

A Plant [Un]Ltd & Susanna Hamnett Production

HOTEL ELSINORE

2 am.
A hotel room,
an unexpected will,
and a production of Hamlet
to rehearse before morning.

Susanna Hamnett: 'A virtuosic performer' *The New York Times*

STUDY GUIDE

Hotel Elsinore is a new play inspired by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Written (with adapted text
from Shakespeare) by Susanna Hamnett

Created by Susanna Hamnett, Joshua MacGregor and
Lily MacGregor

Directed by Susanna Hamnett with Joshua MacGregor

Additional direction by Nigel Richards

Costume and Set Design by . . . the Plant[UnLtd]Company

Lighting design by The Swallow Theatre

Voice-over by Alan Williams

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A NOTE TO THE TEACHERS

Thank you so much for inviting *Hotel Elsinore* to be part of your curriculum. We are thrilled that you have chosen to bring your students to see the play and to explore the themes of *Hamlet* with them as well as how the emotional threads of Shakespeare's play interact with, reflect, provoke, and mirror the stories of the characters in *Hotel Elsinore*.

The exercises and suggestions in this Study Guide revolve around both of the plays and the characters in them. We have placed more emphasis on Shakespeare's play and offered suggestions of ways to work with his language, but there are also sections for reflecting on the themes and feelings that arise from *Hotel Elsinore*.

Of course the exercises can be used interchangeably for the exploration of either play.

HOW THIS PLAY WAS CREATED

Once, quite a long time ago, I made a solo play called *Nearly Lear*. It was based on Shakespeare's *King Lear* and I have had the privilege of playing it to hundreds of people of all ages in many different countries and places.

I love thinking of new and unexpected ways to explore Shakespeare's plays. And the idea for *Hotel Elsinore* came from thinking about *Hamlet*. This new play was made with my son, Joshua and daughter, Lily, and a lot of the work was done during the Covid lockdowns when we were all living together. We had been thinking about making something together for a long time and our conversations would keep coming back to the idea of a story that somehow revolved around the themes of *Hamlet*. Then time would pass and we would get caught up in our lives. But then there was a moment. We were at the time living in Cornwall right at the furthest western tip of England, by the sea. We had gone to have afternoon tea in an old cliff-top hotel that was both a restaurant, cafe, and pub all in one. We ordered a huge pot of tea and pulled out our notebooks and began to brainstorm in earnest — drawing early sketches of what a poster might look like, outlining the characters and what their story-arcs could be. We had a feeling that maybe something had taken root. After a couple of hours we left and I went to the bar to pay. I wanted to leave a tip and asked the server for the tip jar. She handed it to me and it was an empty tin — an empty *Hamlet* cigar tin.

So we took that as a sign, because it was of course a sign, and began steadily to bring this play into being. We created a production company. We worked around our day jobs and commitments, evolving a creative process together, shaping ourselves into a professional company, developing our ethos, artistic discipline and working practice until we had something we could shakily put up on its feet and see if this idea that we had dreamt up actually had legs. We invited a dear actor friend to come to our house and, in our living room, we stumbled through the first version. It was rough and unwieldy, with a hundred problems to be solved — but there was an emotional arc and our friend was deeply moved by the journey of these three characters. And so we continued to delve and develop. I have learned that the best way to get something huge and daunting done is to set a seemingly impossible goal, and so we decided that we would take this still-evolving play to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe — the largest theatre festival in the world. We did everything — we fundraised and crowdfunded and designed and built our set and worked every spare moment and somehow found ourselves in August 2022 onstage in Edinburgh, the recipients of a prestigious award and with a shower of beautiful reviews. And now we are here sharing our work with you.

I love signs. They are real and if we can look out for them, these signposts can point us on our way, encouraging us to keep going with our visions and dreams.

BEFORE SEEING THE PLAY

Information and thoughts for before the students have seen the production.

THE PLAYS

Hotel Elsinore is actually two plays, two stories that meet in a hotel room in Denmark. It is a play about a play. And it is also a play within a play. These two plays collide, weave, and inform each other. We meet the Elder family — mother Greta, and her two teenage children, Henry and Olivia — in the middle of the night as they arrive in a dreary hotel room in Elsinore, Denmark. The baggage they carry is their literal suitcases, but also the family history that has been shaping them for years, as well as the death of their father. And a huge part of their baggage is tied up in a play — Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Because the play of *Hamlet* has haunted Henry and Olivia's childhood and because it is central to what happens in the hotel room between them, even a brief acquaintance with Shakespeare's play is suggested before seeing our performance.

SYNOPSIS OF THE TWO PLAYS

HAMLET

(sourced from the RSC website)



Kenneth Branagh in *Hamlet*

Young Hamlet returns home from university to discover the world-shattering news that, not only is his father (Old Hamlet) newly dead, but that his mother, Gertrude, has married Old Hamlet's brother, Claudius, and that Claudius is now king. The resultant instability has also led to threats of invasion by a soldier from a neighbouring state, Fortinbras.

Late one night, the ghost of Hamlet's father appears to him, accusing Claudius of his murder and urging Hamlet to revenge. This sets in motion a train of events that destroys both family and state.

No longer able to trust his own senses, the loyalty of his old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or even the affections of his young love, Ophelia, Hamlet fakes madness in an attempt to provide himself with proof that the ghost is telling the truth. Aided only by his most loyal companion, Horatio, he persuades a travelling band of actors to re-enact the story of his father's murder in front of Claudius and Gertrude, hoping that Claudius will be so stirred by remorse that he will confess his crime.



Mel Gibson in *Hamlet*

During an intense meeting with his mother, Hamlet hears a noise and realises that they are being spied upon. In rage, he stabs the hidden eavesdropper, believing it to be Claudius. Instead he discovers it is the King's adviser, Polonius, father to both Ophelia and her brother, Laertes. Polonius dies.

Afraid of what Hamlet might do next, Claudius has him arrested and despatched to England under guard, where he has arranged to have Hamlet murdered. Hamlet escapes, returns to his homeland and finally achieves his revenge.



Ethan Hawke and Julia Stiles in *Hamlet 2000*

The psychological effects of these upheavals on Hamlet lead to some of the greatest soliloquies in the English language and take the audience deep into the mind of Shakespeare's most famous protagonist.

Ophelia, having been violently rejected by Hamlet, hears that her father has been murdered. She loses her mind and eventually drowns herself. Her brother, Laertes, returns to court at the head of an angry mob, determined to find out the truth. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet is the only guilty party and agrees to help Laertes gain revenge.

On learning of Hamlet's escape and return to his homeland, Claudius convinces Laertes to challenge Hamlet to a fencing match and advises Laertes on how to kill Hamlet during the duel without arousing suspicion. As a back-up plan, Claudius also poisons a glass of wine which he intends to offer to Hamlet. Gertrude, however, drinks from the glass first and dies.

During the duel, Hamlet is slightly wounded by Laertes, who has tipped his sword with a deadly poison. In the ensuing



Adrian Lester and Natasha Parry in *The Tragedy of Hamlet*

tussle, the swords get switched and Hamlet wounds Laertes with the poisoned one. Realising that he is about to die, and that Claudius has manipulated the situation, Laertes confesses everything, forgives Hamlet and dies.

As the poison takes hold and he realises that he too is about to die, Hamlet finally carries through his dead father's wish for revenge. He forces Claudius to drink the remaining poisoned wine, which quickly takes effect. With his dying breath, Hamlet asks Horatio to ensure that his story is told accurately.

Young Fortinbras arrives at the head of his army, ready to assume control of a state whose royal family has been destroyed by betrayal, murder and revenge.

HOTEL ELSINORE



Joshua MacGregor, Susanna Hamnett, Lily MacGregor

It's 2 am and three wet, bedraggled people enter a dark, cold hotel room. Greta is mother to Henry, 18 and Olivia, 15. They have been travelling by train from London to get to Elsinore — where their father is expected to perform a solo performance of *Hamlet* at the famed Elsinore Shakespeare Festival. Henry Elder has been a famous actor for much of his life, his fame fading somewhat now with age, and the invitation to open this prestigious theatrical event has been a longed-for feather in his cap.

However and with a certain dramatic irony, he has suffered a heart-attack en route to Denmark and died on the train. Dramatically — again — before leaving London he had made his wife promise that if something should happen to him before they reached the iconic location, she must have him cremated and continue the journey with his ashes. His dream of getting to Elsinore must not be thwarted by mere death.

Elsinore of course is the setting of *Hamlet*, and Henry Elder's reputation has been made with his feted solo performance of this play. His long-suffering children have been dragged around the world as their father made his living performing the show over and over, and *Hamlet* has become as deeply etched into their minds and lives as a tattoo, as Henry bitterly bemoans.

Arriving with the urn, and dropping with fatigue, shock and grief, they discover that their father had a plan — and that he has left a will of sorts instructing the three of them to perform *Hamlet* at the festival in his stead — somehow coming up with a three-handed version to present to an audience the next morning. They will also receive his performance fee. The children are horrified, but their mother, a talented actress who has sacrificed her own career in order to support her husband's and to raise their children, and who has increasingly over the years relied on alcohol as a way of coping with her grief and disappointments, is overcome with excitement. At last she will get to be on stage — and in one of the great Shakespearean female roles — Hamlet's mother, Gertrude.

This edict from beyond the grave releases a turmoil of reaction from each of them like steam from a pressure cooker. There are Greta's repressed dreams of acting. Then Henry's frustrations at having spent years watching his undeniably talented father toil away at a version of *Hamlet* that has become irrelevant, tired and stale. And Olivia, wise beyond her years, who has been witnessing the growing dysfunction of the family unit and her mother's spiralling alcoholism without being allowed to express any of it. All these coiled, buried energies awaken and collide as the three of them find themselves engaged in spite of themselves in creating a new version of Hamlet in their hotel room. Through their exhaustion they find themselves being pushed by the ghost of their father, by Henry's need to prove that he can make something that has vigour and relevance, by Greta's ambition and by Olivia's desperate need to have a voice in her family.

As they enter into the play, the language and energy of the words and story carry them deeper into their own emotions until things reach a head and their own unacknowledged ghosts rise up to be recognised, given voice, and released.

AFTER THE PLAY

Reflections and Exercises for after the students have seen the production

EXPLORE



THE ROLE OF MYSTERY IN OUR LIVES

Have there been moments in your lives when you have been encouraged by something, maybe small, that acted like a sign or a message from life? For us it was the Hamlet cigar tin. Hamlet is driven to consider action by a supernatural force — the appearance of the ghost of his dead father. In *Hotel Elsinore* there is an unexplained letter from the father who somehow seems to know that he will die on the way to Elsinore and sets it up ahead of time that his family must perform the play. Do you believe that there are things that we cannot always explain that sometimes shape us?

THEMES

Some of the themes that we identified in *Hotel Elsinore*:

- Grief/loss
- Fathers and family
- Family communication and dysfunction
- Death
- Mystery and the unexplained
- A command from beyond the grave
- Addiction
- Mental health
- Paths to healing and reconciliation
- Creativity as a pathway to identity, self-expression and healing

Some of the themes that we identified in *Hamlet*:

- Grief/loss
- Fathers and family
- Mystery and the unexplained
- A command from beyond the grave
- Revenge
- Love
- Death
- Betrayal

EXPLORE



- Explore and discuss the thematic connections between the two plays. What parallels can you see between the *Hotel Elsinore* story and the story of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Even if they are not direct parallels, how do the themes mirror and echo each other?
- Can the students identify any other themes or issues and questions arising from each story?
- In *Hotel Elsinore* are any of the issues resolved by the end of the play, or is there hope for resolution going forwards?
- In *Hamlet* is anything resolved and how might the story unfold going forwards?

SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

In *Hotel Elsinore* it is the speaking of the words of Shakespeare's play that gives each of the characters the impetus to connect with their own feelings. Shakespeare had a remarkable connection to the visceral nature of sound and words. His text is both poetic and narrative — which means that he was able to contain and evoke so much of the emotional meaning of his stories through the language that he created — through the sound and vibration and rhythm. This is why his plays can resonate so deeply in us — sometimes even when we may not think that we intellectually understand everything that is being spoken.

Often we believe that Shakespeare's plays are now too old and no longer relevant to the present age and the problems that we face. In fact we discover that Shakespeare was writing about what it is to be a human being with all that this involves and brings, and that interestingly — although so much has changed in the outer contexts of our lives in the last 400 years — internally and emotionally very little, if anything, has changed. As human beings we feel the same things — love, hate, disappointment, jealousy, doubt, cravings for power, grief... Human beings themselves have not changed, and Shakespeare had a remarkable capacity to look into this human condition and shine a light on it and us through his stories and language. Shakespeare's themes are themes that flow through our own lives. We face them now, too. He writes about all the most vital and important things that can ever happen to a human being. And as he did so, he found new ways of expressing life and its feelings. He did it so well that so much of what he put into words we still use today.

Here are a few examples of some of the expressions that Shakespeare created that have become a part of our everyday language:

- Every inch a king
- One fell swoop
- Wild-geese chase
- Bated breath
- Eaten me out of house and home

- Soft-hearted
- Neither rhyme nor reason
- Pomp and circumstance
- The milk of human kindness
- Too much of a good thing
- For goodness' sake
- We have seen better days
- Good riddance
- A sorry sight
- A tower of strength
- It beggared all description
- In my mind's eye
- There's the rub
- The be-all and the end-all
- Rue the hour
- Hot-blooded
- To thine own self be true
- Swift as a shadow
- To be or not to be
- The crack of doom
- A dish fit for the gods

(Also please refer to the Resources Section for a wonderful piece created by English journalist, Bernard Levin, that further shows us how much Shakespeare has entered into our everyday language and life — and how we are speaking his words without even realizing it!)

THE ENERGY OF LANGUAGE – SPEAKING SHAKESPEARE

“Many of our habits today are about non-communication. Perhaps we don't trust what we say or believe that others are listening. We're often frightened of committing to any powerful idea or passionate feeling. This is not the energy at the heart of Shakespeare's world. The world he creates is full of inquisitive speakers and attentive listeners. His characters use language to connect to the world, not to hide from it. They use it to survive, to probe, to explore, to quest. They are not afraid of profound expression. [To play Shakespeare] we have to learn to care about our voices, our words, our ears and our ability to communicate and not be ashamed of caring”

from “Speaking Shakespeare” by PATSY RODENBURG

Shakespeare demands commitment. You cannot speak Shakespeare and be cool and disinterested. Feelings and actions take place in the same moment. These are characters with energy and passion. They are not afraid to speak and be heard. They need to communicate. To play these characters we have to connect the need with vocal energy.

When you speak Shakespeare you cannot hide behind the words. They have to be spoken fully and with a deep connection to breath. Breath and speech go together and bring us into a more connected and grounded experience of ourselves and our feelings. That is why working with Shakespeare's text can be such a thrilling and energizing thing to do.

Here are a few suggestions for exercise and games to begin to connect with some of Shakespeare's text. Once you have experienced the power of that connection you can apply it in your own life. When we can find and own words we are empowered to speak our feelings and our truths.

DRAMA & LANGUAGE EXERCISES

EXERCISE:



Have the group stand in a large circle. One person in the centre.

The task of the group is be disinterested in the person in the centre. They may even talk quietly amongst themselves.

The student in the centre will use one phrase to gain the attention of the group, compelling their attention with the power of the words and the want and need to communicate.

They may repeat the phrase as often as needed until they is holding the focus of the whole circle. The group must understand that they must not willfully refuse to react to the energy of the player in the centre. Their job is to allow the words to compel their attention—to get their attention with a phrase. As the students commit to the phrase—they will feel how much power there is in the movement of the words.

HINTS FOR THE SPEAKER:

- keep your knees unlocked and your breath low
- make sure you are not locking your jaw
- make eye contact with the circle
- let the need and urgency of what you are saying bubble up and power your words and vocal energy

Here are a few suggestions of phrases from the play that may be suitable for this exercise, and of course, the students can themselves pick a phrase that catches their imagination:

- The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King!
- Oh my lord, I have been so affrighted
- Murder most foul as in the best it is
- What wilt thou do, wilt murder me?
- Hamlet thou hast thy father much offended
- There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio than are dreamt of in your philosophy

EXERCISE:



Each student may choose a monologue (or part of one) from the play.

If possible the piece should be a minimum of eight lines, and the students should work towards learning it by heart.

In order to connect and engage with the language, the following exercises can be helpful:

- Make sure that the students find out what every single word means
- Have each student whisper the speech quietly to themselves under their breath
- Repeat. This time they must stop and find a picture in their minds for every image and description in the speech
- As they speak the speech quietly to themselves, have them just speak the vowels.
- Then do just the consonants (they will likely feel that this is silly, but encourage them to feel the quality of the sounds)
- If there is space, have the students speak their speech as they walk about. Each time their character has a change or shift in their thinking, the student should turn and change direction (without bumping into anyone else!). This allows them to experience how much movement there is in any given speech; how agile the character's thoughts are.
- In pairs. Have the students speak their monologue to their partner while keeping eye-contact and pushing against their partner's hands. The resistance that is offered in the pushing allows for a deeper connection with the abdominal muscles and the breath. They should feel much more power and vocal strength after pushing.

HAMLET CHARACTER EXERCISES

(The following exercises can also be adapted for the *Hotel Elsinore* characters)

EXERCISE



Invite the students to cast *Hamlet*. If they were to cast a film or a theatrical version, who would they have to play the various characters? They could choose from actors that they know, or from famous and well-known personalities from politics, music, television.

Discuss:

- Why have you chosen each actor?
- What are the characteristics that make you feel that they either resemble the characters in the play or that they would be able to play them well?

EXERCISE:



Hot-seating. One student at a time takes on the role of a particular character in the play and then is interviewed by the rest of the group. The important thing is for the student to stay in character to answer the questions. There are no 'right' answers here. It is a chance for them to allow their imagination to lead, and for spontaneity to release deeper intuitive insights that can help bring the character more fully to life.

The students may decide the context for the interview (ie.newspaper interview, TV show etc).

STORY EXERCISE – OVERVIEW

The following is an Almost Impossible Exercise! The goal can be achieved, but much of the learning and the fun lies in the attempt. It allows students a chance to grapple with the main themes, to try and grasp the bare essentials of story and character, and to be endlessly inventive as they figure out ways of communicating these essential elements in a fantastically short time!

This may be done as a solo exercise, or in groups of two or three.

You may wish to give the students a short amount of prep time, to figure out their approach or strategy.

EXERCISE:



To re-enact the whole story of *Hamlet* in three minutes.

(You could also try one minute or five minute versions)

Here are a few ideas for adding to or adapting this exercise:

- Ask each student to bring in one or two costume pieces and a prop or object. The choice of what they bring should be fairly impulsive (ie. they should not think too hard ahead of time about how things will be used. The pile of props might end up including things as random as a saucepan and an alarm clock, for example.)
- Before beginning their 'speed version' of the play, each student can pick from the costumes and objects anything that they feel will help them with their storytelling and characterization.
- A good variation on this is to have other students dress the performers from the pile. This encourages the actors to wear costumes that they might not have picked for themselves, thereby avoiding 'safe' choices and potentially opening up new feelings and perceptions about the roles they are about to play. It is also a fun exercise that allows everyone to loosen up a little and remember that they are playing and are to have fun!

RESOURCES

'QUOTING SHAKESPEARE' BY BERNARD LEVIN

“If you cannot understand my argument, and declare “It’s Greek to me”, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger; if your wish is farther to the thought; if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool’s paradise -why, be that as it may, the more fool you , for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe that the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then — to give the devil his due — if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish I was dead as a door-nail, if you think I am an eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then — by Jove! O Lord! Tut tut! For goodness’ sake! What the dickens! But me no buts! — it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare.”

FURTHER RESOURCES



Books:

Speaking Shakespeare, by Patsy Rodenburg (Palgrave)

Evoking (and forgetting!) Shakespeare, by Peter Brook (Nick Hern Books)

Film:

Hamlet, directed by Franco Zeffereilli (1990)

Hamlet, directed by Kenneth Branagh (1996)

Hamlet 2000, directed by Michael Almereyda (2000)

The Tragedy of Hamlet, directed by Peter Brook (2002)

Weblinks:

More information about the play can be found here: www.susannahamnett.com/hotel-elsinore
and <https://www.facebook.com/plantunltdproductions>

Three Hamlets: [Three Hamlets — To be or not to be / Scott & Cumberbatch & Tennant](#)