

**National
Theatre**

Hamlet

Learning Guide

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About

This learning guide supports the National Theatre's production of the School's version of **Hamlet** directed by **Tinuke Craig**, which opened in **February 2022**, at the **National Theatre**.

Our packs are designed to support viewing the recording on the **National Theatre Collection**. This pack provides links to the UK school curriculum and other productions in the Collection. It also has a plot synopsis with timecodes to allow you to jump to specific sections of the play.

Here you'll find all the information you need to enable you to study the production and write about it in detail. This includes notes about all the key elements from performance style to design. You'll also find pointers for further research.

Background Information

Location – Dorfman Theatre, National Theatre

Age Recommendation – 8+

Cast:

Guildenstern	Curtis Callier
Polonius	David Ahmad
Hamlet	Kiren Kebaili-Dwyer
Claudius	Vedi Roy
Rosencrantz	Efé Agwele
Gertrude	Claire Redcliffe
Laertes	Chanel Waddock
Ophelia	Jessica Alade

Creative Team:

Director	Tinuke Craig
Adaptor.....	Jude Christian
Designer	Frankie Bradshaw
Lighting Designer	Paul Knott
Composer and Co-Sound Designer	Dom Coyote
Choreographer	Morgann Runacre-Temple
Co-Sound Designer	Clark Henry-Brown
Fight Director.....	Jeremy Barlow
Movement Director.....	Emily Thompson Smith

Teaching Information

This production is particularly suitable for:

- Teachers wishing to give primary pupils a first experience of Shakespeare.
- Students studying the play in Drama or English at secondary level.
- Anyone with an interest in theatre for younger audiences.

In particular you might like to explore:

- How the play has been adapted for a cast of eight actors, to be performed in the round.
- The contemporary setting of the play.
- The design of the play and how this helps to distinguish different characters and make the play clear and accessible for a younger audience.
- This production alongside other productions of Shakespeare for younger audiences which are available on the NT Collection (including *The Winter's Tale* and *Romeo and Juliet*).

Exercises and Activities

Introduction

This production was first performed as a tour to primary schools around the UK, before being performed in the Dorfman Theatre at the National Theatre. The production has been adapted for a Key Stage 2 audience, but still features the language and characters of Shakespeare's original play. It is an entertaining introduction to Shakespeare for children.

In this pack you'll find a series of exercises and activities that you can explore with your class before and after you watch the play.

Many of these activities are taken from the learning resource pack that was written to support schools who saw the original production.



Before you watch the production

It can be useful for children to understand some of the context surrounding the play and Shakespeare before you watch the production.

The exercises below are intended to be suggestions that you could use to introduce the play and link it to your curriculum.

Exercise 1: Setting

Although this production has a contemporary setting, the original Hamlet is set in the Middle Ages (14th/15th century) in Denmark. Explore with your class what it was like in Denmark or England at this time and how it differs from today. You might like to explore the following areas:

Daily Life

What are the differences between life in the village and life in the palace?

Jobs

What jobs did people do? Can you act them out?

Food

What did people eat and drink? Can you make a typical menu for a week?

Clothes

What did people wear? Can you design a costume for someone who lived at the time?

Homes

Where did Hamlet live? Make a castle/palace, look at different designs and how they built them to protect themselves. What were villagers' houses like by contrast?

A Day in the Life

What was a typical day like for a member of the royal family, or a servant or a villager? Can you act it out?

The Royal Family

Can you make a family tree for the royal family or paint portraits of past monarchs?

It's useful to explain to the children that one of the reasons that Shakespeare remains so popular and that his plays are so frequently performed is because his stories and themes have remained relevant to human life, no matter what time we are living in.

Exercise 2: Shakespeare's World

Explore with your class what we know about Shakespeare

Where was he born?

When did he live and work?

What was his family like?

Where did he go to school?

Did he have a wife/children?

What did he do in London?

Was theatre popular then? What was it like?

What are some of his famous stories?

Exercise 3: Shakespeare's Language

Shakespeare is celebrated as one of the best English writers of all time because of his fantastic stories and because of the inventive and creative language he used. He created many words that we still use today.

Here are some examples:

Bandit	Bedroom	Belongings
Bloodsucking	Buzzer	Chopped
Cold-Blooded	Control	Dawn
Downstairs	Excitement	Eyedrop
Fairyland	Fashionable	Full-Grown
Glow	Green-Eyed	Ladybird
Leaky	Lonely	Puppy-dog
Shooting star	Skim-milk	Unaware
Uncomfortable	Undress	Unreal
Upstairs	Useful	Well-behaved

Why not try:

- Giving the whole list of words Shakespeare invented to your class and challenge them to come up with a poem/story using them?
- Can your class invent their own brand-new words?
- Ask your class to talk for a minute on a given word.
- Shakespeare's Word Bingo – Choose a piece of modern text to read to your class. Ask students to call out when they hear one of Shakespeare's words.

After you've watched the production

Exercise 1: Theatre Posters

Discuss why theatre productions (and films) have posters and if it's to make people want to go see it, then what do the posters need to be? Does it have something eye-catching, telling you something about the story, the characters, the style, or the setting? What makes a poster interesting and intriguing, so you want to know more?

Show the children a selection of theatre and film production posters for Hamlet. You can google this to find many examples. Ask them to discuss the effectiveness of each. What does it show –any particular moments or characters? Why does it work? Not work? What do the colours suggest? What about the images? What does it tell you about the story? They should say why they feel as they do.

Put the children into groups of 2-3 and tell them that they are a team of designers. First ask them to brainstorm on a large piece of paper all the key words, themes, emotions, locations, and characters of the story that they know of so far. On a large piece of paper, the task is to design an equally eye-catching poster based on what they think are the key ideas or features of the story.

Get them to think about the 'feel' of the play and pay particular attention to what colours they might want to use. Ask the children to stick post-its to their design to annotate it with reasons for the image, colour, font, style, and colour design choices.

The children could then pitch their designs to the rest of the class –explaining their reasons. The children could make their posters using colouring pens/pencils or collage materials.

Suggestion: This activity could also be extended to the design of a programme which might include things like a synopsis, cast list and more details about the performance.

Exercise 2: Masking Tape Maps

Make a large, detailed masking tape floor plan of Elsinore on your classroom floor, that the children can inhabit. You could create a key and co-ordinates for important features on the map –the Great Hall, the harbour, Hamlet’s room, library.

Suggestion: You could go as far as replicating the character maps and demonstrate with the tape each character’s physical journeys throughout the story, labelling the tape with who’s travelling where and why.

Exercise 3: Exploring a Key Moment

The King is Dead! In this exercise, children will have the opportunity to write a news report about a key moment from the play. They will identify and discuss the purpose, main ideas and supporting detail contained within text, and use this information for different purposes. They will begin to understand persuasive language and different reporting styles.

- Begin by looking at example headlines and news reports in print. Then look at clips of news footage.
- Stage a 1 min ‘clip’ of a news reporter ‘live at the scene’ reporting from the palace the news that the ‘King is Dead’.
- Design a newspaper front page announcing the death of the King.

Exercise 4: Exploring Hamlet as a Character

Hamlet’s Journey Through the Play

Make a timeline of what Hamlet thinks he should do throughout the play. For each moment, focus on what he thinks of Claudius, the ghost, Ophelia, and Gertrude.

Hot-Seating

Discuss with the children why they think Hamlet makes the decisions he makes. You might like to try to interrogate this by using hot seating. You could place one of the children in the 'hot seat' to play Hamlet. Ask them to try and remain in character as Hamlet whilst they answer questions from the other children. This works best when the group is sitting in a circle or with the character sitting in a chair at the front facing the class for questions. Get the class to take turns in asking the character questions about their thoughts, feelings, and opinions on the other characters.



Plot Synopsis with Timecodes

00:00:15

A funeral bell tolls. The story begins at the funeral of Hamlet's father, the King of Denmark. Hamlet and his mother, Queen Gertrude attend the funeral. Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, and brother to the dead King, proposes marriage to Queen Gertrude. Gertrude accepts, Claudius now taking the throne for himself as the new King of Denmark. Hamlet still grieving for his father and can't believe his mother has remarried so soon ("one little month") after his father's death.

00:04:25

The Royal Family throw a party to celebrate the wedding. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz introduce the guests at the wedding and merriment is high. That is, until Hamlet enters, and shouts at all to leave. Hamlet is rebuked by Claudius, who reminds him that all sons lose their fathers, and "tis' unmanly" to grieve so openly. He asks Hamlet to think of him, as a father.

00:08:25

Ophelia admits to her sister, Laertes, that Hamlet has told her he loves her. The two speculate about Hamlet's love for Ophelia and loves path that they both shall tread. Enter Polonius, her father. He sends Laertes off on her travels. Alone with him, Ophelia admits that Hamlet has sent her many letters of describing his affection for her. Polonius scoffs at the idea and isn't pleased with the news.

Ophelia and Hamlet sing of their love of one another.

*Cause I love you, I love you, I'm gonna go
crazy it's too
good to be true, and if it's good for you too,*

*then stay in my arms, and I'm with you through it all
If you love me I'll be true*

Polonius grows stern. He warns of Hamlet's youth and naivety and tells Ophelia not to spend any more time with Hamlet.

00:15:00

A graveyard, the clock strikes midnight. Hamlet visits his father's grave. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears to him and asks Hamlet to take revenge and reveals to Hamlet that Claudius murdered him by pouring poison in his ear while he was sleeping and has now stolen his throne and his Queen. In rage, Hamlet vows to take revenge. He decides to pretend to be mad so that no one suspects he knows the truth about how his father died. Ophelia enters and Hamlet enacts his "madness" and flees the scene.

00:20:21

Ophelia tells Polonius that Hamlet has started behaving strangely. Polonius believes that Hamlet's behaviour can be put down to Ophelia refusing to see him, and that he is "madly" in love. He reports this to the King and Queen and shows them one of Hamlet's love letters to Ophelia as proof. The group concoct a plan to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia, to see for themselves Hamlet's madness.

Hamlet soliloquises "to be or not to be" about the pain of life, and the uncertainty of what comes after death.

Ophelia enters, and hands back the love letters that he has written to her. He spots the hiding Claudius and Polonius and understands that he is being spied on. He tells Ophelia that he doesn't love her, she should not have believed him, and to get herself to a nunnery.

Ophelia's heart has broken for the mad prince Hamlet.

Concerned about Hamlet's behaviour, Claudius, and Gertrude call Hamlet's old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the court and pay them to spy on Hamlet and to help them figure out why he is behaving so strangely, where they witness his strange behaviour first-hand.

00:29:20

Hamlet questions why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have come to visit and speculates that they have been summoned by the King and Queen, which on discovery of the money they have been given, the pair confirm that Hamlet is correct. Hamlet threatens the pair to tell him of their intentions. Rosencrantz says they have brought with them some actors, with them from England – the audience, to entertain Hamlet.

Hamlet decides to stage a play 'The Murder of Gonzago' which shows a king being murdered in the same way that his uncle murdered his father. He wants Claudius to watch the play to see his reaction to prove that what his father's ghost told him was true.

00:35.50

The stage is set. Hamlet asks Polonius to play the King Gonzago, and his mother, Gertrude, to play his Queen. They set the scene of a harmonious and beautiful love story. Claudius grows uncomfortable. The plan works and Claudius, when asked to play the murderer, cannot finish the scene, and calls the play to a halt, while Hamlet and his audience chant "murderer". Claudius leaves.

00:40:00

Hamlet is summoned to speak with the Queen. Polonius hides behind a curtain while Gertrude scolds for upsetting Claudius. Hamlet becomes angry with Gertrude for so quickly marrying his uncle and tells her that he believes Claudius did murder his father. Gertrude fears that in his anger, Hamlet is going to kill her. Polonius calls for help from behind the curtain and Hamlet stabs at it, killing Polonius.

00:44:00

Gertrude recounts the tale to Claudius, framing Hamlet's madness. As punishment for killing Polonius, Claudius sentences Hamlet to be sent by boat to England. In secret, Claudius writes a letter, asking for Hamlet to be killed in England.

00:46:45

Ophelia laments her father's death, killed by Hamlet, the man she loves. Laertes returns and demands that the King bring her father to him. Claudius reveals that he is dead, killed by Hamlet, Laertes swears revenge. Ophelia enters, adorned with flowers, growing more mentally unwell, and gives flowers to the present company, and exits.

00:50:00

Aboard the boat to England. In secret, Hamlet steals and reads Claudius' letter, instructing Hamlet to be killed. He amends the letter to read that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be killed instead and replants the letter where it was found. He jumps offboard and decides to return to Denmark. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are killed.

00:52:20

Ophelia walks alone by the river. Mentally unwell and extremely upset by Hamlet's rejection of her and the death of her father, she drowns. Gertrude discovers Ophelia and tells Laertes her sister is dead. Laertes wants to take revenge on Hamlet for both her sister and her father's death. Laertes mourns her sister's death when Hamlet enters, he sees Ophelia's body, arranged with flowers. Laertes lunges for him. Hamlet admits that he loves Ophelia. Claudius declares him as mad. Hamlet accuses Laertes of trying to outdo his mourning.

Claudius offers to help Laertes kill Hamlet. Laertes will challenge Hamlet to a duel. The tip of Laertes' sword will be covered with Claudius' poison. If Hamlet is slightly wounded, then the poison will kill him. Claudius is also going to poison a drink which will be given to Hamlet, in case that Hamlet escapes the mortal blow.

00:59:00

Hamlet enters the scene, alone. He laments the weight of his actions, watched on by the ghosts of those deceased. He apologises to Laertes, but the duel commences. Hamlet and Laertes are well matched in ability. The Queen toasts to the pair, unknowingly picking the poisoned cup, and drinks from it. Claudius watches in horror.

The final round commences, and Laertes lightly wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword. Laertes and Hamlet continue to fight, and in their scrabble, swap swords. Hamlet now wounds Laertes with the poisoned sword. Laertes realises what has happened. The effect of the poison begins to take hold, and Hamlet, Gertrude and Laertes fall to the ground.

Laertes tells Hamlet that Claudius is to blame. Hamlet stabs Claudius and finally makes him drink the poisoned drink. Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes and Hamlet all die.

The ghost of Ophelia steps into the scene, and bids Hamlet goodnight.

OPHELIA: Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince.
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

The company stand, the Royal House of Denmark are done.

END.

Find out More

If you would like to explore more Shakespeare with your class, there are other Shakespeare productions available to watch on the National Theatre Collection. Why not explore our productions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Winter's Tale*, both of which were also adapted for a Key Stage 2 audience?

Explore

The National Theatre's Google Arts and Culture exhibitions, including this one on Shakespeare at the National Theatre

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/WQVxxgh-hh8A8A>

Learning Hub

You can find more resources for schools and teachers on the National Theatre's Learning Hub. Search by key stage, subject, theatrical style or practitioner and discover an ever-growing library of short films, learning guides and digital exhibitions.

Find out more: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/learn-explore/schools/teacher-resources/>

National Theatre Archive

More materials relating to the production including the costume bible, poster, prompt scripts, programme, stage management reports and more are held at the National Theatre Archive, which is free to visit.

Find out more: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/archive>

We hope that you have enjoyed watching and studying **Hamlet**. Don't forget that there are many more fantastic productions to explore as part of the NT Collection. We hope that watching this recorded production has made you feel inspired to see and make live theatre. [Why not find out what's happening at your local theatre and how you can get involved?](#)

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Thank you