

HAMLET

STUDY GUIDE



by William Shakespeare

directed by Eric Tucker

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COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.9-10.6 Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS *cont.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.9-10.3 Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.11-12.1-3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA .RL.11-12.7 Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry); evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist)

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

TH.Re7.1 Perceive and analyze artistic work.

TH.Re8.1 Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

TH.Re9.1 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

TH.Cn10.1 Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

TH.Cn11.1 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

**ASF wishes to thank the Education department at McCarter Theatre Center,
 who generously shared their teacher resources with us.**

PLOT

On the rampart of Elsinore’s castle, guardsmen encounter the ghost of the newly dead King of Denmark. The Ghost charges his son, Hamlet, to revenge his murder by his brother, Claudius, who married Hamlet’s mother, Queen Gertrude, after the King’s death. As Hamlet ponders revenge, he behaves in more melancholy and disturbing ways. Claudius and Gertrude seek help from Hamlet’s friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to discover the root of his madness. Lord Polonius suggests that Hamlet may be love sick, not mad, but his poor treatment of his former love, Ophelia, proves that this may not be the case. When a group of traveling actors arrives at the castle, Hamlet hatches a plan to catch Claudius. He informs the actors to perform a sequence resembling the murder of his father by Claudius. Surely if Claudius is the killer, he will react. When Claudius storms out of the performance, Hamlet is assured of his guilt. Claudius, aware of the danger that Hamlet poses to him, sends him to England. Hamlet is saying goodbye to his mother, when he hears a noise behind a tapestry. Believing the figure to be Claudius, he stabs the curtain and inadvertently kills Polonius. As Hamlet is sent to England, Claudius orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to follow him and deliver a letter to the King of England demanding Hamlet’s execution. Distraught after her father’s death, Ophelia drowns herself in the river. Her brother, Laertes, returns swearing revenge on Hamlet. After hearing news that Hamlet’s ship was beset by pirates and he is returning to Elsinore, Claudius poisons Laertes’ blade in hopes that he will kill Hamlet. He also poisons a goblet as a back-up plan. As the duel draws near, who will survive Claudius’ plot?

CHARACTERS

In Bedlam’s adaptation of *Hamlet*, an ensemble of four actors play all the roles. While one actor typically portrays one character for the duration of the play, there are moments when a character shifts between various actors. In addition, the stage managers, and sometimes even the audience, are called on to voice additional characters.



Bedlam’s cast of *Hamlet*

Hamlet: Prince of Denmark, son of the murdered King

Claudius: Hamlet’s uncle, the new King of Denmark

Gertrude: Hamlet’s mother and the Queen of Denmark; she has recently married Claudius

Polonius: Lord in Claudius’s court;
Father of Laertes and Ophelia

Horatio: Hamlet’s best friend

Ophelia: Hamlet’s former love interest;
Polonius’s daughter

Laertes: Ophelia’s brother

Fortinbras: Prince of Norway

The Ghost: Hamlet’s late father

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Hamlet’s friends

Osric: A courtier in Claudius’ court

Marcellus, Bernardo, and Francisco: Guardsmen of Elsinore

Reynaldo: Polonius’ servant

Captain: The captain of the ship taking Hamlet to England

Two Clowns: Gravediggers

Players: Traveling actors

Priest

Sailor

SETTING

Hamlet is set in Elsinore, a town on the eastern coast of Denmark. The action of the play is confined to the castle and its grounds.

ABOUT SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is England's most famous playwright. He wrote during the Elizabethan era, and his plays heavily influenced Western theatre.

Hamlet was written sometime before the first recorded performance in 1602. Like many of Shakespeare's plays, it isn't an original story. It was heavily inspired by Scandinavian myth of "Amleth," a poem dating back to the 10th century. *Hamlet* has become one of Shakespeare's enduring classics due to its major themes of mortality, insanity, and revenge. It is the most produced play in the world: It is estimated that *Hamlet* is performed somewhere in the world every minute of every day. In addition to being translated into 75 languages, *Hamlet* has also been adapted into an opera, film, and has been depicted in artworks and songs. The plot has inspired many homages, from Disney's *The Lion King* to episodes of *The Simpsons* and *Star Trek*.



The Chandos portrait of William Shakespeare hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London, England.

BEDLAM THEATRE

BEDLAM is a NYC-based not-for-profit theatre company under the leadership of Artistic Director Eric Tucker and Managing Director Kimberly Pau Boston. Founded in 2012, Bedlam received instant recognition for its production of George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* in which only four actors played over 25 characters. Additional past shows include *Hamlet*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pygmalion*, *Uncle Romeo Vanya Juliet*, *Peter Pan*, *The Seagull*, *Dead Dog Park*, *New York Animals*, and two productions of *Twelfth Night* that ran in rep with each other.

Bedlam's shows have been noted as Ben Brantley's "Critics' Picks" for *The New York Times* six times, noted on *The New York Times* and *New York Magazine*'s "Top Ten Best Show Lists" two times, as well as those of *The Wall Street Journal* and *Time Magazine* respectively. *The Wall Street Journal* also noted Eric Tucker as "Director of the Year" in 2014. Bedlam has won two Irene Awards, two Off Broadway Alliance Awards, and an Obie Grant. Bedlam has also been nominated for two Lucille Lortel awards, a Drama League award, and six Elliot Norton awards, winning for Best Visiting Production and Best Ensemble for Bedlam's *Saint Joan*, Best Visiting Production for Bedlam's *Twelfth Night/What You Will*, and Best Visiting Performer for Vaishnavi Sharma in Bedlam's *Pygmalion*. Bedlam also offers a free Veteran Outreach program and adult education workshops in acting, producing, and directing.

Alabama Shakespeare Festival sat down with Eric Tucker, Artistic Director of Bedlam, to learn more about the company, their artistic process, and the development process for *Hamlet* and *Saint Joan* by George Bernard Shaw, which is playing in repertory with *Hamlet*.



Hamlet and Laertes' fight scene in Bedlam's *Hamlet*

How and why did Bedlam decide to form a theatre company? What kind of work is your company interested in?

I have always felt as a director that it's important to have a home base, a place where one can practice their own aesthetic and be solely responsible for the product. We formed Bedlam as a place to examine classic material more deeply and to try to find new ways of presenting those plays in order to bring audiences a fresh perspective on the stories. We are interested in classic material as well as new plays and musicals.

Tell me about the adaptation process for *Hamlet* and *Saint Joan*. Why did these scripts interest Bedlam?

Saint Joan has always been one of my favorite plays. It's incredibly funny and moving and the language is brilliant. *Hamlet* is of course one of the greatest plays ever written, and I thought together these two stories were well matched. I thought as a first-time company we needed something incredibly difficult to pull off in order to be noticed. So, four actors performing *Hamlet* and *Saint Joan* in rep seemed to do the trick. We did both plays mostly uncut, so there was little adaptation of the actual scripts. Most of the adaptation involved deciding how to double the roles and in some cases, share the roles.

What did you learn about *Hamlet* and *Saint Joan* during the adaptation and performance process?

I've seen what a powerful play *Saint Joan* is because of its effect on so many different audiences. Audiences from all over the country respond in the same way. They find it hysterically funny and completely moving, and most say it's an unforgettable experience. When we added *Hamlet* into the mix, I learned that the most important and best way to be successful with a production is to stay out of the way of the play. A truly great play will do the work for you if you don't overcomplicate it. We present these two plays simply and with very little in the way of sets, costumes, or props. We let the great writing take center stage.

What do you give up when you restrict *Hamlet* and *Saint Joan* to four performers? What do you gain?

I think the one thing most people feel when they see a large cast reduced to a few actors is that it's easier to follow if they already know the play. This is probably true, though we do strive to make the storytelling as clear as possible. This is our main concern when rehearsing the plays. I think we gain access to better actors because everyone gets a large part of the play to perform, and audiences can't help but hear the plays differently. They see and hear them in a way they may not have experienced before and the plays feel new in a way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. Have you seen a Shakespeare production? The language and the complexity of the plot can be impediments to understanding the play. What are skills and tools you and your classmates can use to interpret the production?
2. In the Bedlam production, a cast of four replaces the typical cast of twenty plus. How do you think the actors will handle the challenge of playing multiple character, sometimes in the same scene?

POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. How did Bedlam accomplish the task of four actors playing a litany of roles? Did the doubling of actors illuminate anything about the relationships in the play that would be lost in traditional casting?
2. The question of Hamlet's madness has endured through the centuries following its premiere. What do you think: Was Hamlet's madness real, or was he faking it? How did Bedlam's production impact your understanding?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. At Your Desk: *Hamlet* employs many tropes of a revenge tragedy: a vengeful ghost, a high death count, gory scenes, and a character inflicted with madness. Either alone or in groups, write a revenge tragedy of your own (consider a short story, graphic novel, or even a video) that includes at least two of the above markers of a revenge tragedy. What does your story have in common with *Hamlet* or other revenge tragedies? Why have revenge tragedies remained a popular storytelling device?
2. On Your Feet: Bedlam's *Hamlet* reduces the cast to a lean ensemble of four actors. Use this method on another Shakespeare play. How will you determine what scenes are performed in your play, and which are "cut"? Which characters will be played by the same actor? Design a marketing campaign to sell your production, including a show poster, blurb, and commercial. How will you communicate your vision to an audience?