

Welcome to this introduction to the RSC's 2026 touring production of Hamlet.

Originally directed by Rupert Goold, the associate director on this tour is Sophie Drake.

Set design is by Es Devlin, costume design by Evie Gurney. The composer and sound designer is Adam Cork. The movement director is Hannes Langolf.

Including a 20-minute interval, the running time is around two hours and forty minutes.

The audio describers on the tour are Gethyn Edwards and Carolyn Smith.

The play is set on board an ocean-going liner - the *Elsinore* – the action taking place during just a single, ill-fated night - 14th April 1912.

The stage has been transformed into the rear portion of the deck of the ship, rising steeply away from us to the angled stern at the rear. The deck is made of grey-painted wooden planks, set with six square hatches, three to a side, and a pair of gangway handrails that can be lowered and raised in the stern as scenes demand. A portion in the centre of the deck can be removed, leaving a large, ragged, darkly-smoking hole. Characters come and go via ramps to left and right at midstage, and at the rear. Some characters also emerge from the deck hatches, and even fall from the ship – both off the back and down the central hole.

A second deck hangs above the stage, mirroring the performing space below, and gives the impression of a high ceiling or the underside of an upper deck. It has a single, large, square opening in its centre and the whole thing can pivot, see-sawing oppressively when the ship starts to founder.

A huge, curving wall of LED mesh-screen embraces the entire rear of the stage, and presents us with a sweeping, realistic view of the cloudy night sky and the dark, moonlit sea - whether retreating placidly in the ship's wake or crashing stormily against its stern. The screen also shifts us between locations below decks, from the steamy, cavernous engine room with its toiling pistons, to royal staterooms and spacious cabins looking out onto the sea through grand, rectangular or circular windows. The screen is built with a doorway-sized opening, cleverly constructed with a secondary screen behind it. This allows for the illusion of both the seamless continuation of ocean panoramas, and the effect of a usable doorway, leading off the deck onto an exterior rear gangway as required.

High up to either side of the stage, two digital clocks display the time of night in glowing red digits, and we hear them beeping stridently as we move from scene to scene.

The play is performed by a diverse 18-strong cast, with costumes rooted in the styles and silhouettes of the era.

The events of the play take place during the night of the celebration of King Claudius and Queen Gertrude's marriage - so the more upper-class characters are seen in party-wear throughout the play; the women in elegant, sequined cocktail dresses, and the men in formal, white-tie with black tail suits.

The crew of the Elsinore (among them **Barnardo** played by Djibril Ramsey and **Francisco** played by Leo Shak) wear dark blue naval uniform with high, white gaiters, white caps and blue and white neckerchiefs. The captain and officers (**Voltemand** played by Rob Alexander-Williams, **Cornelius** played by Mark Oosterveen and **Marcellus** played by Maximums Evans) wear smart uniform suits with double rows of brass buttons and gold rank-stripes on the cuffs, with white, badged caps with gleaming black peaks. When out on deck, the crew pull on heavy greatcoats against the cold.

A troupe of actors dress in their travelling clothes, with a touch of the circus carnival about them - the men in waistcoats, shirt sleeves and neck scarves, with plain, striped or checked trousers; the women in brown or blue dresses and long jackets. When they perform, their costumes have a classical Greek feel to them - long, white, tunics cinched at the waist, over white leggings; white half-face caricature masks, and black caps.

Maids wear white pinafores over grey dresses and a waiter attends guests in a short, collarless white jacket and grey pillbox hat.

Claudius, King of Denmark, played by Raymond Coulthard, is a white man in his late 50's, around 6ft tall, with greying hair and neat, short beard. With a charming, commanding presence, he dresses formally in black suits or white-tie evening wear with a blue ceremonial sash and royal crown. Later he changes into a velvet dinner jacket.

Gertrude, his new queen and Hamlet's mother, is played by Poppy Miller. A white woman in her mid fifties, Gertrude is first seen in elegant funeral black, with a striking, wide-brimmed round hat and veil. For most of the play however, following her wedding she wears a long ivory silk dress with an embroidered, lacy jacket on top. The dress is cinched at the waist, emphasising her slightly curvaceous figure. Her long, greying dark blonde hair is beautifully piled up in a flattering Edwardian style, set off by a diamond tiara. As the play progresses, the tiara goes and she replaces the jacket with a plainer brown cardigan, her hairdo

becoming wispy and wayward.

Their son, **Hamlet**, played by Ralph Davis, is a tall, lean white man in his late 20s, with a closely-shaved head and a lightly-stubbled face. Often brooding and intense, at times he's listless, at others full of frantic energy.

We first meet him in black trousers and a black velvet jacket and waistcoat over a black shirt. On deck, he adds a long overcoat. As events unfold, he goes barefoot in a loose, open-necked white shirt, his trouser legs often unevenly rolled up. At one point he even appears in just a moth-eaten, thin orange sweater and thigh-length white underpants.

Polonius, played by Richard Cant, is the King's advisor. Polonius is a white man in his early sixties, slim and straight-backed with a head of trim, greying sandy hair and a neat, short grey beard. He, too dresses formally in evening wear and, like Claudius, is also seen in a more relaxed, velvet dinner jacket. He has a fob watch and half-rim spectacles.

His son, **Laertes**, played by Benjamin Westerby, is a mixed-race young man - half-black Jamaican, half white-British - around the same age as Hamlet. Tall and athletic, he has mid length black afro hair with a sharp left parting and a moustache and short beard. Initially dressing in a preppy oxbridge style, in grey slacks, cricket jumper and camel overcoat, later on he becomes far more dishevelled -dirt-smearred in shirtsleeves and braces.

His younger sister, **Ophelia**, played by Georgia-Mae Myers, is mixed-white/black Caribbean like her brother - a tall, slim young woman with long, curly dark-brown hair, worn pinned back, with two ringlets hanging framing her face. She is spirited, playful and quick to smile, her feelings always clear in her expressive face. She's dressed for the wedding in a long, lilac satin dress with a ruffled skirt – the style feels slightly younger than she would probably choose for herself. On deck, she wears a far more chic, long, burgundy overcoat with a short shoulder-cape.

Horatio, played by Colin Ryan, is Hamlet's friend from university. He is white man around Hamlet's age, several inches shorter with a medium build. He has a slim moustache and medium-length wavy brown hair and wears round, wire-frame glasses. He dresses in green corduroys, a white shirt and braces under a brown tweed waistcoat and suit jacket. On deck he wears a grey tweed overcoat.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two of Hamlet's old schoolfriends, both around his age.

Rosencrantz, played by Jamie Sayers, is a tall white man, elegant in white tie evening wear, worn with an embroidered, gold silk scarf draped over his neck.

Guildenstern, played by Julia Kass, is a white woman a few inches shorter than Rosenkrantz, dressed glamorously in a close-fitting, pale-pink, sequinned cocktail dress, a splendid pale-pink, ostrich-feather plume in her hair.

The two of them have American accents.

The Ghost of Hamlet's father is played by Ian Hughes. Gaunt and pale, in his sixties, slightly built, with long, lank grey hair and short greying brown beard. He wears a dark, water-stained naval greatcoat with faded gold cuffs and braided epaulettes.

Ian Hughes also takes the role of the lead actor of the troupe of players, appearing fresher-faced, with short-shaved hair, a silver earring glinting on his right ear – but with the ghost's same greatcoat hanging open over shirt and waistcoat.

Other parts are played by members of the company and the **Ensemble** – Kat Collings, Jonathan Savage and CJ Johnson (who also appears as the Player Queen).