK SPATTERED WITH BLOOD
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix’d with baser matter: yes, by heaven!
(HAMLET, ACT I, SCENE IV)

The book itself represents Hamlet's mind. The blood spattered on the pages symbolize the violence and madness that have marred Hamlet's mind. Hamlet is a lifelong scholar, still attending college at the age of 30. He receives a great deal of his ideas about mortality and nature from his books. The book could also signify the history of Denmark, with the blood forever staining it with violence. The blood spattered on the book signifies Hamlet taking action on the suggestion of his books. It also suggests that Hamlet has to some degree forsaken his books in favor of action. Finally, the book with the blood spattered on it signifies that while Hamlet is not in the direct position of authority, that of the writer, he is determined to permanently alter these actions, to help "write the book," through any means necessary, even if it means writing in his own, or others' blood.

Designers' Note

OUR FINAL DESIGN PROJECT WAS A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT between two designers and an English class. Each group was given one of three Shakespearean classics: Hamlet, Twelfth Night, or The Merchant of Venice. Our group was assigned Hamlet, the tragedy about a Dutch prince's preoccupation with death as he plots to avenge his father's murder. Our English group reinterpreted the classic text into a modern setting: a crack house in South Carolina. Though it seems an unlikely setting, the context worked surprisingly well with its overarching themes of death, madness and violence. Our task as designers was to create a poster and program cover that blended traditional elements with the modern interpretation.

Kate: My early contributions to the poster involved several sketches varying from simple to complex (more like a Hollywood film poster than the minimalist angle I wanted). Once I started putting things together on the computer, however, my ideas took on a new direction. I pulled some grunge textures from old files I had saved on my desktop, playing with dark and light overlays to see what was effective. I seriously avoided using a skull at first. I thought it seemed too cliché, since it is used in nearly every interpretation of the play. However, when combined with the crack house setting, I eventually realized it was so appropriate that I just had to include it. So I made it part of the background instead of the primary element, and added some red to the title to draw attention to that instead. It was unlike anything I had originally sketched, but I liked the outcome much better.

Ben: Having a very different design background and style than Kate, I was hesitant to fully indulge in my usual design characteristics and instead made it a point in my thinking to be accepting to an alternate design style. In my first two designs, I played with the contrast of black smoke on white paper, and white smoke on black paper. As stated before, our group staged this version of Hamlet in a crack house, and while I had wanted to abstain from the cliché skull used in every other Hamlet poster, our proposed setting practically begged for a skull—representing the death and insanity of both Hamlet and crack cocaine. Smoke was used to propose the new setting of the show as well as the “ghosts” of Hamlet’s life.

Ultimately, Kate and I combined her use of a textured background and almost transparent skull with my use of smoke as a flowing and strong presence. For the program, we added a smoking crack pipe onto the back cover and faded it out as to not draw too much attention to it, while still maintaining it’s glorified existence in the show. At the end of the pipe is a very faint crown, juxtapositioned ironically as “the king of crack” which could also be inferred as “the king of death.” Overall, this collaboration went very, very well, and the final product is much more invoking and successful than we had first imagined.
**This program** and the corresponding theater poster were produced as part of an interdisciplinary collaboration between students in two *Shakespeare in Context* classes and two *Graphic Design Two* classes at Drake University in Spring 2011. The program is typeset in Chaparral Pro.

**This project** was conceived and organized by Sarah Hogan (Department of English) and Hilary Williams (Department of Art & Design).
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