WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S

Hamlet

DIRECTORS
Cecily Pincsak, Greg Schiedler, & Kathy Wiseman

DESIGNERS
Laura Dixon & Cecily Pincsak
Directors’ Note

Hamlet is widely recognized as one of William Shakespeare’s darker tragedies, so when we were initially discussing how to stage the play we decided to take a slightly more humorous approach to the story. It is not intended to be satirical by any means, but we tried to lighten up some of the darker lines in one of the play’s most somber scenes through the actions and reactions of our actors. We also understand that Shakespearean language can be hard to comprehend for a modern audience, so if the actions of the actors do not immediately grab viewers’ interest there is a chance they will become confused or bored very quickly. The best way to catch an audience’s attention can often be through the use of humor. We chose to stage this play the way we have because, while Hamlet is a classic revenge tragedy, its dark and tragic nature can be alienating to some audiences. Perhaps overshadowed by its own nature, Hamlet showcases some of Shakespeare’s best writing and most memorable characters. Each character has some distinct trait that every person in the audience can relate to, despite the age of the play. The story revolves around the timeless plot of a son revenging his father, but unlike many similar revenge tales, Hamlet stands out because there is no clear hero or perfect resolution for any of its characters. It drives home the idea that pursuing revenge—even if it is justified—will affect everyone, including those not directly involved. Vengefully taking another’s life will simply spark an endless cycle of bloodshed—even the original avenger will become a victim of his own violence in the end. Shakespeare demonstrates this circle of vengeance very clearly; he shows what could realistically happen, and it is this clear and well-penned portrayal that continuously attracts audiences to watch and read the play. This is why we chose to stage this story in modern times: no matter when or where the action is set, the integrity of the original work will survive. Hamlet is a timeless story that can be seen and performed over and over again without ever losing its appeal or message. We hope our audience will recognize the true reality of revenge killing and the harsh consequences that can—and will—happen, while still finding entertainment in some of our more humorous twists.

Plot Summary

Shakespeare’s Hamlet tells the tale of young prince Hamlet of Denmark, whose father has recently died under suspicious circumstances after which his uncle, Claudius, takes the throne. Hamlet is still grieving over his father’s sudden death and is upset that his mother, Gertrude, could so easily forget her husband and marry the dead king’s own brother. His sneaking suspicions about Claudius’s involvement in the king’s death are confirmed when Hamlet comes face-to-face with the ghost of his dead father, who informs his son that Claudius murdered him. Faced with this heartbreaking knowledge, Hamlet begins to plot against Claudius to take revenge as his father instructed. Paranoid and unsure of whom he should trust, Hamlet chooses to depend on and trust one man only: his closest friend, Horatio. Others who are drawn into the feud between Hamlet and Claudius include a family close to the royals, consisting of Polonius and his two children, Laertes and Ophelia. They are all directly affected by the results of both Claudius’ and Hamlet’s actions. Ophelia is in love with Hamlet, and while Hamlet does appear to have feelings for her as well, he is forced to manipulate those feelings in order to exact his revenge. Polonius is an advisor and ally of Claudius and becomes a victim of Hamlet’s increasing bloodlust. After her father’s death, Ophelia descends into madness and eventually drowns herself in a river. Laertes is left confused and grief-stricken after what befalls his family, and becomes easy to manipulate in the impending clash between Claudius and Hamlet. Despite its rare happier qualities, including the loyalty and friendship between Hamlet and Horatio and the brief love story of Ophelia and Hamlet, the play presents a dark and brooding story filled with betrayal, turmoil, madness, and tragedy. Death treads in the footsteps of nearly every major character, and not a single player is left untouched by its constant presence.

Theme

Through the revenge story of Hamlet, the terrifying and puzzling question of the meaning of death is examined, in its many forms, as a central theme.

Following the appearance of his father’s mysterious spirit, the idea of death becomes Hamlet’s central, obsessive focus. Not only is he led to ponder the afterlife, as his father’s spirit has now raised the question, but he begins to reflect on death as a solution to the pain he feels over his father’s death. One of his most immediate options would be for him to kill himself. Through suicide, he muses, all of one’s worries would simply cease to exist. As he explores in the famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy, suicide could indeed provide an instant remedy to his suffering. However, there still lingers the fundamental spiritual question that dogs him, that “dread of something after death,” the “undiscover’d country, from whose bourn/no traveller returns, puzzles the will” (3.1.77–79). As Hamlet will never know what exactly lies beyond, he is extremely hesitant to commit himself so readily to the spirit world.

Death again arises in Hamlet’s thoughts during the graveyard scene—albeit in a different form—as he now morbidly considers the physical remnants of death through his examination of corpses. As he realizes, death is the great equalizer and marks no difference between a gravedigger, a lawyer,
or Alexander the Great: all may eventually “stop a beer-barrel” or “patch a wall” (5.1.197-202). What then makes us so great and special in life, he wonders, if in the end our remains are just as worthless as any common peasant, liable to be tossed around by a mad gravekeeper?

Death is—and forever will be—one of the greatest mysteries mankind will ponder. We are all terrified of the unknown, and it is for this reason that the uncertainty of death scares us. *Hamlet* grapples with these issues, and paints an image of a man devastated by his own obsession with it.

**Symbolism**

**CROWN**

> Now, Hamlet, hear:
> 'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
> A serpent stung me, so the whole ear of Denmark
> Is by a forged process of my death
> Rankly abus’d; but know, thou noble youth,
> The serpent that did sting thy father’s life
> Now wears his crown. (1.5.34-9)

A crown is representative first and foremost of a physical crown—that which was taken from the murdered King Hamlet by his treacherous brother Claudius—as well as, in a broader sense, of the primary social class to which many of the main players in *Hamlet* belong. This physical transfer of the King’s crown to the head of an unworthy man is what primarily drives Hamlet’s desire for revenge, after the ghost of his father tells him the true nature of Claudius’ suspicious succession to the throne. “The Crown” is also a way to reference a monarchy as a whole, and can even refer to the entire kingdom under its rule; the drama of *Hamlet* is primarily centered around a royal conflict, a prince’s duty to his father, king and country, and the fate of a nation in turmoil whose leaders are caught up in a net of lies, scandal, and madness.

**SKULL**

> This same skull, sir, was, sir, Yorick’s skull, the King’s jester.
> HAMLET: This? [Takes the skull.]
> CLOWN: E’en that.
> HAMLET: Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorr’d in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kiss’d I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning—quite chop-fall’n. (5.1.168-79)

The human skull is one of the most prominent images that people associate with *Hamlet*, and with good reason. Though a physical skull only appears in a single scene in the play’s last act, this universal symbol for death and mortality is a fitting representation of one of the story’s primary themes. Prince Hamlet is preoccupied—even obsessed—with the idea of death almost from the beginning, and in the infamous graveyard scene he is able to confront the reality of it literally face-to-face with an actual skull. The skull also represents Hamlet’s struggle with the inescapable finality of what dying actually means, and serves as a reminder of death’s constant presence following nearly every character through the play: many are doomed to die in the play’s final act. Death seems to become a character in itself, ever-present and patiently waiting to clean each of its tragic victims.

**SWORD**

> Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
> And that his soul may be as damned and black
> As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays,
> This physic but prolongs thy sickly days. (3.3.84-96)

As with the crown, a sword is both an icon for actual swords used by characters throughout the story as well as a symbol for several key plot elements and larger themes within the play as a whole. In the above quote, Hamlet is prepared to murder King Claudius by running him through with his sword—an action he later takes against an innocent bystander, which finally leads to a physical duel in which he and the murdered man’s son are each killed upon the other’s sword. This physical tool and symbol of destruction is Hamlet’s weapon of choice for exacting his calculated and long-awaited revenge. It is also a symbol of the play’s dark, violent, and ultimately tragic nature: the threat of war with Norway serves as a backdrop to the turmoil in which the Danish nobility are mired, and both mirror the internal struggles of the story’s key players.
Designers’ Note

William Shakespeare’s Hamlet is by no means a comedy.
Rather, as our collaborators indicated, it is one of the darkest tragedies in the playwright’s vast arsenal of plays and prose. Given this understanding of the work, we set forth to design a poster and program that embraces the dark tone of the story…but with a twist. Our collaborators, the directors of the show, re-imagined the play in a slightly unexpected way. They envisioned a contemporary version of Hamlet as a dark comedy set in a modern environment and cast with college-aged individuals. They made the classic, almost universally recognizable work of William Shakespeare more relatable to a college audience. The challenge for us as designers, therefore, was to make the poster and program communicate this unique interpretation.

From our first collaborative meeting as a design team, we were in agreement that we wanted our design style to be more illustrative than realistic. Because of the modern and darkly comic interpretation of the play, we wanted to avoid more classic styles of art and design. Hamlet is a story that is rooted in our past, but the themes remain relevant to our lives—present and future. We felt that a hand-drawn or painted image for the cover would evoke a feeling of history and tradition. Had the directors decided to simply reproduce the classic play, a hand-drawn approach might have been the ideal choice for formal and technical execution. A photograph could provide a realistic view of the setting but might also have been too limiting, restricting the viewer to a single specific time and place. By creating and utilizing vector graphics drawn on the computer, we were able to develop a design that is memorable and visually engaging without being too literal.

Our collaborators, as well as most of the general public, associate the image of a human skull with Shakespeare’s Hamlet, and not without good reason: the presence of a skull symbolizes death, a central theme of the story. The title character, Hamlet himself, grows more and more fascinated with mortality as the play progresses; he muses on death throughout the story, becoming deeply entangled in the twisted depths of his own mind. In the scene our collaborators chose to highlight, Hamlet is faced with the physical, stark reality of death in the form of a skull belonging to an old acquaintance; because of this and the established cultural connection between the play and the human skull, we knew that we wanted to incorporate it into our work. However, since the image of a skull has become synonymous with this tragedy and can easily become cliché, we knew that our challenge would be to present it in an entirely new way to make our promotional materials stand out.

We chose to incorporate the imagery of growing weeds, cluttered with hidden pieces of modern-day litter, to represent how Hamlet’s growing madness and his obsession with death spreads uncontrollably, affecting the fate of everyone around him. References to unweeded gardens, the rank smell of rot and the uncontrollable spread of decay are a prominent motif across the play and we found this idea to be very striking. Overall, we feel that the layout, colors and imagery have come together in an effective and eye-catching way and that the materials both form a strong complement to our collaborators’ work and can stand alone as strong and unified design pieces.
The 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).