HAMLET: HISTORY OF PERFORMANCES

Hamlet was first performed, probably in 1600 or 1601, by **the Lord Chamberlain's Men, who were to become the King's Men in 1603** when James VI of Scotland came to the throne as James VI and I. Richard Burbage took the role of Hamlet. Tradition proposes, with uncertain authority, that Shakespeare may have played the Ghost of Hamlet's father. Other actor sharers included John Heminges, Henry Condell, Thomas Pope, Augustine Phillips, Will Sly, and Robert Armin, who had joined the company in 1598 and seems to have specialized in comic roles, including probably the Gravedigger in this play. Hamlet may have been one of the plays used to open the company's new theatre, the Globe, on the south bank of the River Thames. The company regulars took the important speaking roles of Polonius, Claudius, Laertes, Horatio, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Fortinbras, and Osric. Hired extras could be retained to play the soldiers on watch, ambassadors, actors, lords, gentlemen, soldiers, sailors, attendants, a priest, and the like. Boy actors portrayed Gertrude, Ophelia, and the Player Queen in "The Murder of Gonzago."

The accompanying illustration of the Swan Theatre, based on the observations of a Dutch visitor to London in 1596 named Johannes de Witt, gives us the best evidence we have as to the theatrical space available for performances of Hamlet, even though we cannot assume that the Globe Theatre resembled the Swan in every detail.

[](https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid=B%2bLVlEA7&id=FDCAB5FD8D9BE4DB78843F7749302D5E3FE15171&thid=OIP.B-LVlEA7x_y34pv2Pnk0awHaJ3&mediaurl=http://static.wixstatic.com/media/136149_5c907858afdd458053777110b04d1ad8.jpg_srz_374_498_85_22_0.50_1.20_0.00_jpg_srz&exph=498&expw=374&q=Theatre+the+Swan+1595&simid=608001585552819632&selectedIndex=0)

The stage was broad and deep, measuring approximately 43 feet from side to side and 27 feet from front to back. A roof, supported by two pillars, protected the players from inclement weather. Seating was provided for well-to-do spectators by a roofed polygonal structure approximately 70 feet in diameter. The theatre was otherwise open to the elements. Patrons of relatively modest means paid a penny to stand in the "yard" encompassing the stage on three sides. These were the "groundlings" to whom Hamlet refers to somewhat condescendingly at 3.2.11. Perhaps two large doors at the back of the stage, as shown in the De Witt drawing, opened into what was known as the "tiring" or attiring house for the actors. A gallery over the back wall could be used for entrances "above," but could also provide seating for spectators. Although the use of scenery was minimal, the building itself provided a handsome milieu for action that could be imagined to take place, in Hamlet, at the court of Elsinore or on the battlements of the castle or in a graveyard. Action could be supposed to occur in Polonius's chambers (1.3, 2.1) or the Queen's private rooms (3.4) or on the coast of Denmark (4.4) or in a churchyard (5.1) without alteration of scenery; the action moved swiftly from scene to scene as the actors informed the audience of where there were imagined to be by their gestures, costumes, and dialogue. The mistaken slaying of Polonius in 3.4 required that he be hidden at first behind an "arras" or curtain (3.3.28) in the Queen's chambers, probably hung over a doorway backstage or over a "discovery space" in that tiring house façade which, though not shown in the De Witt sketch, seems called for in numerous Renaissance London plays.

A trap door in the main stage must have provided a space for Ophelia's grave in Act 5. A tribute to Richard Burbage in 1619 observed, "Oft have I seen him jump into the grave." The unauthorized 1603 quarto supports this evidence with its stage directions, "Leartes leaps into the grave," followed then by "Hamlet leaps in after Laertes." Earlier, as we learn from the authorized second quarto, the Ghost's voice could be heard "under the stage" (1.5.58) as he moved from place to place. The appearances of the Ghost in Act 1 were probably located on the main stage; the gallery was too small and impractical for such complex action. When the Ghost appeared to Hamlet and the Queen in 3.4, in her private chambers, he seems to have been dressed "in his nightgown," according to a stage direction in Q1. Earlier, in Act 1, the Ghost seems to have appeared in full armor, with his "beaver" or visor on his helmet "up" so that his face and "sable silvered" beard were visible (1.5.232-45). Costuming was generally contemporary for the years in which the play was produced.

Large props, sparingly employed, must have included thrones for King and Queen. The play within the play about the murder of Gonzago began with a dumb show and must have been attractively spectacular, with a sizable audience on stage. Hand-held props were plentiful: mattocks and spades, swords, rapiers, daggers, tables, cushions, bouquets of flowers, skulls, recorders, and still more. Musical effects included Ophelia's singing, and numerous fanfares of trumpet and drum celebrating royal entrances and toasts of wine. Since lighting effects were essentially unknown, and since the stage action was open to the heavens, the suggestion of nighttime and ghostly visitations must have been achieved by gesture and terse conversation. Hamlet's remarks to the players on how to practice their art (3.2.1-45) tell us much about the company's acting ability and its fervent intent to improve on the practices of previous generations of actors.

Hamlet was performed often in its early years, including a performance at court in 1619. When the theatre reopened in London, after a mid-century hiatus of conflict between Puritans and Royalists, with the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660, Hamlet was among the first plays to be shown in revival. It had become the property of **William Davenant, impresario of the Duke of York's Company.** This Hamlet, though it was less altered than some other of Shakespeare's plays, was shortened from the original by some 841 lines. Gone was most of the action involving Fortinbras, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, along with Hamlet's advice to the players and his encounter with the Captain of Fortinbras's army and a good deal else. Performances were now indoors, at the Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre, with a proscenium arch, artificial lighting, and scenic effects showing views in perspective by means of movable painted flats. **Thomas Betterton** was the reigning actor-manager of the Restoration period, meaning that he starred in the play's title role while also managing the company in which he owned a major share. Betterton was greatly admired, by **Samuel Pepys** and others, for his ability to convey "an almost breathless astonishment, or an impatience, limited by filial obedience," in his encounters with his father's Ghost. Gertrude was played by **Elizabeth Barry**, one of the famous actresses who had by now replaced the boy actors of Shakespeare's era. **Elegance and refinement** were the order of the day, in accord with Restoration manners that had in good part been imported from France when the royal family of Charles I returned from mid-century exile. The Drury Lane Theatre provided another venue for theatrical performances, sometimes featuring a combined acting company that monopolized legitimate drama in London until 1695 when a newly patented company opened at Lincoln Inn Fields. **Betterton was the Hamlet of the London stage from 1661 until 1709, when he was seventy-four. He was succeeded by Robert Wilks, who played Hamlet until 1732.**

**David Garrick** excelled in the role of Hamlet at Drury Lane (briefly also at Covent Garden) from the **1740s down to his retirement in 1776. Garrick aided materially in raising Shakespeare to the iconic status of being England's greatest writer;** Stratford-upon-Avon became as a place of pilgrimage in 1769, when Garrick staged a three-day Shakespeare Jubilee centered mainly on Garrick's stirring recital of his own "Ode Upon Dedicating the Town Hall, and Erecting a Statue to Shakespeare." (No plays were performed on this occasion.) **His Hamlet thrilled audiences to the core, most of all when a specially made wig caused his hair to stand on end. A trick chair fell over, in a piece of stage business inherited from Betterton. Garrick trembled so at the appearance of the Ghost that his knees knocked together, his hat fell off, his mouth stood open, and he looks so petrified with terror that his friends feared he would fall to the ground. Despite this great success, Garrick undertook in 1772 to revise the text of Hamlet in a way not heretofore attempted.** Hamlet never embarked for England at all. Laertes did not enter into a conspiracy with Claudius to kill Hamlet. When the King attempted to intervene in the duel between Laertes and Hamlet, he was fatally stabbed by Hamlet. Hamlet was slain by Laertes but forgave him, whereupon Laertes agreed to rule jointly in Denmark with Horatio. Fortinbras, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern were omitted from this ending. Gertrude lived on, though having fallen into a remorseful trance of near madness. Garrick soon regretted having undertaken this revision, and it quickly disappeared from stage history.

Romantic authors like **William Hazlitt,** intent upon portraying Hamlet as a **melancholy and sensitive poet incapable of forthright action,** considered Hamlet a play ill suited for performance. Though Hazlitt admired **John Philip Kemble and Edmund Kean** as the great Shakespearean actors of the day, he considered them largely incapable of portraying Hamlet as a man "wrapped up in his own reflections" who only "thinks aloud." He should be acted with "a pensive air of sadness," In Hazlitt's view, "full of weakness and melancholy," "the most amiable of misanthropes" (Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, 1817). Kemble's sister, **Sarah Siddons**, played Gertrude in 1796 and even undertook Hamlet in a "breeches" performance. Kemble was a great success, despite Hazlitt's strictures, at the rebuilt Drury Lane Theatre (after a fire in 1809) with a capacity of over 2,000 seats. **Middle-class audiences were increasingly large in these early years of the industrial revolution. These audiences, demanding more elaborate and expensive scenery, were gratified by new scenic effects, especially those introduced by Edmund Kean at Drury Lane. William Charles Macready expanded this new opulent style of presentation, at Covent Garden and then at Drury Lane from 1841 to 1843. His Hamlet in 1837 was lauded by one reviewer as** "a series of glorious pictures." The backstage set for the scene a Ophelia's grave featured a Gothic-windowed building and masonry archway flanked by trees. Macready located the play within the play in 3.2 in an elaborate theatrical structure ornamented with drapes, curtains, statuary, and carved paneling, surrounded by an onstage audience that included King and Queen, Hamlet, Horatio, Ophelia, numerous courtiers, and spear-carrying guards. Macready's other great contribution to theatre history was to restore the text to something more approaching its original features than had been the revisionary custom for nearly two centuries. (He also abandoned the happy ending of King Lear that had held the stage since Nahum Tate's production of 1681.)

Later Victorian productions were the work of actor-managers like **Samuel Phelps, Charles Kean, and Henry Irving, whose reign as Hamlet at the Lyceum from 187i to 1902 achieved new heights of opulent and expensive set-building**. The battlements of Elsinore Castle and surrounding massive rocks were bathed in the soft light of the moon, shimmering over an expanse of water as dawn approached. Ellen Terry, touchingly triumphant in her mad scenes, played Ophelia for Irving in a production that ran for 108 performances in 1878-9. Like other actor-managers before him, Irving ended the play with Hamlet's "**the rest is silence," thereby giving him, rather than Fortinbras, the last word.**

The early twentieth century saw a **marked departure from this opulent and expensive staging**, even if that tradition still persisted in the lavish productions of Herbert Beerbohm Tree in 1909 and 1910. **William Poel introduced a revolutionary return to something like Renaissance staging when he directed a reading of Hamlet at St. George's Hall on Regent Street, London, in 1881 and then 1914,** based on the 1603 unauthorized quarto. Poel employed an unadorned stage framed on four sides by red curtains. **George Bernard Shaw enthusiastically endorsed** the restoration of Shakespearean staging to something like its original mode of production. Inspired by these new promptings, **Harley Granville-Barker championed the cause of a bare-stage production** unencumbered by the neoclassical preconceptions that had made for long delays at the presumed scene divisions of nineteenth-century Shakespearean staging. A modern-dress Hamlet first took place in 1925, under the direction of Barry Jackson and H. K. Ayliff, at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. **Muriel Hewitt, dressed for her role of Ophelia in the style of the flapper generation of the 1920s, was both fascinated and anxious by the prospect of an enlarged sexual freedom.**

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation of Hamlet, enlarged upon by Ernest Jones in his **Hamlet and Oedipus** (1910, 1949) as **emotionally paralyzed into inactivity by his Oedipal plight as the stepson of a hated rival for his mother's affection**, was adopted by some directors, notably Tyrone **Guthrie and Laurence Olivier in 1937-8.** An improvised indoor performance at Kronborg Castle (i.e., Elsinore) in Denmark obliged the performers **to act in the round**, with such startlingly revolutionary effects that a new mode of staging came into being. **Olivier's film version** in 1948 imagined Hamlet as "**the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind."** A powerful film version **in Russian directed by Grigori Kozintsev,** with a translation by Boris Pasternak and a musical score by Dmitri Shostakovich, in 1954 looked at the play in the light of **Stalin's prison camps:** the Hamlet of this film was heroic in his resistance to oppression. Michael Benthall set the play in **Victorian England** in his 1948 production at Stratford-upon-Avon, with two actors, Paul Scofield and Robert Helpmann, in the role of Hamlet on alternate nights. Once the precedence had been established of transferring the mine en scène from **Renaissance Denmark to more modern locations**, other experiments followed. **Richard Burton's** Electronovision enactment of the title role in 1964 rejected the melancholy and pensive interpretation insisted upon by Goethe, Coleridge, and Ernest Jones in favor of a **virile and rough-edged Hamle**t dressed informally as if at a rehearsal. Burton was, after all, the son of a Welsh coal-miner who had found his theatrical calling in the Oxford University Dramatic Society.

Disaffection with social and political life in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, in the era of civil rights struggles, East-West conflict, the assassinations of President Kennedy (1963), his brother Bobby (1968), and Martin Luther King Jr. (also 1968), and increasing resistance to the Vietnam War prompted a number of productions of Hamlet caught up in a mood of **disillusionment and cynicism.** **Peter Hall's Hamlet** at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1965 dwelt, in Hall's words, on **"an apathy of the will so deep that commitment to politics, to religion or to life is impossible.**" The observation of Hamlet (played by David Warner) that "**Denmark's a prison"** (2.2.244) seems painfully appropriate to a **Europe now divided by an Iron Curtain. Glenda Jackson as Ophelia was a neurotic shrew**. Jan Kott's Shakespeare Our Contemporary (translated into English in 1964) inspired a number of directors to speak through Hamlet about a **nightmare world of existential impasse**. Nicole Williamson, in Tony Richardson's 1969 production at London's Roundhouse Theatre, was a **snarling, ill-tempered working-class rebel against the British Establishment, speaking in the guttural rhythms of his social class.** **Buzz Goodbody, the first woman to direct a major production of the play** in Great Britain, **converted The Other Place at Stratford-upon-Avon into a prison by shutting the theatre doors and not allowing the audience to exit for any reason until the show was over**. In the United States, Joseph Papp opened his 1968 production at the Public Theater with Hamlet (**Martin Sheen)** in a **coffin-like cradle at the foot of Claudius's and Gertrude's bed, thereby invoking a nightmare atmosphere of Oedipal and incestuous conflict.** Heiner Müller's Die Hamletmachine, first produced in Paris in 1979, took the point of view of artists and intellectuals alienated from the **police state of Soviet-dominated eastern Europe.** An expanded version of over seven hours at Berlin in 1989-90 turned the play into an avant-garde disquisition between a ***schizophrenically impotent Hamlet and a revolutionary Ophelia.***

The rise to prominence in 1980 and afterwards of new historicism, feminism, and deconstruction among other new schools of criticism was sure to find theatrical expression in an age still powerfully attuned to the existential philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, to the revisionary manifestos of Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski, and to the absurdist drama of Eugène Ionesco and **Harold Pinter**. Jonathan Miller's 1982 production at London's Warehouse Theatre presented Hamlet (Anton Lesser) as "a rather unattractive character, a tiresome, clever, destructive boy who is very intelligent but volatile, dirty-minded and immature." Adrian Noble's production in 1992-3 with **Kenneth Branagh** in the title role was highly self-referential in a way as to suggest that everything in life is staged and hollow. Alexander Tocilescu, at Bucharest's Bulandra Theatre in 1985, saw the world of Denmark as a theatrical version of Nicolai Ceauçescu's Stalinist regime in Rumania; the part of Hamlet was taken by Ion Caramaitru, who was soon to become **the leader of the revolution overthrowing Ceauçisco** in 1989. In John Caird's production of 2001-2, the set was simultaneously a **prison and a cathedral**. For **Steven Pimlott**, directing the play at Stratford-upon-Avon in 2001, Hamlet was **a killer, the embodiment of a youth culture rebelling against an unfeeling world.** Surveillance cameras and searchlights looked down upon the drab, grey world of Denmark. Larry Lamb as Claudius was a master of "spin-doctoring" in a way that invoked the political world of George W. Bush and Tony Blair. **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern shared a marijuana joint with Hamlet.** Hamlet dispatched Claudius with a revolver, whereupon those who survived the **holocaust** at the end of the play fawningly greeted Fortinbras as the new strongman of the hour. Hamlet has proved to be a powerful weapon for devastating critiques of President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s until his overthrow in 1970.

Jude Law, as Hamlet at Michael Grandage's production at the Donmar Warehouse in 2009, was a **media sensation, Law himself having been identified as one of the ten most handsome males in show business. David Tennant's** interpretation of Hamlet, under the direction **of Gregory Doran** in 2008-9, was intense and intelligent. A filmed version was set in a nineteenth-century missionary school chapel. Another insightful production, starring **Benedict Cumberbatch** at the Barbican Theatre in London under the direction of Lyndsey Turner, was made available on live television in 2015, enabling large audiences to see a show that was quickly sold out in London. Cumberbatch had proved to be an **astonishingly fine actor** in updated Sherlock Holmes episodes and in the film The Imitation Game**. War in this production was imminent in** the many bomb blasts and battlefield carnage brought about by Fortinbras's huge army.

Hamlet has been filmed more often than any other Shakespeare play, and justly so. The Danish early movie star Asta Nielsen played Hamlet in a 78-minute silent version filmed in 1920. In addition to Laurence Olivier's version of 1948 and Grigori Kozentsev's of 1954, notable film adaptations include a **1980 BBC version with Derek Jacobi as Hamlet and Franco Zeffirelli's film of 1990 with Mel Gibson as an action hero, along with Alan Bates as Claudius, Glenn Close as a Gertrude who is deeply attracted to her new husband, Helena Bonham Carter as a jittery and unhappy Ophelia, Ian Holm as Polonius, and Paul Scofield as the Ghost.** Such star power and the film's pictorial handsomeness ensured a commercial success. Kenneth Branagh's four-hour complete Hamlet (1996-7) featured Derek Jacobi, who had played Hamlet in 1980, as the King, along with Julie Christie as the Queen, Kate Winslet as a distraught Ophelia, and Richard Briers as Polonius. Celebrity star turns for Robin Williams as Osric, Charlton Heston as the Player King, Jack Lemmon as Marcellus, Gérard Depardieu as Reynaldo, and Billy Crystal as the Gravedigger again contributed to financial success, even if some of the individual performances were disappointing. Michael Almereyda set Hamlet (2000) in a New York skyscraper housing the Denmark Corporation, of which Claudius (Kyle MacLachlan) was chief executive officer, with Gertrude (Diana Venora), his wife, a svelte suburbanite well placed in a world of luxurious creature comforts like private swimming pools and stretch limousines. Hamlet was played by Ethan Hawke as a film geek deeply alienated from the materialistic world of his mother and stepfather. The playwright Sam Shepard took the role of the Ghost, appearing eerily on the building's closed-circuit security system. Nicholas Hytner's 2010-11 production of the play at London's National Theatre was shown on film to good effect. Kevin Kline and Kirk Browning filmed a Hamlet in 1989, with Kline himself in the title role, that was low-budget and has accordingly been generally forgotten today, but managed to be wonderfully intelligent. The role of Hamlet continues to serve as a supreme theatrical challenge and achievement for so many great actors, including Maurice Evans, John Gielgud, John Neville, Christopher Plummer, and Rory Kinnear, along with those already named here.