

A Rehearsal Scrapbook

To cut or not to cut. Hamlet is perhaps the most revered play in the canon, perhaps the most familiar. But there's no such thing as a definitive production, perhaps because there's no such thing as a definitive text. The first published edition we have of the play, the First Quarto, has lines like 'To be or not to be. Aye, there's the point' and is usually referred to as the 'Bad' Quarto. It's short: about 2,200 lines (a bit longer than Macbeth and The Tempest), but it is nearly half the length of the next edition, the Second Quarto, which is 3,900 lines. Shakespeare must have continued to revise the play as it continued in the repertoire of the company, because by the time his fellow actors published the Complete Works edition after his death (the First Folio) the text had been cut and substantially rearranged.

He can't ever have imagined the play would have been performed at that length, as plays at the Globe went up at two o'clock and had to be down by between four and five, so perhaps he prepared an edition for the library, a bit like the director's cut in the film industry, for the aficionado's private enjoyment.

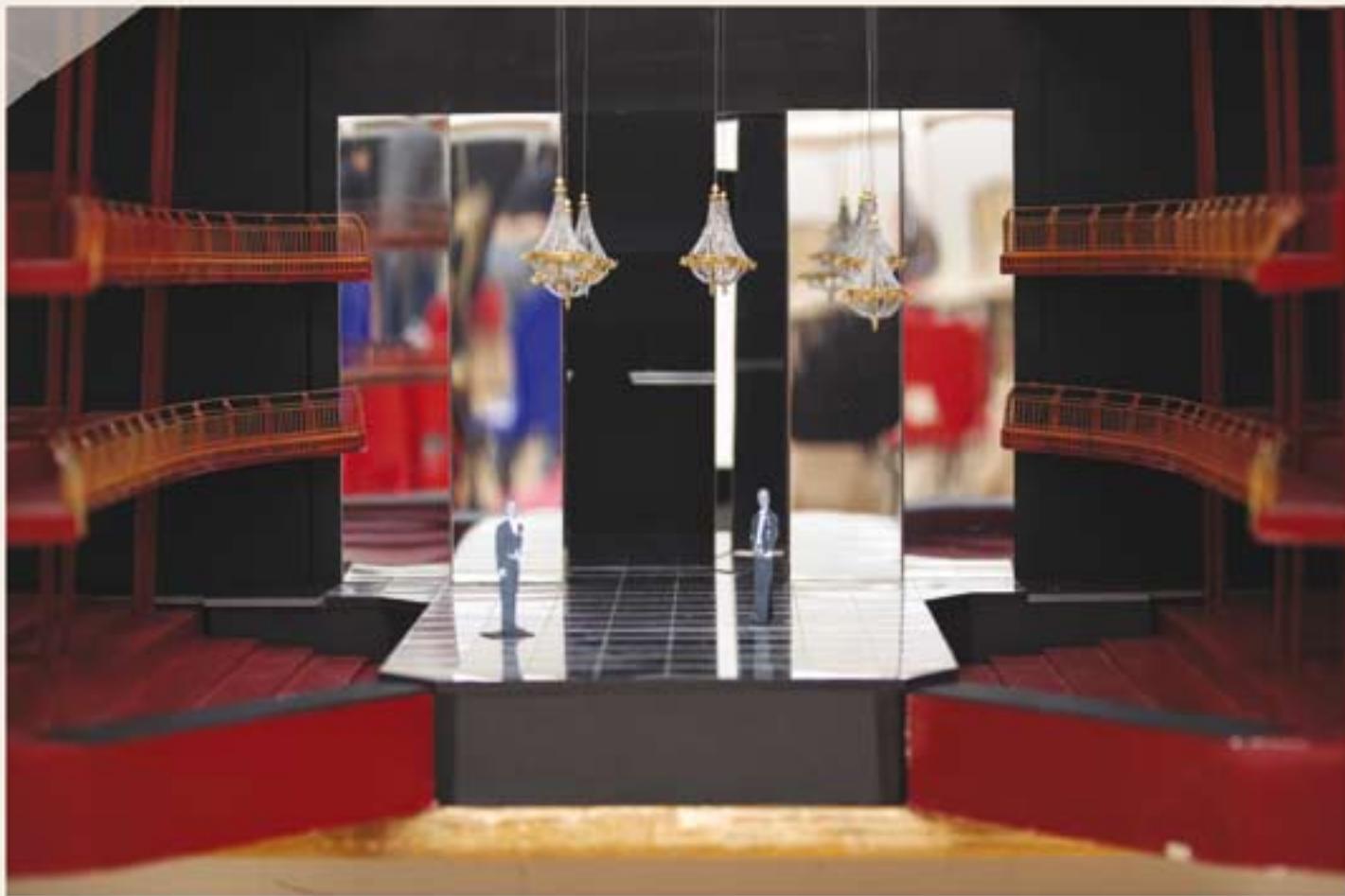
The first time the full Folio text was played was here in Stratford, in 1899 by Frank Benson. They played up to the end of the closet scene in the afternoon and then resumed the rest of the play in the evening. The first marathon Shakespeare day!

On the afternoon of the first day of rehearsals we visit the Shakespeare Centre Library in Henley Street, where Head Librarian Sylvia Morris gets out the RSC's own copy of the First Folio for the company to look at. At the front is my favourite page: the list of all the actors who first appeared in the plays. After Shakespeare comes Richard Burbage, the first Hamlet; further down the list is Joseph Taylor, who took over the part after his death, thus beginning a long line which goes through Betterton, Garrick, Kemble, Kean, Macready, Irving, Gielgud, Olivier and on up to David Tennant now.

Gregory Doran

Hamlet cannot be performed in its entirety. One has to select, curtail and cut. One can perform only one of several Hamlets potentially existing in this arch-play. It will always be poorer than Shakespeare's is, but it may also be enriched by being a Hamlet of our time. It may, but I would rather say - it must be so.
JAN KOTT - SHAKESPEARE OUR CONTEMPORARY





Designing the Production

The design process begins with the director and designer discussing their individual responses to the play and then working together to establish the world in which the play will be set. We will look through numerous paintings, photographs and any other visual aids which might provide inspiration for the set and costumes. In the case of Hamlet it was established from a very early stage that it would be a mirrored world and we then began to explore ideas around this. Next comes the

design model. Initially this is a very rough version in white card. This is used to work out if the design is workable (and affordable!) and allows us to develop a number of different design solutions to any problems that may arise. Once refined, this is then followed by a very detailed finished model, with many of the props and furniture modelled to absolute scale. This is a vital tool, which helps everyone from actors to lighting designers to composers to the workshops to visualise the director

and designer's vision of the piece. It is integral to the process of communication. From this finished model, sets of detailed 'working drawings' are prepared in order to work out the mechanics and actually build the set. All the carpentry, metal work and painting is processed by the RSC workshops to produce the finished piece, including building specific scenic props (like the chandeliers in this production).

Robert Jones, Designer



For a second week we are sitting around a table exploring the text word-by-word, line-by-line. The whole company read the play in turns, scene-by-scene, and then put each line into their own words. This may sound laborious, but it reveals how easy it is to assume you know what the words mean, and how hard it is to be really specific. Sometimes it shatters preconceptions, sometimes confirms them. Occasionally someone provides a memorable 'translation'; Andrea Harris, with admirable alliteration, translates the word 'Mountebank' as 'drug-dealing dude' and (revealing her Arkansas roots) converts 'John-a-Dreams' to 'Who-hit-John-and-run'.

Very quickly our collective knowledge of the play is enhanced. No-one is allowed to read their own part or comment

on their own character. Sometimes there are intense disagreements. We have every possible edition of the play at hand to consult various editorial opinions. Inevitably the editors tend to fall silent on just the point the actors want illuminating. By the time we get to Friday and we read the whole play through for the first time in one go, everyone is ready and prepared.

The process reveals images and descriptions which can easily be overlooked, like Shakespeare's chilling description of how Claudius keeps Rosencrantz and Guildenstern like 'an ape an apple, in the corner of its mouth, first mouthed to be last swallowed'. It's a shocking, metaphysical, almost absurdist image. The work of rehearsal will be to try and fresh mint images such as these.

As a little light relief from all the brain work we watch an episode of The Simpsons in which Bart plays Hamlet. Above his bed is a sticker which reads 'Danes do it Melancholy'.

Robert Jones, designer, and Christine Rowland, our costume supervisor, begin having costume chats with members of the company. The assistant director, Cressida, and some of the company present a rehearsed reading of 'Fratricide Punished', a seventeenth century German version of Hamlet, which has a particularly funny account of how Hamlet got away from the pirates. It strikes us that this might be a fragment of the Ur-Hamlet, sometimes ascribed to Thomas Kyd, which Shakespeare rewrote.

G.D.



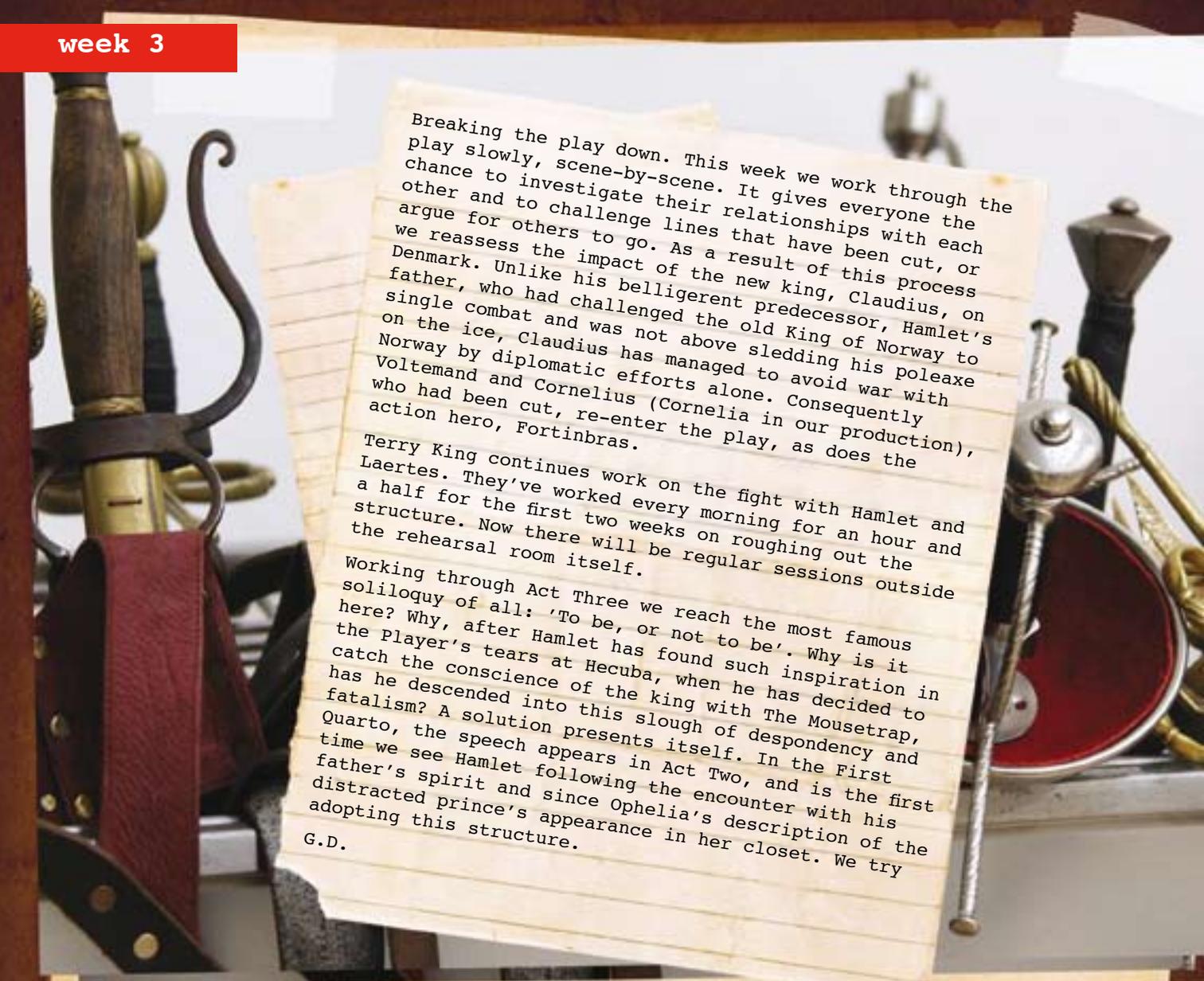
'Fratricide Punished'

The Text and Voice Coach

All productions have the support of text and voice coaches. In rehearsal we work on the language by exploring the dynamics of sound and rhythm and provide opportunities for actors to approach the text in a physical and visceral way. We also assist actors in their quest to build vocal and breathing stamina, flexibility and muscularity as well as to make connections between text, voice and character. This entails work on the body as well as the voice and a movement practitioner has worked with us on Hamlet. Text, voice and movement coaches also work on the understudy roles, offering actors the time and space to 'play' with the text and organically develop their performances. Voice and movement warm-ups take place before every performance and these help actors prepare their voices and bodies and focus their minds.

Lyn Darnley,
Head of Text, Voice
and Artist Development





Breaking the play down. This week we work through the play slowly, scene-by-scene. It gives everyone the chance to investigate their relationships with each other and to challenge lines that have been cut, or argue for others to go. As a result of this process we reassess the impact of the new king, Claudius, on Denmark. Unlike his belligerent predecessor, Hamlet's father, who had challenged the old King of Norway to single combat and was not above sledding his poleaxe on the ice, Claudius has managed to avoid war with Norway by diplomatic efforts alone. Consequently Voltmand and Cornelius (Cornelia in our production), who had been cut, re-enter the play, as does the action hero, Fortinbras.

Terry King continues work on the fight with Hamlet and Laertes. They've worked every morning for an hour and a half for the first two weeks on roughing out the structure. Now there will be regular sessions outside the rehearsal room itself.

Working through Act Three we reach the most famous soliloquy of all: 'To be, or not to be'. Why is it here? Why, after Hamlet has found such inspiration in the Player's tears at Hecuba, when he has decided to catch the conscience of the king with *The Mousetrap*, has he descended into this slough of despondency and fatalism? A solution presents itself. In the First Quarto, the speech appears in Act Two, and is the first time we see Hamlet following the encounter with his father's spirit and since Ophelia's description of the distracted prince's appearance in her closet. We try adopting this structure.

G.D.



The Fight Director

The fight scenes begin with a discussion with the director and the actors about what sort of fight they consider to be appropriate: how the characters relate to the fight and how they would feel about fighting. From there we build up various moves, listen to various suggestions, and through rehearsal we refine these until hopefully we realise the vision of what we want the fight to be.

Most actors don't have the specific technical knowledge of how to use a sword, so I try to interpret what they want to communicate and make the fights expressive of that, but also accurate. Taking voice as an example, if you talk very quietly on the stage it might seem very realistic, but the audience won't be able to hear at the back. The same applies to swordplay. You have to interpret and experiment with what is precisely accurate in order to make it appear realistic on stage.

The biggest challenge in Hamlet is that there is nothing to distract attention from the fights. Arranging big fight scenes with lots of people on stage does present its own problems, but it also means that the swordplay doesn't necessarily have to be very clever, because your eyes are constantly being pulled all around the stage. In Hamlet there is a lot of focus on just two people fighting; they are the centre of attention.

Terry King,
Fight Director





This week we are finally on our feet sketching out the whole play. With a little simple stage geography applied, the scenes begin to move themselves. To keep the play fluid and fast-moving we've allowed very little furniture.

Movement director Michael Ashcroft begins work on the dumbshow and we try to work out the difference between it and the play-within-a-play. In examining the staging of this it seems the real focus of the audience's attention should be on Claudius and Gertrude. It is they who are on display.

On Tuesday we rehearse for the first time on the Courtyard stage. The working lights are on the stage and the auditorium is lit by the house lights, so we can't see the actors' faces; their voices must carry the scene. Cicely Berry, the RSC's Director of Text and Voice, is watching and listening intently at the back of the auditorium.

She puts her finger on the challenge we face. Everybody might now know precisely what they are talking about, but it is not only literal meaning that is important with Shakespeare. His power is also conveyed through the rhythm and sound of the language; 'the sound must seem an echo to the sense'.

On a more mundane level, we have to decide where to place the interval. Shakespeare didn't have intervals, but these days they are demanded, both by audiences and bar managers. So, where to put it? What about after the play? But surely that would interrupt the furious dynamic that leads right through that terrible day to the closet scene and on to Hamlet's departure for England? Before the play? Too early, surely? What about two intervals? One when Hamlet decides not to rely solely on the evidence of the Ghost but to set *The Mousetrap*, and perhaps one just before the 'Eggshell' scene, as Hamlet witnesses Fortinbras' army marching against a corner of Poland and finally determines to accept his fate and delay no longer. But that would make a long evening even longer. So where is the ideal cliffhanger?

G.D.





The Movement Director

The movement director has various roles, dependant on the type of production and on what the director wants. Sometimes the director will ask for a dance, so it is then my job to go away and, working with the composer, choreograph a dance routine. Sometimes a director might not be totally sure what they require physically in a scene. A lot of the time the process is simply trying out different forms of movement and physical styles. These can then be refined and developed back in the rehearsal room.

A lot depends on the actors. You might find somebody in the company who is very, very

physical, in which case you can put those skills to use. It is hard to plan too much before rehearsals begin, as there is no point creating a lovely big dance routine, then arriving in rehearsal to discover that it doesn't look right or isn't suitable for the actor.

The movement and choreography is something that develops throughout the rehearsal process in discussions with the director, the composer and the actors. It is a very collaborative process.

Michael Ashcroft,
Movement Director



Act Four: the mad scene.
 In 1579 a girl called Katharine Hamlet was drowned in the Avon at Tiddington, just upstream from Stratford. Shakespeare was fifteen. Mariah Gale, who plays Ophelia, and I visit the spot where it was meant to have happened, as recorded in the Court records of the time. Then we walk along the Avon, past willows growing aslant the river. In one spot there are tall spikes of purple blossom. They are the long purples, which Gertrude describes in Ophelia's garland of coronet weeds. They grow among banks of stinging nettles (another of the plants Ophelia has gathered for her garland). It occurs to us that if Mariah were to try gathering the long purples, nettles, daisies, crow flowers, the rosemary, fennel, pansies and rue which she collects in her imagined funerary tribute for her dead father (buried in a hurried hugging mugger of secrecy after

his murder) then her skin would quickly become muddy, scratched and red-raw with stings. Perhaps this is how to play the mad scene.

Ellen Terry, who played Ophelia opposite Henry Irving, was probably the first actress to visit an asylum to research the character's madness. This initiative possibly reached its height when, in 1989, the RSC took Mark Rylance's Hamlet to Broadmoor, the hospital for the criminally insane, to do a run for the inmates.

We have agreed that each time we rehearse the mad scene, the other actors will not know what route to Ophelia's madness we are taking, what instigates it. What is sense to her must seem lunacy to them. Someone once said that madness is when people stop trying to understand you.

Elsewhere, Claudius' Switzers are being taught a bit of military discipline by Staff Sgt. 'Robbo' Robertson and Sgt. Nick Casswell from the local branch of the Territorial Army.

G.D.





Composing the score

I normally begin to sketch out ideas after reading the script and an initial conversation with the director about the proposed style and feel of the production, e.g. will it be a period setting or contemporary, a very physical, fast-paced production or stark and minimal in design. The model showing is always inspiring and I often try to match the atmosphere of the set with the music. Many of Shakespeare's plays have songs in them, and that can be a good place to start in finding a harmonic language for the piece. Any music which requires active participation on stage, i.e. songs, dances or onstage band music, needs to be written early in the process so that it can be rehearsed in the context of the scenes. In Hamlet I needed to get Ophelia's songs written early, in order that Ophelia and the rest of the cast had time to learn them.

At some point during rehearsals, we'll sit and go through the script and decide where we think music should go and what its function is. The score and underscore is written as the scenes take shape and it becomes clear what the music needs to do; for example, sometimes one wants to usher in the next scene with music or, alternatively, linger on a moment at the end of a scene. The music might try to mirror how a character is feeling, or indicate that an army or some other threat is approaching. The score is still being worked on through the technical period, as practical matters often dictate the length of cues.

Paul Englishby, Composer



The Understudy Process

All actors at the RSC agree to take part in the understudy process in order to ensure that the play can still go on in the eventuality of any actor being absent. This means that an entire double cast of Hamlet is rehearsing in parallel throughout the process. These rehearsals can amount to long evening calls, half-hour lunch meetings and three-minute chats over green room coffee. Time snatching can be tricky with Hamlet, as almost all the actors are called during the day and are often performing A Midsummer Night's Dream in the evenings. At the same time, I am reluctant to slip out of rehearsals in case I miss crucial developments in the scenes; the principals are so creative in their daytime rehearsals that the characters' intentions, and therefore blocking, seem to change every session.

It is not unusual for an understudy to have to go on, even in the preview period, and as we hurtle towards our first public performance all the actors are very busy learning words, blocking, music and fights on top of their ordinary principal roles. Luckily they seem unfazed by these demands.

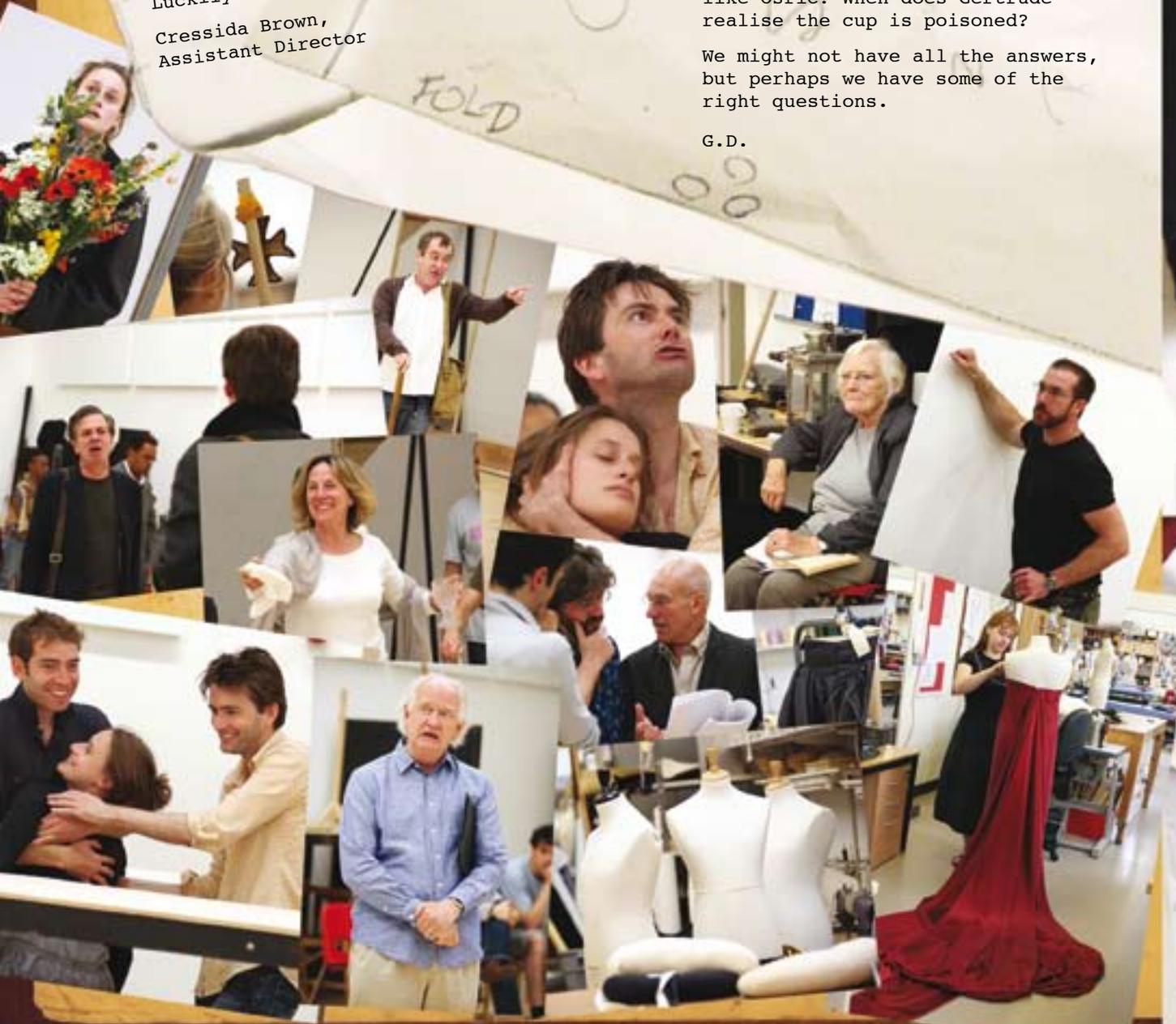
Cressida Brown,
Assistant Director

Back to the top of the play. Lots of questions have emerged, which now need answering. The text may allow ambiguity, but actors can't act it. We need to make choices. That's the difference between reading a play and acting it.

When did Claudius and Gertrude begin their affair? Was it before Old Hamlet's death? Is that why the Ghost accuses them of adultery? Why does Hamlet adopt his antic disposition? Does Hamlet realise he is being overheard in the nunnery scene? Does Claudius actually reveal his guilt in his reaction to The Mousetrap, or is that Hamlet's imagination, and what does Horatio think? Why does the Ghost appear in the closet scene, and what effect does that have on his old family? Does he prevent his son's attack on his mother? Is that his intention? Why doesn't Gertrude see the Ghost if, after all, mere soldiers like Barnardo and Marcellus do? Why does Gertrude seem not to have run to help Ophelia as she drowns? Why does Shakespeare put the invitation to the duel in the mouth of a waterfly like Osric? When does Gertrude realise the cup is poisoned?

We might not have all the answers, but perhaps we have some of the right questions.

G.D.





The Costume Department

On this production of Hamlet the designer and costume supervisor have involved the actors as much as possible in the design process. For the newly made period costumes fabrics were sampled from both national and international suppliers. The RSC Cutters draft all patterns themselves according to the specifics of each design. Once the fabric pieces have been cut they are handed on to a team of makers who begin construction ready for the first costume fittings. At the same time, the supervisor shops for hundreds of individual items of clothing: everything from suits to socks. Every article of costume is fitted on the actor to determine the visual look of the garment as well as to check technical aspects. Sometimes designs can change considerably through the rehearsals. Before any costume or footwear goes on stage it may need breaking down: the process of distressing a costume to give it a worn and authentic look. The dye department also regularly cover footwear with specially made 'mud'.

The technical rehearsal is the first time that the actor gets to wear the complete costume and the designer sees it under stage lighting. This is a very busy time as some costumes may need alterations in terms of design or fit, some need extra breaking down and sometimes unforeseen difficulties arise as part of the technical process.

Alistair McArthur,
Head of Costume



We start to run sections together. Pace is clarity of thought. If our thinking is right, the pace of the play should be swift and deadly. As we start to run sections, the five distinct days over which the play occurs (allowing for the various time shifts) emerge with clarity. After one run, Cicely Berry, shaking her head, says 'It is all so human'.

We have explored the historicist perspective (is Polonius a portrait of Lord Burleigh, Queen Elizabeth's Chief Minister? Is Hamlet an autobiographical portrait of the Earl of Oxford?). We've argued about the play's politics. It's an intensely dangerous world of hyper-surveillance, in which Hamlet himself seems largely politically disinterested. We've delved into the psychoanalysis of poisoners, and rejected Freudian analysis of the oedipal nature of the closet scene. But to bring the play home to each of us, to allow it to touch our own lives, and to get even closer to the iconic questions touching our own mortality that the play poses, we have more work to do.

Next week we move from the security of our rehearsal room into The Courtyard Theatre for the technical week. Suddenly there will be a huge set, and lights, and sound effects, and costumes, and dressers and wig girls, and the whole stage crew and props staff, and a band and music cues, and flymen on hand for the automation, and the aerial work, and a production photographer, and a massive auditorium to reach, and, by the first preview on Thursday, a thousand people sitting in it. On Monday morning it seems impossible to believe that we will ever get there!

G.D.



The Production Manager

The Production Manager (PM) is involved in a production from beginning to end, supervising collaboration between the creative and the technical teams. Coordinating all the physical aspects of a production, such as scenery, lighting, props, sound, costume and special effects, involves many departments and the PM works in close collaboration with all of these to realise the creative vision of the artistic team.

The life of a production begins with a design brief, written by the PM, which prescribes the parameters of the production. The designer then produces a detailed scale model of the set, which is assessed for practicality, safety and affordability by the PM and construction departments. Once in rehearsal, the PM chairs a series of meetings attended by the director, designers, construction and show running departments, where progress, changes, rehearsal developments and artistic requirements are discussed. The PM also draws up the production schedule, which timetables the preparation and installation of the show into the theatre.

Then comes the hectic business of 'fitting up' a show: the initial assembly on stage of all the hardware needed for a production. This is followed by the technical and dress rehearsals and then the preview performances, all coordinated by the PM. Even when a production is safely up and running and in the hands of the stage manager, the PM has a role in responding to requests for maintenance and repair, as the life of a production is often measured in months and sometimes years. When this life is extended as productions are transferred to London, Newcastle or cities around the world, the PM will be involved in the process of moving the show into its new home and ensuring that the original vision of the artistic team is preserved.

Simon Ash, Production Manager

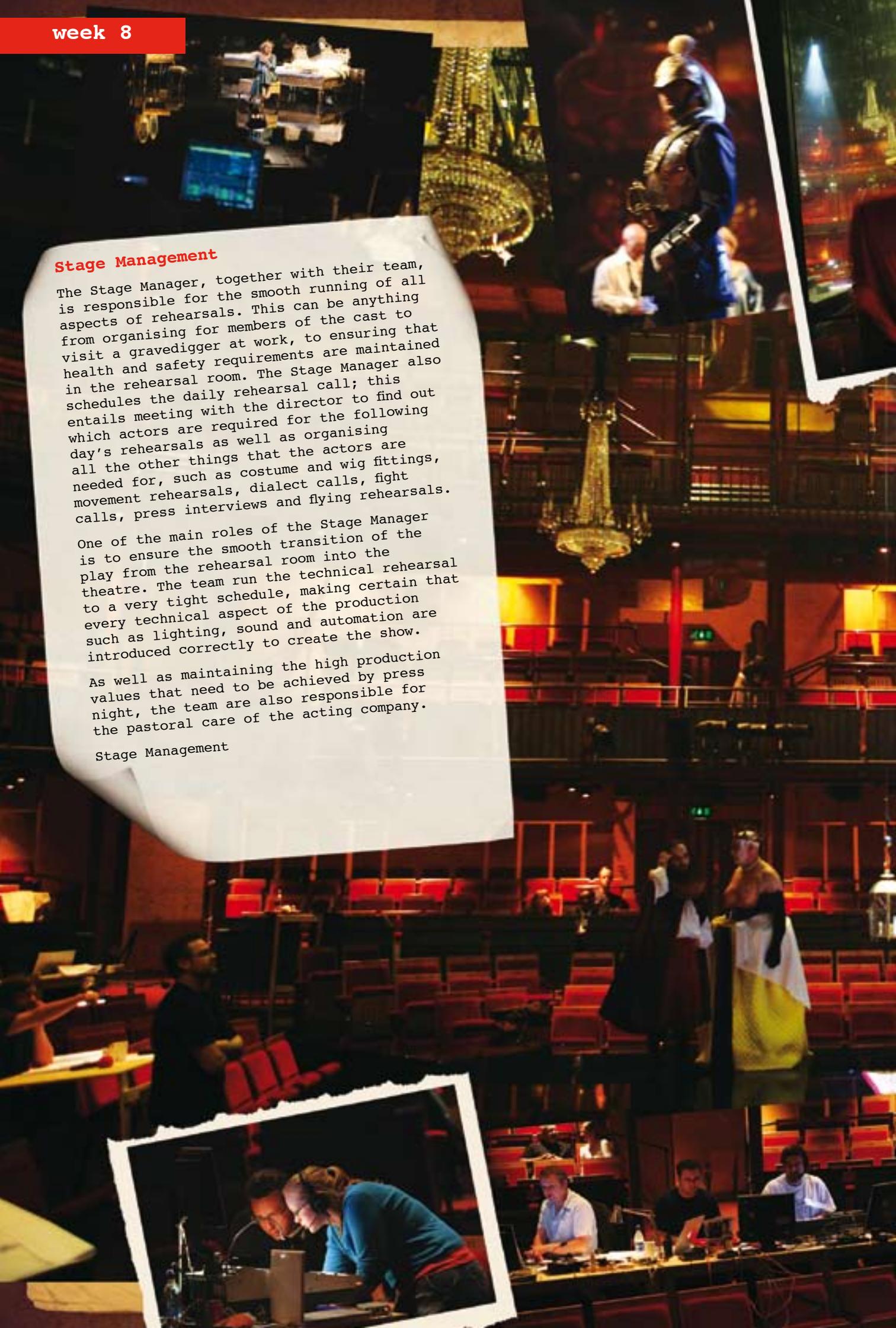
Stage Management

The Stage Manager, together with their team, is responsible for the smooth running of all aspects of rehearsals. This can be anything from organising for members of the cast to visit a gravedigger at work, to ensuring that health and safety requirements are maintained in the rehearsal room. The Stage Manager also schedules the daily rehearsal call; this entails meeting with the director to find out which actors are required for the following day's rehearsals as well as organising all the other things that the actors are needed for, such as costume and wig fittings, movement rehearsals, dialect calls, fight calls, press interviews and flying rehearsals.

One of the main roles of the Stage Manager is to ensure the smooth transition of the play from the rehearsal room into the theatre. The team run the technical rehearsal to a very tight schedule, making certain that every technical aspect of the production such as lighting, sound and automation are introduced correctly to create the show.

As well as maintaining the high production values that need to be achieved by press night, the team are also responsible for the pastoral care of the acting company.

Stage Management



The Sound Design

Having received the script, I generally look through and mark obvious points where a sound effect might be used and what it might be. Shakespeare is very good at letting you know what's required, and if you're not too sure, just read on a little and he usually gives up the reason.

The main answers come from the director describing the influences, style and period of the production, and from engaging with each artistic discipline. Some sound effects will be the result of a director's inspirational idea, some from a direct request, say for a bell striking twelve. We try and record as many new sound effects as we can, but if all else fails the RSC has a huge library of effects to hand, both purchased and from previous shows.

As rehearsals progress we test out our ideas as we gain more and more knowledge about the production and how sound and music will interface to tell the story. All RSC music is live; in this show the musicians are high up behind the mirror wall. When we get to technical rehearsals the band and the sound operator join and we have at least one microphone on each instrument; they will be mixed live with the sound effects, and balanced against the actors' voices for each performance.

Jeremy Dunn, Sound Designer

