



Virtual Programme

Director's note: Alistair Nunn



When you hear *Hamlet* performed, it can feel like the history of English Literature performed in front of you. It can be equally intimidating directing it. *Hamlet* is a monolith, the K-2 of Shakespearean drama. It feels there are as many interpretations of it as there are raindrops in a storm. It can be personal and political, private and public, crazy and chillingly sane, hopeful and despairing, uplifting and tear-jerking, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral (maybe not pastoral).

The first thing you need to do is to take a deep breath, step away from the reputation and look at how this play speaks to you. And to me, this is a tragedy of two families destroyed by one terrible burden piled onto an unsuitable man. A man who wants to prove himself to a lost and distant father, who feels betrayed by discovering his mother has desires in her life he doesn't want to think about, who is in love with a woman he doesn't know how to protect, who makes mistake after mistake trying to balance all these pressures – mistakes with

increasingly deadly results.

If the Ghost had never turned up, it's perfectly easy to imagine a world where Hamlet might perhaps have just *got over it* (as his mother and uncle urge him to do in the first scene). Aside from being a murderer, Claudius isn't even that bad a guy – certainly he's a lot warmer and easier to like than his austere dead brother. That Hamlet could have got married to Ophelia – I can't imagine he ever really wanted to be king anyway – and the two of them would have sniggered together over Polonius' failed attempts at Christmas Charades and spent the rest of the year in a town like Oxford.

But that doesn't happen. Hamlet is given a burden, disguised as a duty, by his dead father. A wrong to be righted. And, to his credit, Hamlet can't forget about that. However much he must wish he *did not know* his uncle was a killer, he must act on it. But only when the time is completely right. And like the rest of us, he goes through waves of doubt and uncertainty. He's so smart though, that his mind can change from moment to moment: even within a speech, certainty can twist into doubt, resolve into wavering. The Smartest Guy in the Room can also be the least proactive.

He's both perfect, and completely and utterly wrong, for avenging angel. He's not afraid to act – but he needs categorical proof first. He throws out false flags everywhere – pretending to be mad, alienating Ophelia, staging plays – because he needs to be completely satisfied. Compare him to

Laertes who, within hours of arriving in Elsinore, is dipping her sword in poison. Hamlet is both determined to avenge his father, and profoundly worried about the moral questions of doing so.

Part of the fascination of Hamlet is he is both simultaneously a selfish man fixated solely on his own goals (he'll deliberately murder four people over the course of the play and doesn't seem guilty for a moment) and a sensitive humanist. He analyses everything very intensely, loves very dearly (his affection for his parents and Ophelia is genuine and deep) and is deeply worried about his immortal soul. He takes betrayal very, very deeply (and he is betrayed many, many times in the play by almost everyone) a feeling that makes him more determined than ever to be loyal to his father.

It's less indecision – Hamlet, I think, is certain he *will* kill his uncle when he learns the truth – more wanting the conditions to be perfect. To have all the proof, to make his case to witnesses, to catch Claudius in the midst of doing something so *awful* he really deserves to die. Sure he's worried about doing the deed – but he knows he's going to do it.

With this leading character who is such a disrupter, our other characters are frequently trying to muddle through. Claudius can't escape the shadow of his crime, no matter how much he jollies along and tries to position himself as Hamlet's surrogate father (tragically, I always imagined these two probably got on really well while the Ghost was alive – they certainly have more in common than Hamlet and his martial Dad do). Gertrude can't understand why the gentle son she loved seems to be lost. Ophelia suddenly finds the sensitive man she loves transformed into a short-tempered and even cruel man determined to drive her away. Events twist someone warm and caring like Laertes into a shifty killer and good natured jokers like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into conspiratorial betrayers.

Shakespeare understood revenge is a thankless, horrible, dirty task: even when he gave it to the most fully-rounded character he ever wrote, that man was still turned into a remorseless killer who harms the innocent as much as the guilty, desperately justifying his actions to himself. But never remorseless enough: imagine how much less messy it would have been if Hamlet had stridden from the Ghost's return straight to Claudius' bedroom and run him through. He'd have caused far less harm: but that Hamlet is never one we could have taken to our heart, because he would not have the personal guilt, sorrow and pain that constantly obstruct this Tragic Dane.

It's these personal stories that speak to me in *Hamlet* – and hopefully are transmitted in this production, where we present an intimate family tragedy in the grandest setting in Oxford. Hamlet and his mission of death, taking place in the shadow of an actual castle. Far from a play about indecision, it's a play all about decisions and their deadly and terrible consequences.

Cast & Crew:



Ed Blagrove

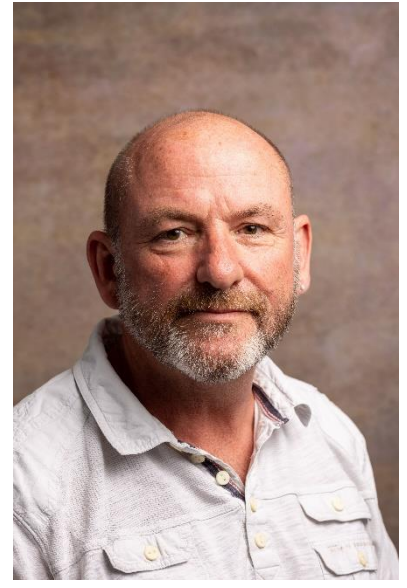
Hamlet

Ed is a co-founder of BMH Productions and has performed in a number of shows with BMH Productions including Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* and Captain Stanhope in *Journey's End*. He has found Hamlet both thrilling and daunting to play and hopes you enjoy the show as much as he has enjoyed the rehearsal and performance process.

Matt Blurton

King Claudius

This is Matt's first show with BMH and the first time performing outdoors at Oxford Castle, although he has been very active in the Oxford theatre scene over the last 5 years. Credits include Dr. Bradman in *Blithe Spirit* at the Playhouse and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* in University Parks (OTG) as well as Joseph Stalin in *Collaborators* (Ronin Theatre), General Melchett in *Blackadder Goes Forth* (Atomic Theatre) and Col Pickering in *My Fair Lady* with OXOPS at the New Theatre. He has thoroughly enjoyed the rehearsal process for *Hamlet* and has made great new friends as well as strengthening old bonds.



Paul Clifford

The Ghost, Player King & Gravedigger

Paul has been acting since his school days but this is his first appearance at the Oxford Castle. Recent parts include Newman Noggs in *Nicholas Nickleby* (Oxford Playhouse), Judge Collins and Robert Sideway in *Our Country's Good* (Old Fire Station), Canon Chasuble in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (on-line) and a range of cameos from Ronald Reagan to Arthur Scargill in *Handbagged* (Wesley Memorial Church). He particularly enjoys playing more than one character in a production, though worries that increasing age may lead him to forget which he is supposed to be playing at any given time.

Vijay Hare

Horatio

After a 3 year Covid-enforced absence from the boards, I'm absolutely delighted to be playing Hamlet's long-suffering confidante and 'mum friend', Horatio. Doing Shakespeare in an atmospheric place like the Castle is always such an experience, and I look forward to failing to stop Hamlet doing any of his philosophy-induced crazy antics. Before *Hamlet*, some of my highlights include *The History Boys*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *The Bacchae*, *Antigone*, *The Idylls of the King* and most recently Aramis in *The Three Musketeers*. Offstage, I'm balancing work with a nagging sense of existential dread, and working on my second novel.





Nicola Jones

Marcellus, Player Queen & Gravedigger

This is Nicola's first production with BMH having spent most of her performing time in Oxford performing musicals with Oxford Operatic Society. Past roles include Mrs Pearce in *My Fair Lady*, Patricia Fodor in *Crazy For You* and Roz Keith in *9 to 5*. Whilst it has been some time since she has worked on Shakespeare, she has thoroughly enjoyed getting her teeth back into it.

In her 'free time', Nicola teaches Theology and Philosophy at a secondary school near Henley, enjoys singing and sewing, and is on the board of trustees for OXOPS.

Cate Nunn

Laertes

Cate is delighted to be returning to the Oxford Castle with BMH this summer. Her previous roles for BMH include Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*), Beatrice (*Much Ado About Nothing*), Tybalt (*Romeo & Juliet*), Queen Elizabeth (*Richard III*), and Portia (*Merchant of Venice*). She also directed their production of *Twelfth Night* in their shipwrecks double bill here at the Castle. Roles for other companies have included Goneril (*King Lear*), Elvira (*Blithe Spirit*), Blanche (*Streetcar Named Desire*), and playing Commander Falconer in the comedy scifi podcast *Oblivity*. She has also directed for companies including ElevenOne, OTG and Ronin.



Joe O'Connor

Guildenstern

This is Joe's third show with BMH, having been violently murdered as Clarence in 2019's *Richard III*, and gotten himself all dressed up fancy-like as Flute in 2021's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Since 2011, he's worked with a number of companies in Oxfordshire, including OTG, Eleven One, ThistleDown, Bartholomew Players, and St Peter's Players.

Kate O'Connor

Rosencrantz

Kate has been acting with various groups around Oxford for the past ten years, including with BMH in last year's *Midsummer Nights Dream* and 2019's *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet* double-bill. She has also appeared in Oxford as Hero in Thistledown Theatre's *Much Ado About Nothing* in 2017, and as Marianne Dashwood in Oxford Theatre Guild's *Sense and Sensibility* at Oxford Playhouse in 2016 amongst many others. She also regularly acts with Eynsham's Bartholomew Players.



Jessica Reilly

Ophelia

This is Jess' fifth show with BMH at Oxford Castle, having previously directed *Othello* and *Richard III / Romeo & Juliet*, and appeared in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, and she is thrilled to be back.

Usually to be found directing, Jess does occasionally venture onstage, (sometimes unexpectedly, as in BMH's *Othello*/*Much Ado About Nothing*!).

Other previous Shakespeare roles include: Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (Tomahawk, Oxford Castle and Italian Tour), Isabella in *Measure for Measure* (North Wall), Cordelia in *King Lear* (OFS) and Celia in *As You Like It* (Trinity College Gardens).

Recent non Shakespeare roles include: Connie in *The Effect* (Ronin Theatre Productions, Modern Art Oxford) and Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility* (Oxford Playhouse).

Alison Stibbe

Queen Gertrude

Alison believes that everyone needs their side passions beyond work, and has found hers in Oxford's theatre world, where she has enjoyed many enriching experiences to write, act, direct and produce. Although this is her first time with BMH, Alison has performed in a wide range of productions over the past several years. Highlights from her recent theatre credits include playing the roles of Andromache in *Andromache* with the Oxford Theatre Guild, Susan in *Bed Among the Lentils* (ElevenOne Theatre), Mikhail Bulgakov's wife, Yelena, in *The Collaborators* and Dr Lorna James in *The Effect* (Ronin Theatre Productions) and Casca in Nova Theatre's gender-reversed production of *Julius Caesar*.

By day, Alison earns a living as a strategy & communications consultant, working mostly with the higher education sector to promote research and learning





Carolyn Taylor

Polonius

Carolyn is delighted to be acting with BMH again, having appeared in *Macbeth* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2016, *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet* in 2019 and *Monologues* in 2020. She has acted and directed for many years with various companies, in productions ranging from Shakespeare to Revue at the Edinburgh Fringe. Her favourite role: Madame Ranevskaya in the 'Cherry Orchard', most recent directing challenges include 'Our Country's Good' and an open air Nativity Play for her home town, with a large cast, including three camels, a donkey and a six week old baby.

Catherine Woolley

Co-Costume design

Catherine has been designing costumes in Oxford since 2016 and this is her fifth time designing for BMH Productions, having previously worked on *Midsummer Night's Dream* (2021), *Unspoken* (2019), *Richard III/ Romeo and Juliet* (2019) and *Much Ado About Nothing/Othello* (2018). Other design work in Oxford includes: *Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons* (Ronin Theatre), *After Miss Julie* (Elevenone), *Doubt* (OTG) and *Festen* (OTG). This is her second time collaborating with the multi-talented Kate O'Connor on costume design, having previously worked with her on the aptly named *Collaborators* in 2018 (Ronin Theatre).



Sound Design: Costa Cambanakis

Sound Technician: Grace Clare

Sound Engineer: Ashley Harvey

Producers: Ashley Harvey and Ed Blagrove

Poster design: Ned Joliffe

Special thanks to: Roger Blagrove, Marilyn & Neil Moore,