

# National Theatre Collection

## *Hamlet* – Rehearsal Insights

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## About

This pack supports the National Theatre's production of *Hamlet*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, which opened on the 8th October 2010 at the National's Olivier Theatre in London.

These insights were prepared during rehearsals by staff director James Bounds. They introduce the process of creating, rehearsing and staging this play.

## The World of the Production

### The World of the Production

This production of *Hamlet* is a political thriller set in a contemporary but fictionalised former Soviet republic.



We have looked at a number of actual countries, and drawn influences from several of these, paying greater heed to Eastern European Christian states than Central Asian ones. It would, though, be a mistake to assume that our production is set in a specific country and watch the show trying to work out which.

During World War Two, the USSR occupied many Eastern European states which were then absorbed into the Soviet Republic in the Cold War. After the collapse of the USSR in 1989, these countries regained their independence.

For many of these nations, the legacy of the former Soviet Union remains strong, and they retain links with Russia. A number operate as authoritarian dictatorships, in which assassination attempts on the leadership are frequent and sometimes successful. Democracy is

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absent or a charade, and leadership, in many cases, passes through the family line. The principle armed forces are the security services rather than the army or the police, and both political dissidents and ordinary citizens are subject to routine surveillance and observation. People deemed politically dangerous may be imprisoned or quietly executed. Human rights are ignored and freedoms of speech, press, assembly and access to information are restricted. International travel is deliberately made difficult for citizens and internet access is limited and closely monitored. The parallels between these real-life states and the one in *Hamlet* are clear. Claudius and Polonius spy on Hamlet and Ophelia without a second thought; Polonius sends his man Reynaldo to spy on his son Laertes when he goes to Paris; Claudius has become King by assassinating the former leader, his brother, then withholds accurate information about the death of Old Hamlet from both the public and his inner circle; Hamlet and Laertes must seek permission from the establishment before leaving the country; Claudius has his own armed guards (the Switzers); and when Hamlet becomes politically dangerous he is dispatched to a friendly neighbouring country to be quietly disposed of.

There are two further aspects of life in former Soviet bloc countries which proved useful when creating our fictional state for *Hamlet*: religious life and the place of theatre.

The Soviets severely curtailed religious expression and ensured a clear separation between church and state. In many of these nations today, that division remains; religious observance may remain high, but the church has no role in the running of the nation, and political leaders need not express particular religious views. Since the collapse of the USSR, religious expression has soared in some countries as a means of manifesting a national identity which was for decades suppressed by the Soviets. In many, though – and, notably, in those we looked most closely to when creating our fictional state for *Hamlet* – religious observance, faith, and the impact of this on everyday thought and action is expressed in a fashion not dissimilar to Western European countries like Britain. These states are largely secular, and though many people



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purport to express a Christian faith, for many its impact on one's day-to-day life is quite minimal. In our production, Roman Catholicism is the predominant religion; we have inserted Catholic Latin rites into Ophelia's funeral, and the soldiers cross themselves in the Catholic fashion at the sight of the ghost. While we have also assumed Hamlet and Claudius have had a Catholic-informed upbringing, the production is not set in a country where faith infuses every action or thought, or in which the Church is knitted into the infrastructure of the state or government.

One of the central factors alienating contemporary audiences from Jacobean plays is the role religion plays in the lives and make-up of 16th-century characters compared to the largely secular nature of contemporary British audiences. Being able to set the play in a contemporary world in which religion isn't a predominant feature of everyday life allows one to, in a fashion, de-emphasise faith within the play and therefore ensure the characters and their journeys resonate better with the experiences of the audience.

The second aspect that proved useful was the attitude towards theatre. All too often in productions of *Hamlet*, the troupe of players are used as an opportunity to make cheap gags about pretentious actors and insert a few laughs half way through a long first half. This perhaps rests uneasily with their dramatic function in the climax of Shakespeare's Act 3 Scene 2 (the scene in which *The Murder of Gonzago* is performed).



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In many contemporary former Soviet republics, theatre is often seen as politically dangerous by the establishment because it is used as a means to express dissident or nonconformist views. Actors and theatre-makers may be subject to routine surveillance and performances are interrupted or banned by the authorities. In our production, the Players are dangerous intellectuals who create alternative theatre that subtly challenges the political status quo, giving their performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* a thrilling political dimension.

## Rehearsal Diary

### Rehearsal Diary

On the first day of rehearsal, Nicholas Hytner (director) and Vicki Mortimer (designer) show the cast the model box of the set, and talk through their ideas on the play and how Nick wants to direct and rehearse the play. We then sit round a table, and read the play. This can be quite nerve-wracking; some actors like to do a lot of preparation prior to rehearsals, others like to make discoveries in the rehearsal room. Everyone is of course very nervous.

#### Early rehearsals

We start at the beginning, and take each scene in turn. Some of the longer scenes are split into chunks, usually based on natural breaks in the action, to make rehearsing them more manageable. We start by reading the play round the table, and making sure we understand all the language. Many of the obscure references have been cut, but some lines need quite a lot of unpicking. Our version of the script is basically an edited version of the Second Quarto (published 1604), but with a couple of Folio (published 1623) passages included as well. It can be useful to have the Second Quarto, Folio and also the First ('bad') Quarto (published 1603) to hand, as they often have interesting alternative lines. Looking at how Shakespeare's text developed over years of performance to become the Folio version of the play can also be informative and useful, as it can give an indication of what was changed, perhaps at the request of actors, and allows us to infer what Shakespeare's audiences might have enjoyed and responded to.

Some of the big questions in the first few weeks include: the nature of the relationship between Gertrude and Claudius and what brought them together; the key points in Hamlet's journey through the play and the different manifestations of Hamlet's madness and antic disposition; and the family dynamic between Polonius, Ophelia and Laertes.

## Rehearsal Diary



Some of the thorny narrative issues are worked out here too: just how did the Players arrive in Elsinore? Were they invited, and by whom? And which, if any, are the additional lines that Hamlet asked them to insert into the play?

Working out the timescale of the play can be tricky too, but is hugely important. Realising that Hamlet has spent two months putting on his antic disposition between Acts 1 and 2 indicates that when Claudius, Gertrude and Polonius see him behaving oddly in Act 2 Scene 2 this is behaviour that they are used to, and also suggests to the actor playing Hamlet that the antic disposition has now become habitual. For the actors playing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the realisation that Act 2 Scene 1 through to Act 4 Scene 3 takes place over a 24 hours is hugely useful, because it shows that their characters are only in court for a single day before they are sent off with Hamlet to England. The performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* is therefore a huge event in their characters' journeys through the play because it is the first time they see Hamlet behaving with malice towards his mother and Ophelia. After this event – at least in our production – they become a lot less sympathetic to their one-time friend.



## Rehearsal Diary

### Later rehearsals

At the end of the second week, we've gone all the way through the play, and are now ready to go through it again. Some of the original choices we made about the characters change and we tweak some of the scenes quite substantially now that we're returning to them, though others will remain largely the same. Many of the scenes will feature secret service personnel to monitor people's movements closely, along with attendants, and so on, but these we put in place when we run through the play the third and final time in the later weeks of rehearsal. Whether a scene is public or private has, of course, an impact on the choices the actors make, so the presence of Switzers, secretaries and dignitaries makes a huge difference, even if they don't have any lines and simply respond to what is happening in front of them.

When it comes to rehearsing the big ensemble scenes, we start with simple chunks and then build more detail to add texture each time we come back to it. For example, when we rehearse Act 3 Scene 2, which climaxes with the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, we start by rehearsing the play within the play, to which we then add Hamlet and the other speaking characters.



## **Rehearsal Diary**

Finally we add Switzers. It's a very hard scene to rehearse, because the language used in *The Murder of Gonzago* is quite tricky for an audience to understand, and there are lots of complex character relationships which need unpicking and exploring. It's also challenging to stage because there are many technical elements that need perfecting. Our Players bring on their own set with them, so working on when and how they manage to do this in the scene is quite challenging. And of course we have to decide what sort of theatre-makers the Players are and the kind of theatre they might want to make.

At all times our focus in rehearsals is, roughly speaking, on the following areas:

1. Making sure we're consistent in the story we're telling about the relationships between the characters and the arcs the characters undergo throughout the play. *Hamlet* has a number of principle characters and there are multiple narrative strands to communicate.
2. Making sure all this is clear to the audience. Sometimes the main concern is staging (putting important moments centre stage), and sometimes it's about making sure the actors draw attention to important plot points so that the audience members notice them.

It's probably important to note that our discussions in rehearsal are almost entirely about the characters and their relationships, rather than a discussion about themes or philosophical ideas. It's also good to avoid trying to second-guess what an audience might think, although it is important to try and find moments where Hamlet can behave in a more obviously sympathetic fashion or demonstrate some contrition for the suffering he has inflicted on Ophelia, Gertrude and some of the other characters.

Because of the world we're setting the production in, the Switzers have become a major feature. Ophelia's coffin-bearers, Reynaldo and Osric have all become Switzers; they accompany Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when they are sent to look for Hamlet, and they attempt to protect Claudius and Gertrude when they feel they are under threat.

## Rehearsal Diary

### Fencing, dancing, voice and verse

In addition to the principle rehearsals, Rory Kinnear and Alex Lanipekun (playing Hamlet and Laertes) and Kate Waters, the fight director, spend two weeks before main rehearsals begin, developing the climactic fencing match which concludes the play.



The six actors who are playing the Players work closely with Fin Walker, the choreographer, to devise the dumb show that precedes *The Murder of Gonzago*. The National Theatre also has an excellent Voice Department so many of the actors have one-on-one voice and verse sessions with Jeannette Nelson, the production's voice coach.

# Research

## Contemporary context of the production

*Love Me, Turkmenistan* by Nicolas Righetti (Trolley, 2008)

A pictorial representation of life in contemporary Turkmenistan, one of the countries we looked to for inspiration in creating the world of the production.

*Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall* by Ana Fuder (Granta Books, 2003)

A fascinating book about spying and the Stasi in East Germany during the Cold War, which is a fascinating insight into life in a surveillance state.

*The Lives of Others* (film), directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

Contemporary German language film, again about spying and the Stasi in East Germany during the Cold War. Its depiction of theatre-makers and artists also informed how we approached the Players.

## Hamlet

*Hamlet Folio* edition edited by Nick De Somogyi (Nick Hern Books, 2001)

*The Shakespeare Handbook [Hamlet]*, by John Russell Brown (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

## Shakespeare (Performance, Biography and Academia)

*Performing Shakespeare* by Oliver Ford Davies (Nick Hern Books, 2007)

*Speaking Shakespeare* by Patsy Rodenberg (Methuen Drama, 2005)

*Talking to the Audience* by Brigid Escolme (Routledge, new edition, 2005)



## Research

*How to Study a Shakespeare Play* by John Peck (Palgrave Macmillan, 2nd edition, 1995)

*Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare* by Jonathan Bate (Viking, 2008)

*Shakespeare: The Biography* by Peter Ackroyd (Anchor, 2006)

