Understanding theatre craft in the play within the play (up to 60 mins)

This learning resource is designed to help students understand how different elements of theatre craft are used to create meaning, by a close analysis of Act III, Scene 2.

Who is it for?

This resource is designed for A-Level students of English Literature and Drama. It is not necessary for them to be familiar with the story of *Hamlet*, but it may be of particular interest to those who are.

This resource will be especially useful for students of Drama and Theatre in analysing how drama is created and performed, applying theatrical skills, and considering how meaning is created. They will also have opportunities to develop essay writing skills. Students of English Literature will be able to consider the context of production and its contribution to the meaning of scenes.

Learning outcomes

Learners will:

• Closely examine the role different elements of theatre craft (costume, lighting, etc) play within a scene.

- Discuss how these elements are used to create meaning within the scene.
- Create their own alternative interpretation of *Hamlet*, using theatre craft to create meaning in a new way.

You will need

- Access to the film Designing 'Hamlet' in the 'On Demand' player.
- Access to the clip 'The play within the play' in the 'On Demand' player.

Activities

1.

Show the film *Designing 'Hamlet'* using the 'On Demand' player. The film discusses how a theatre production finds a stylistic approach to visually represent the world of the play.

2.

Break the class into small groups and assign each a kind of theatre craft from the following list: costume; lighting; sound and music; set and props; movement; the ensemble (actors in the background).

3.

Hand out copies of the synopsis of Act III, Scene 2 which gives context to the scene the students are about to study. You can skip this step with groups who are more familiar with the text.

4.

Show the clip 'The play within the play' using the 'On Demand' player. This clip is taken from Act III, Scene 2 of the National Theatre's 2010 production, and shows preparations for, and the performance of, *The Murder of Gonzago*. While they watch, ask the groups to make notes on how their assigned element of theatre craft appears and is made use of in the scene, paying close attention to the differences between its use in the play, and in the play within the play.

To help them, you may choose to pose them the following questions:

- What does their element tell an audience about what is going on in the scene?
- What mood does it create?
- What does it draw attention to?
- What information does it reveal?
- How does it contribute to the director's interpretation of this scene?

5.

Ask each group in turn to share their observations about how their element of theatre craft was used within the scene. Encourage the rest of the class to build on the suggestions of each group, and share their own ideas.

6.

As more groups share their ideas, **steer the discussion toward the play's themes**. Ask the class which themes they think are most prominent in this scene, and how the elements of theatre craft have emphasised these.

EITHER:

7.

Ask students to write a short essay about how they might design a production of Hamlet, giving specific examples of how they might use one element of theatre craft in a meaningful way throughout the production.

OR:

7.

Ask each group to use these elements of theatre craft to come up with an alternative way of staging this scene. Their alternative design choices should focus on bringing out one or more of the play's themes.

8.

Ask each group to present their choices to the rest of the class, explaining their overall approach to design and how they plan to use each element of theatre craft in turn.

Synopsis of Act III, Scene 2

This scene takes place about halfway through the play, and appears just before the interval in the National Theatre's production.

Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark. His father, the King, recently died, apparently killed by a snake in his orchard. After his death, his brother Claudius took over the throne, and married the old King's wife, Gertrude. Hamlet, grieving for his father, and confused and upset by his mother's decision to remarry so quickly, is making the rest of the court uncomfortable – they would much rather he stay quiet and accept the new regime.

One night, Hamlet's father appears to him as a ghost. He tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius, and he commands Hamlet to revenge his murder by killing him. Hamlet is unsure whether he should believe the ghost – he worries it might be an evil spirit trying to trick him into killing someone. To cope with the stress of this situation, Hamlet pretends to be mad – which he thinks will also allow him some freedom to say and do things Claudius' regime would otherwise think too dangerous to allow.

Hamlet hatches a plan to determine whether or not the ghost was telling the truth about Claudius. He asks a group of actors to perform a play in front of Claudius and the rest of the court – a play which portrays a murder very similar to the supposed murder of Hamlet's father. Hamlet hopes that by watching Claudius during the play, he will see some sign of his guilt.

This scene, Act III, Scene 2, begins just as the actors are preparing to perform the play for the court.