

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S SHAKESPEARE

# HAMLET

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*Hamlet* is the second *Young People's Shakespeare (YPS)* the RSC produced to tour into primary schools. The show is performed with no stage lighting and minimal set. The cast create atmosphere and set in a number of innovative ways. The exercises in this pack will enable you to explore the making of this YPS *Hamlet* with your group using activities inspired by the rehearsal room. Most of them are best suited to an open space such as a hall, but they can be done in a classroom with chairs pushed to the side.

Tarell Alvin McCraney, the director, has deliberately focused on the ghost story, the family relationship and the friendship between Horatio and Hamlet. These were the elements of the play that Tarell felt a young audience would most identify with in relation to their own lives.

# CREATING A MUSICAL CHARACTER



During the rehearsals of the 2009 Young People's Shakespeare production, the Director Tarell asked the cast to think of a song that reminded them of *Hamlet*. The actors came up with a variety of songs and music from Gnarl's Berkley's *Crazy* to folk tunes; these have been integrated throughout the show. This activity allows students to find their own theme tunes for the main characters in *Hamlet* which should help them consider the different qualities the characters in the play have. Because each group will choose different sounds and songs they will also discover that there are a number of choices that are available for every element of the play and that characters have a variety of qualities that can be brought to the forefront.



- Explain to the students that in a theatre, actors don't only use their scripts but also music and sound effects to help audiences get a sense of character and atmosphere.
- Using their voices and parts of their bodies, ask the group to come up with noises associated with emotions; happy, sad, scary, angry etc.
- Then ask the group to think of a happy song, a sad song, a scary song etc. These can be nursery rhymes, current songs, folk songs, or anything else they can think of.
- Explain that it is possible to get a sense of character from a song associated with them, especially a song that is representative of their qualities. In order to demonstrate this idea you might want to play them some of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*.
- Explain that the group are going to try and do something similar with three of the characters in *Hamlet*.
- Divide the group into teams of three. In each group one person will be Claudius, one will be Gertrude and one will be Hamlet.
- Give each group the character facts – ask each group to come up with a theme tune. You can choose the point in the play you want to go from but it is easier after Hamlet's discovery of his father's murder.
- The theme tune can be a modern or traditional song or a sound effect.
- Once they have chosen their character's theme tune ask them to consider how their character would stand or walk: Are they confident or nervous? What expression they might have, for example are they happy or sad?
- Ask each group to introduce their character by getting the other two people in the group to sing the theme tune whilst the person playing the character creates the pose or walk
- You might want to compare characters or create some class characters by choosing one song and movement quality for each character.
- Reflect on what impact music has on a character and how character and emotions are created through music. What is it about particular sounds that give a sense of character?
- You might also want to ask what the students would choose as their theme tune and why.



# EXPLORING THE GHOST STORY



For a Renaissance audience the appearance of the ghost would have been a strong signal of a malevolent force. For many people the ghost would represent a devil figure. For a modern audience our relationship with ghosts is more ambivalent but the ghost is an unusual occurrence. Creating a ghost on stage that can be taken seriously but is obviously different from the living characters is a challenge. Without lights this is even more difficult. Tarell and the actors have chosen one sound which represents the ghost. Hamlet's father also moves very slowly in contrast to the rest of the characters. In this activity your students will explore how to stage the ghost using sound and movement, together with the text used when the ghost first appears. You might want to allow the groups to use some minimal costume or a representative costume such as a mask or a cloak in this activity, and you might want to have some percussion instruments available. The activity breaks into several sections. You can do as much or as little as you choose with your group.



## Soundscaping the Battlements

- Ask the group to form a circle
- Ask them to close their eyes and imagine this scene:  
*It's night time. You are standing on the top of a castle in Denmark. The castle is by the sea. It's a cold night and the wind is blowing. Your job is to guard the castle.*
- With their eyes still shut ask them to quietly make one of the sounds that they heard in their imagination.
- Ask the students what they think they can hear.
- You might want to move students around in the circle so that groups making similar sounds are sitting close together.
- Once every student is confident with the sound they have chosen you can conduct the soundscape, building up the layers of sound and changing the dynamics.
- Once the soundscape has run for a few minutes ask them to think about how they feel in this environment.

## Seeing the Ghost

- Now tell them that the guards have seen a ghost the night before and are on the look out for his return.
- Ask them what they think of when they think of a ghost. What do ghosts look like? How do they move? What do they smell like? What do they sound like? Do they appear suddenly or gradually?
- Ask every student to stand in a space and to move like a ghost without making a sound. Remind students that this ghost signifies that something is wrong so it is important that it is more scary than funny.
- If the students are finding this hard, ask them all to move as slowly as they can without being still and then build up the speed until they are walking briskly. Then ask them to pick the speed they think is most sinister.
- Once they have chosen their ghost's speed they can think about the sort of gestures it might make. Ask the students to work out the way that their ghost might point and beckon.

- Finally ask them to think of one sound that will make it obvious to someone else that they are a ghost. Try and avoid the stereotypical ghost noises. You might want to try breathy sounds or groans. Again remind the group that this ghost has bad news to deliver and their sound has to represent that.
- Once they have ghosts that they are happy with ask the group to return to their soundscaping circle.
- Choose five people to stand outside the circle. The group will create their soundscape again – this time with their eyes open. The five students outside will enter as a ghost, do their two gestures and make their sound.
- You might want to repeat with different students.
- Discuss what they consider to be good qualities of the ghosts that they've seen.

### Introducing the Guards

- Pick three further students to play Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo who will need to speak the lines on page 6 before the ghost enters. They are guards. It will work best if the three students are standing across the circle from one another as it will help them project their voices over the soundscape.
- Ask the group to make suggestions for how these students will talk. Ask them to think about the atmosphere on the battlements. Remind them that the two guards saw the ghost the night before and that they have brought Horatio to see it now. How would they talk? Would they want to be overheard? Give the students a chance to practice their lines with these suggestions.
- The rest of the group who aren't the ghost or the guards start the soundscape. They have to be able to hear the speakers, so if they can't they have to make the soundscape quieter.
- When they are ready the student playing Barnardo starts speaking.
- After the character playing Horatio says *Tush, tush 'twill not appear* the ghost can enter the circle and make its noise. Then everyone should freeze.



### What's Your Reaction?

- What would be the reaction of the guards? You might want to try out some possible reactions.
- Explain that the ghost looks like Prince Hamlet's dead father. Does that make any difference? Ask the group to come up with a set of reactions based on this information. Is the ghost the scariest bit in this scene? What do they think is important about the ghost coming twice? What do they think the ghost wants?



# ACT 1 SCENE 1 (EDITED)

**BARNARDO:** Welcome Horatio, welcome good Marcellus.

**MARCELLUS:** What, has the thing appeared tonight?

**BARNARDO:** I have seen nothing

**HORATIO:** Tush tush, 'twill not appear

*Enter Ghost*

# EXPLORING THE USE OF EVERYDAY OBJECTS AS PROPS



In the 2009 YPS production an umbrella was used as a key prop to represent lots of different things in the production. This is partly because of its transformative nature; it can be long and thin one minute and open the next. In addition, the noise the umbrella makes as it opens is used to demonstrate scene changes. In this activity your students will explore creating different things out of ordinary objects, and then look at creating objects from the play using fans.

You will need:

1. A selection of household/classroom items (things with one moving or flexible part are best). Some suggestions are:

- A bunch of keys
- A hand whisk
- A skipping rope
- A dish mop
- A plastic cafetiere

2. Paper fans – up to 30 These could be made by the students or bought from toy shops.



- Collect the household objects into a container or PE bag.
- Sit the students in a circle and explain that they are going to pick an object and make it into something else by doing an action with it and saying “This is a...”.
- You might want to model the activity – examples include making the keys into an insect, the dish-mop into a person etc.
- Explain that the important thing is to believe that that is what the object is.
- Pass the objects round the circle and ask each student to try.
- Explain the key to success is using the object convincingly as the thing they say it is.
- If the students are finding this activity easy you might want two of the objects to meet each other.
- Once every student has tried, explain that they are going to have an opportunity to create moments from *Hamlet* using fans to create any props. They will be creating still images of the moment they are given.
- Split the group into smaller groups of five and assign one of the moments from the play to them. Explain that each student will be a character in that scene and will need to use their bodies, facial expressions and their fans to create the image of their scene.
- Give the group approximately 10 minutes to come up with their moment using the fans in the most creative way possible. During their creative time you might want to coach them to push their use of fans further. Remind them that the fans open and close and can be used together.
- Ask the group to show their moments in the order they occur in the play.
- What is the advantage of using only one prop to represent lots of things?
- Does it cause any problems?
- What else might they use instead of fans?



# KEY MOMENTS

A ghost has been seen on the roof of the castle at night. Two guards and Hamlet's friend are looking out for it at midnight.

The Queen marries her dead husband's brother, Claudius, soon after he dies. Hamlet, the Queen's son, is very upset about it.

Hamlet meets the ghost of his father who tells him that it was his Uncle Claudius who killed him. The ghost asks Hamlet to take revenge.

Hamlet gets some actors who visit the castle to play the murder of his father. The actor playing Hamlet's father is asleep and he is killed by poison being poured into his ear. The new King Claudius stops the play as the actor King dies.

Hamlet goes to speak to his mother. Polonius, the King's advisor, is hiding to hear what he says. Polonius makes a noise. Hamlet thinks he is King Claudius and kills him in his hiding place through a curtain.

# EXPLORING HAMLET'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS BEST FRIEND HORATIO



Horatio is Hamlet's best friend and confidant. As Hamlet trusts his mother and Claudius less and less he confides in Horatio more and more. In 2009 YPS Production the Director Tarell Alvin McCraney felt that this strength of friendship was easy for primary aged children to understand. Despite the fact Hamlet and Horatio are dealing with life and death, the fierce loyalty and trust between them parallels the strength of feeling that is demonstrated in the playground. This activity will enable students to explore friendship using Hamlet and Horatio's relationship as an example.



- Explain to students that they are going to explore the relationship between two best friends.
- Ask the group in pairs to make a frozen image of best friends. Pick out pairs that seem to be showing qualities of friendship – trust, love etc.
- Ask the students to make a second image showing the most important quality a best friend should have.
- Split the group in half. Ask one half to hold their images and others to look and discuss and then swap over.
- Repeat for the other side.
- Ask the group to think about why having a best friend with those qualities is important.
- Ask them to think of one situation when they have really relied on their best friend.
- Explain that for the rest of the session they are going to think about a pair of best friends. One of them is having a really tough time and the other one is trying to help him out.



- As a whole group they are going to look at the letter Hamlet sends to Horatio - a letter about the plot to kill him in England.
- Look at the scenario statement at the top. Ask the students to think about what they'd need to enact what happens in this letter.
  - Where are they?
  - What characters are in it?
  - Are there any props?
- They are going to use the text of the letter to help them answer the questions.
- Read the speech through – you might want to display it on a whiteboard and add notes as you are going along. Explain that one of the first things actors do when they are looking at a scene is to find actions for their characters.
- Underline any actions they can see in the letter.
- Pick three volunteers to be Hamlet, Rosenkratz and Guildenstern. Read the first three lines - what are each of them doing? Ask the volunteers to act this out.
- What does Hamlet find? Read the next three lines. Ask the volunteer playing Hamlet to complete the actions in these lines.
- What does the letter say? Read the final three lines. How would Hamlet react?
- Ask the students why Hamlet chooses to write to Horatio; what does this show Hamlet feels about him? What do they think Horatio's response will be?
- Explain that the students are going to explore what qualities of friendship Hamlet and Horatio show to each other during the course of the play. These can also be negative qualities if they feel that one or other is not acting in the right way towards their friend.

- In groups of four they will be given a scenario from the play and what their character actually says.
- They can follow a similar process to the letter, looking for an action for every line.
- Two people will be Hamlet and Horatio. The other two will vocalise the qualities they are showing during the scene by standing behind one of the characters and repeating the quality as they speak.
- Play the scenarios with the qualities back to the group.



- What are the most important qualities in Hamlet and Horatio's friendship?
- Why is it sometimes easier to talk to a best friend than a parent?
- What do you think Hamlet would have done without Horatio?



# HAMLET'S LETTER

Hamlet has been sent to England on a ship with Rosencratz and Guildenstern. Before they left the King gave Rosencratz and Guildenstern some papers to give to the people that meet the boat when they arrive in England.

My sea-gown scarf'd about me, in the dark

Groped I to find out them; had my desire.

Fingere'd their packet, and in fine withdrew

To mine own room again; making so bold,

My fears forgetting manners, to unseal

Their grand commission; where I found, Horatio,--

O royal knavery!—an exact command,

Larded with many several sorts of reasons

That, on the supervise, no leisure bated,

My head should be struck off.