WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S

Hamlet

DIRECTORS
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DESIGNERS
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Directors' Note

In our production of Hamlet we chose to stage our production as a puppet show. The puppets’ costumes were from the Renaissance era and the props and background were very minimal. We also chose to have the men play the female characters (Ophelia and Queen Gertrude) and the women play the male characters (Laertes and King Claudius), to add another comedic element to the play. We chose to use hand puppets to give the play a more fun and lighthearted mood. Puppets also create an emotional disconnect between the audience and the characters, ultimately allowing them to view the play as objectively as possible, without relating to the characters. Because puppetry is generally used in comedic productions, our use of it was to soften the tragedy of Hamlet by making the play good-humored and thus, more accessible for an audience that may not be familiar with it. Also, the puppets, as opposed to real actors, present a sort of overblown caricature of the roles, not just as visual caricatures, but in personality as well. Puppets allow for serious situations to be viewed in a different light; we planned on this effect in order to exaggerate the characters’ faults and emphasize their mistakes. This effect allowed us to push the boundaries of Ophelia’s madness and make it even more comedic and outlandish. Ophelia as a puppet, as opposed to an actor, was able to open her mouth so wide it practically looked unhinged; her insanity was emphasized not to alarm and cause discomfort to the audience, but to allow the audience to glimpse how Ophelia might be viewing the world in her own mind.

By using puppets, the audience is required to step away and view the play in an objective light. With the character’s flaws and traits highlighted, the audience will find it easier to recognize what might be mere nuance in a traditionally staged production. Also, the justification of revenge is easier to debate when the audience doesn’t relate to the characters.

Having the men play the women’s roles and vice versa was a device we employed to push the comedic angle of the original tragedy. With the addition of more humor, the audience would certainly view the tragedy as lighter than it would otherwise be, ultimately making it more accessible. It can also be seen as a nod, with a twist, to early Shakespearean theater where men were used exclusively to play both the men’s and women’s roles. We hope that our viewers would see our production of Hamlet and find the humor within the tragedy as we did. We want them not only to be moved by the magnitude of death, betrayal, revenge, and deception that takes place in Hamlet, but also with the humor and insanity that Shakespeare litters within.

Plot Summary

On a cold night at the Danish Royal Castle, Hamlet is informed by Horatio that three watchmen have seen a Ghost that resembles the recently deceased King Hamlet, young Hamlet’s father. Hamlet is determined to view the Ghost the next night. The Ghost appears and leads Hamlet away to tell him that he is indeed the dead king and that he was murdered by Hamlet’s uncle Claudius, who has procured the Danish throne. The Ghost demands vengeance for his murder and Hamlet vows revenge fervently.

Polonius, an advisor to Claudius, has two children: Laertes, who is leaving for France, and Ophelia, who is courted by Hamlet. Ophelia notices Hamlet’s increasingly strange behavior and tells her father. Polonius shares his worry with Claudius and Gertrude. Claudius sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—Hamlet’s old friends—to spy on him. Hamlet exposes their dishonesty immediately and quickly decides (through interaction) that Ophelia is being deceitful too.

Hamlet decides to stage a play replicating the circumstances of his father’s death to Claudius and Gertrude in order to discern Claudius’s supposed guilt. Claudius leaves abruptly during the performance and Hamlet believes that it illustrates his guilt. Gertrude demands an explanation from her son; en route to her quarters, Hamlet finds Claudius in prayer but decides not to kill him yet.

Upon entrance, Gertrude and Hamlet argue. Polonius, who is hiding behind a curtain, makes a noise and Hamlet, believing the noise to be Claudius, stabs Polonius through the curtain. Hamlet again sees the Ghost, who tells Hamlet to treat Gertrude gently and to keep his vengeance in mind. Gertrude is unable to see the Ghost, and views it as a bout of insanity. Claudius, as he is afraid of Hamlet, decides to send Hamlet to England, and hopefully to his death.

Ophelia, now delusional from grief by her father’s death, wanders around the castle singing senselessly. Laertes returns from France and sees his sister’s insanity and is told of Polonius’s death by Hamlet’s hand. News arrives stating that Hamlet’s ship was attacked by pirates, but he is alive and returning. Laertes and Claudius plot Hamlet’s demise through a fencing match with a poisoned sword and a poisoned chalice. Ophelia is reported dead by Gertrude and Laertes is further enraged.

Hamlet wanders into the graveyard and happens upon joking gravediggers who tell of Ophelia’s suicide. Laertes leads the procession to the burial and jumps into the grave; Hamlet leaps in at him and they wrestle, but are broken apart by Claudius. The next day, Laertes sends a messenger to challenge
Hamlet to a fencing match. Hamlet agrees and soon duels with Laertes. Gertrude, who is watching, accidentally drinks wine poisoned by Claudius, ans intended for Hamlet. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned blade and Hamlet wounds Laertes with the same blade. Gertrude dies and exclains the chalice is poisoned. Hamlet takes the poisoned blade and stabs Claudius. They all die, except Horatio, who is left alive to tell their tale.

Theme

**In William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, We Discovered One Major Theme**

That defines the play. Overall, *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy; as Hamlet spends the entire play revenging his father’s death and as Laertes also tries to revenge his father’s death in a duel against Hamlet, we must ask ourselves, is revenge, in this play, actually justified?

Revenge is to punish another for a certain wrongdoing, especially done with a condemning or vindictive spirit. In our culture, many people view revenge as justifiable. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* does the same, as it causes the reader to empathize with Hamlet’s emotional struggles and mental changes as he shockingly learns of the unjust way his father, King Hamlet, was killed and as he battles the despicable incest between his mother, Queen Gertrude, and uncle, King Claudius. The audience supports the protagonist Hamlet, but by the end, as we witness the destruction of so many innocent people, we question the true justifiability of Hamlet’s quest. One scene where revenge is heaviest and melodramatic is Act 4, Scene 5 where Laertes sees his sister Ophelia gone insane.

In this scene, Laertes vows revenge in a very basic way after he sees what their father’s death and Hamlet’s rejection has done to Ophelia. Laertes, as a character, is the embodiment of vengeance, shown by his vehement anger and his thirst for justice first directed toward Claudius; throughout this scene, the undercurrent of revenge is strong. We chose to stage this scene because it is a strong appearance of Hamlet’s revenge tragedy theme.

In one of Ophelia’s crazed rants, we see just how deeply Hamlet’s rejection and revenge destroyed her: “Before you tumbled me / you promis’d me to wed. / So would I ‘a done, by yonder sun / and [if] thou hadst not come to my bed” (4.5.62-65). Furthermore, Polonius was loyal to whoever the king was and was unaware of Claudius’s deceptive means of becoming ruler of Denmark, so he unknowingly became involved in a mess that lead to his eternal demise. Altogether, Polonius’s family was innocent, but revenge meant only for one man actually destroyed the lives of six people, including the revenger himself.

Even Hamlet in Act 3, Scene 1, questions his instruction to revenge, whether or not he should just suffer and die with the unjusticefulness of what happened to him and his father, or if he should take justice into his own hands through the act of revenge. In lines 55-59, he says, “To be, or not to be, that is the question:/ 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” (3.1.55-59). Although a moderately accepting view of revenge is a similarity between the 16th and 21st centuries, the audience of *Hamlet* is persuaded to questions their true beliefs about morality and justice in the wake of injustice and the possibility of revenge.

Symbolism

**The Skull of Yorick, King Hamlet’s Court Jester**

*Hamlet*: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth...

(5.1.194)

This reflects the inevitability of death and Hamlet’s pessimistic view of the world; no matter what we do in this life, eventually we end up buried in the ground to serve as fertilizer for the creatures beneath the dirt. He uses Alexander the Great and Caesar as examples. Both were great and influential men, but in death, their rotted corpses fell to dust and clay where perhaps their remains were used to plug holes in walls. This also reflects the death of Hamlet’s father. He was a great and influential king, but after his death, his brother Claudius took rule and it is almost as if there had been no previous king. King Hamlet’s former rulings no longer held any merit when Claudius took the throne. At the end of the play, as Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes are killed by poison, Hamlet makes a point of commanding Horatio to live, so that he might tell Fortinbras what has befallen the royal court in hopes that the truth is revealed and not forgotten by the people of Denmark.

**Poison**

*Claudius*: Revenge should have no bounds.

(4.7.129)

To poison someone is considered a more dishonorable way of killing, a cowardly method, rather than something as fair as a duel. Poison represents the newly “poisoned” court with Claudius’s rise to power. Hamlet felt the purity of the court was poisoned with Claudius’s ruthless political campaigns and the incestuous relationship between Claudius and his mother, Gertrude. Gertrude “poisoned” the vows she made in her marriage to King Hamlet and his memory by marrying his brother Claudius. Polonius “poisons” Ophelia’s feelings toward Hamlet so she might not have an interest in him. There are also literal symbols of poison. Claudius murders King Hamlet by pouring
poison in his ear, and he later attempts to kill young Hamlet with Laertes’s
poisoned sword and a poisoned chalice Hamlet is meant to drink from.
In the end, Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius all die at the end from
the poison that was intended only to kill Hamlet.

**GARDEN**

_Hamlet: This world, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed, things gross and rank in nature
Possess it merely... (1.2.135–137)_

Hamlet views the world as a “rank garden,” something disgusting and foul,
referring to the fertile rot and overgrowth of vegetation. It is in this way that
Hamlet views the relationship between his mother and Claudius. Hamlet also
sees his father’s murder as something appalling. It is no coincidence that King
Hamlet was murdered in his orchard, which is a type of garden. The image
of the world as a ruined garden also refers to the Biblical garden of Eden in
which Eve is tempted with the apple, bringing about the fall of man. This ties
in with the orchard where King Hamlet was murdered. Just as the fall of man
occurred in the Garden of Eden, the political fall of Denmark happened in the
king’s orchard with his murder.

**Designers’ Note**

ינו Collaborators Decided to Rewrite _Hamlet_

In a More Lighthearted Tone. They chose to represent this by including
comedic elements throughout the play, such as the males playing female
roles and females playing male roles. In addition to the changing of actors,
the play was given an even more humorous twist through the use of puppets.
In response to their new staging of the play, we decided to create a poster
and program that captured the human and puppet elements of _Hamlet_ in an
oddly comedic manner—seeing as this was one of their main points of the
play’s re-creation.

As designers, we wanted to represent the puppets by playing up the
paper bag aspect as well as the caricature of roles. Through much debate over
different ideas, we chose to directly represent the paper bag puppets in a fun
way to display the _Hamlet_ title on the poster. Not only does this showcase
the human element by having an arm extending out from the bottom of each
bag, but this idea of ours coincides with the mood our collaborators were
aiming for. However, our best demonstration of the mood would be the image
we created of _Hamlet_’s characters. We wanted to play up seeing the humor in
insanity by making a complex collage of elements. The collage is madness—
with combined male and female elements, as well as symbols chosen by our
collaborators to represent the play, we morphed many different glimpses of
_Hamlet_ into one image.

Similar to a collage, _Hamlet_ is an intricate story of many characters
and plots. While the characters may each have their own agendas, their
actions directly affect the lives of the other characters in the play—such as
how the revenge sought by a single person may ruin the life of another—thus
complicating the plot in a true Shakespearean way. A collage captures this
complexity, while maintaining the humor our collaborators were attempting
to achieve. In fact, each element of the collage alters the viewing of the others.
Individual elements we chose to include went through much debate. With a
male’s face as the starting point and base of our Hamlet image, we chose two
very distinctly different eyes and pair of lips. We also chose to play with the
comedic theme and place a giant head on top of a small Renaissance body.
We also chose to place the symbol of the skull within the character’s necklace
and a crown balanced in one of the hands. To add to the lighthearted theme,
we also made the decision to make the collar three-dimensional and the
mustache hand-drawn. Our overall concept was to tell the story of multiple
characters; through the initial ideas from our collaborators and our own
formal and technical design choices, we were able to create and communicate
an influential and cohesive poster and program.
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).