

ACTORS' ROUNDTABLE

Acting Shakespeare: A Roundtable Discussion with Artists from the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2006 Production of *Hamlet*

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Featuring: J. R. Sullivan (Director), Brian Vaughn (Hamlet), Ashley Smith (Laertes), Emily Trask (Ophelia), Michael Connolly (Polonius), Leslie Brott (Gertrude), and Bill Christ (Claudius)

Flachmann: I'd like to welcome everyone to the culminating event for our Wooden O Symposium. We're delighted to have all of you here. I'm Michael Flachmann, the Festival Dramaturg, and I'm honored to introduce today's panelists from our brilliant production of *Hamlet*, which include J. R. Sullivan (director), Brian Vaughn (Hamlet), Ashley Smith (Laertes), Emily Trask (Ophelia), Michael Connolly (Polonius), Leslie Brott (Gertrude), and Bill Christ (Claudius) [applause].

As everyone knows, *Hamlet* is performed frequently all over the world, has a great deal of scholarship written on it, and has generated a massive performance history. We've also just spent three wonderful days at the "Wooden O Symposium" listening to a wide variety of papers, many of which investigated different aspects of the play. Within such an extensive scholarly and theatrical context, how do you make a production like this your own in this special space for this unique audience? In other words, what clues did you find in the script, in the rehearsal process, or in your own life experience that helped you make these characters yours? And in the case of Mr. Sullivan, how do you "own" this play as a director. Could we start with you, Jim?

Sullivan: Sure, thank you. And thanks to everyone for coming this morning and joining us at our festival. It's easy to think of *Hamlet* as Mt. Everest. That's the problem if you're going to work on it. I used that phrase in the initial notes when we began talking about it last fall, and when I shared that sentiment with Brian

[Vaughn], he said to me, "That's exactly how I see it." So we agreed that it could be a difficult mountain to climb, given all its brilliance, its extraordinary depth, and its ability to engender conversations on such a wide range of philosophic, political, and social topics, both Elizabethan and contemporary. Finally and ultimately, as I was saying last night [at the Wooden O Symposium Keynote Speech], it's all about working in the moment of its performance, and for me that meant making sure we demystified the script right away. We tried to keep all conversation in rehearsal away from everything that *Hamlet* is or has been to people throughout the ages, focusing instead on what the story says to us right now. We were content to leave the ultimate "meaning" of the play to our audiences.

One comment I did make at the first rehearsal was that I was really sick of all the deception in the world. I'm convinced that the rampant deceit that's running through Hamlet's world, his political and social construct, is a very contemporary issue. If we wanted the play to speak meaningfully to modern audiences, we needed to make certain that it resonated in every way possible within its Tudor staging. So in the opening scene, we purposely mixed in contemporary costuming with Shakespeare's Renaissance context. The guys at the top of the show are in black jeans, for instance. I'm not sure that's entirely evident, and perhaps it shouldn't be. But we wanted to do something that literally put one leg in our time and one leg in Shakespeare's. And I don't know why we would perform these plays if they didn't have one leg firmly in the time of the audience that is watching it. So that was my approach. Our extraordinary company was very amenable and even enthusiastic about that as we set to work on the play.

Staging *Hamlet* is a huge undertaking! The difficulty at this festival, at any repertory theatre, is getting enough rehearsal time, getting the people you need at the hours you need them. This play allowed for that, so we were able to spend significant time on the many scenes involving two or three people, such as the nunnery scene, for instance. And Brian and I spent many rich hours on the soliloquies. I felt that we really had the time, and I know he does too, to work moment to moment on them. And that made a lot of difference in the process. That was my basic approach to directing the play.

Flachmann: Thanks, Jim. We're off to a great start. So, Ashley, how do you own the role of Laertes? How did you make it yours when it's been done so many times before at so many different theatres?

Smith: I really connected with the idea of family and the sense of loss—with those two concepts combined. From one certain perspective, this is a story about two families, each with its own tragedy. Although the play is seen from the point of view of Hamlet, the parallels between what Hamlet is going through and what Laertes is experiencing are very interesting. Both these young men are trying to avenge the deaths of their fathers. And the play ends up being a meeting of sorts between the two of them. We also talked a lot in rehearsal about the fact that since there's something rotten in the state of Denmark, it seems as if the young people are all trying to get out of the country. Although Laertes gets to leave, Hamlet doesn't. This idea of young adults needing to get away from home and strike out on their own and become their own persons is crucial in the play. That's something I could certainly identify with, and I think most people these days tend to have lives like that. It's more common to leave home and end up living somewhere quite far away from your family, although a lot of guilt can go along with that. There's this bond between Laertes and Ophelia. And when the oldest child strikes out on his own, there's always some guilt about leaving the other one behind, that person for whom they feel such deep love. So those are some of the ideas I connected with in the role.

Flachmann: Thanks, Ashley. Emily, how about Ophelia?

Trask: It was really important to me that Ophelia be a real person. Unfortunately, because her role is not actually that large, her character is often just sketched in on the surface. For me, it was crucial that she be an intelligent woman. Otherwise, why would Hamlet love her? Other than she's the only girl in Denmark [laughter]. So we needed to delve into the heart of her and found immediately that she really did have some soul and some intelligence and some bite, so we worked through and found moments where she was strongly standing her ground. In that time period, she needed to do what her father said, but all the same she also needed to be enough of her own person for that to come through and for the audience to like her. If she's just whining and crying all the time, then when she dies, it's like "Oh well, thank goodness she's dead . . ." So, I really approached the meat of the character. I think it's all about *love* for Ophelia: She loves her father so deeply, and loves her brother so deeply, and Hamlet so deeply. So you can define her through her relationships to other people, which tell you a great deal about her character.

Flachmann: Lovely job, Emily. Brian, how about the "melancholy Dane"?

Vaughn: Well, the first place I started was with a great amount of fear about playing the role [laughter], because I think the role is much larger than I am. In fact, the role is bigger than all of us. And I think that's one of the most amazing elements about the play. So I did a great deal of research, certainly, and luckily I found out I was going to be playing the part fairly early, in October of last year, I believe. So the first thing I did was read the play again, and then went and read a gazillion commentaries—everything from T. S. Eliot to Harold Bloom. I talked to other actors who had played the part, which was very helpful to me concerning what they had noticed in playing it over long periods of time.

But then it basically became about myself, and I think ultimately that's what the play is about: the recognition of purpose within your own life and Hamlet's journey from the beginning of the play to the end of it. In the midst of this mourning for his father, there is a reexamination of self and those around him, and in that comes this seeking for truth, for immediacy, for the "now" of all things. That was really what I latched onto, and I think Jim was absolutely fantastic in his design and his ideas about the play's focus on "being" versus "seeming" and "truth" versus "fiction." And in the midst of all of this is, how do we step out of that fictional world, how do we take action against it, how do we ruminate about it, where do we find our true purpose within this plague of pretense?

So, that was the real key to me. Also, technically, we spent a lot of time on the soliloquies: when they happen, why they happen, and where they are in the play. I believe that the soliloquies are reaching out to the audience, seeking an answer. It's the moment for the character to ask for help. Then in the second half of the play, there are no more soliloquies. After he comes back from England, he's a changed man; there is a sense of balance and grace and calm about him. And I think he reaches this state of knowing his own self and his purpose. There are so many different facets in playing the role; certain moments resonate at certain times. As one of the other actors said to me, "You'll never get it 100%." It's a monster part because it's so rich with ideas about life and humanity and self. It's "outside" of us, but it also forms to the individual. I think that's one of the most exciting elements about reading the play: Everyone becomes Hamlet. Steven Berkoff has written that "we are all Hamlet." So the thing you have to do in playing the role is to just play it and just be in the immediate moment to moment, the now of it. I think Shakespeare is saying that we have to live in that place of right here, right in this second,

and to do that night after night is such a comment on acting and on life. So that's where I started and where I ended, too, I guess.

Flachmann: Wonderful! Leslie, tell us about Gertrude.

Brott: Thank you all for being here today. Thank you for coming and supporting the festival. Gertrude doesn't have a lot of text, but what is there about Gertrude and what Gertrude says about herself and what other people say about her is pretty straightforward. And the big change for me actually came with some help from my director, which was to extract Gertrude from the overall atmosphere that I felt surrounded the play: *Hamlet*, tragedy, heavy. Gertrude is living in a really happy place in the first half of the play, and once I realized that, the play started to open up for me. I am so myopically self-involved with my own life that many times I don't realize what's going on around me, and that's pretty much where Gertrude is living. My friends who know me well can attest to the fact that I'm pretty clueless. Usually people are dating for three or four months before I notice! [laughter] That's actually the case with Gertrude: There are some unpleasanties that she doesn't want to see, and it takes awhile for those to filter into her consciousness. But it's also because she would like to fix the problems around her. Maybe Hamlet's crazy, but perhaps I can adjust that truth. I'm in a happy place, and I don't want to give up that happiness for the corruption and the deceit that's around me. So, that's where I started.

Flachmann: Thank you, Leslie. Michael, how do you see Polonius?

Connolly: I can attest to the fact that people have to make out passionately in Leslie's living room before she's aware of their involvement [laughter]. That's as far as I will go this morning [laughter]. I think almost all characters in the canon are like coral reefs. I mean, they are encrusted with tradition and various interpretive choices, and so for me it's really important to read the text naïvely the first time as if unaware of the various controversies that surround these people. At the beginning, I was aware that there were essentially two schools of thought on Polonius: There's the *pantalone*, on the one hand, which really takes care of act 2, scene 2 to Polonius' death; and then there's the Sir Francis Walsingham on the other side, which essentially argues for two scenes in the play. And so I went to the text, and was struck in act 1, scene 3 that even in the Folio version Polonius blesses his son twice. So I began to ask what a blessing constituted in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in both Britain and on the continent. It often constituted a kiss—a kiss on the lips or a kiss

on the forehead. For me, that was a crucial moment, because what opened up for me then was how Polonius as a man loves his children. I wanted that to be the spine of the character. So all the machinations of statecraft (for example, why does he work so hard to position Ophelia as a possible partner for Hamlet?) have to do with his fundamental love for his son and his daughter, along with his desire to further his "house," which in that period was a very appropriate way to show love for one's children. In Jim [Sullivan], I was lucky to find a director who was interested in approaching the script in that way and who thought that Polonius was a worthy character, and that's where we are.

Flachmann: Thank you, Michael. Bill, how did you approach Claudius?

Christ: Claudius is a man who is a politician first and foremost, who enjoys power, and who is happy to have gotten power, but has done it in a way that is causing him great pain. He loves his wife, the queen, and thinks he can be good for the state of Denmark. What was interesting in working on this with Jim is that we focused on the concept of public and private masks, on the face that Claudius puts on when he is in public to convince people that he is the man who can do the job and do it well, as opposed to those moments where he can reveal the private mask and show the torment going on inside because of what he has done. His guilt begins to creep up on him as things start to unravel through Hamlet's actions or the problems that Hamlet presents in contrast to the neat little scenario that Claudius has set up.

Flachmann: Thank you, Bill. I've got some other topics I'd like to guide you through. I know that nobody up here is shy, so if you have a comment you want to make, just start waving your hand, and I'll get to you. Brian, we talked about madness this week in the seminar, and there were a lot of references to the "antic disposition" your character puts on. And Emily, there was even a question about the extent to which you actually go mad in the play. Without revealing any "actor bag" moments here that would make the other participants uncomfortable, I wonder if you could talk a little bit, starting with Brian, about the madness. I haven't asked you this summer, Brian, but are there any moments when you feel Hamlet really succumbs to genuine madness, or is it all a carefully feigned antic disposition?

Vaughn: I think the antic disposition is a shield for him, a protective armor to seek truth in the midst of all this deception. The words Hamlet uses are his armor; his weapon is his wit. It's as if he's saying, "I will put on this antic disposition to keep everyone

off balance about what I'm doing." The first event that happens after he becomes "mad" is the entrance of the players, and he sees clearly the difference between "seeming" and "truth" through these performers who are professionally embodying a theatrical reality and doing it so realistically and convincingly. This realization allows Hamlet to go even farther with that notion, and I believe that his antic disposition lets him teeter on the brink of control where he believes he can almost change the "stamp of nature."

Later, when he tells Gertrude to "assume a virtue if you have it not," his madness has gained some control over him. He goes a little bit into that dark place when he kills Polonius, and then he comes out of it when he goes to England. Like many Shakespearean characters who go into forests or new environments, Hamlet learns a great deal about himself on the voyage to England and comes back to Denmark much saner than when he left. Ultimately, I think that's what happens with Hamlet: He plays with this fake madness, which overtakes him for a time, and then he steps away from it so he can take his revenge.

Flachmann: That's excellent. Thank you, Brian. Emily, I wonder about the quality of your madness in the play. Jim [Sullivan] has you eavesdropping from the upper stage for some of the scenes involving Polonius' death. How helpful was this in creating your character?

Trask: The difficulty with Ophelia's madness is that after the play within the play, she disappears for quite a while, and when she comes back, she's singing bawdy tunes and picking flowers [laughter]. So I'm really grateful that Jim added a few key moments for Ophelia to eavesdrop on the other characters. When she overhears that Hamlet "has in madness Polonius slain," the realization hits her that her father is dead. She also listens when Hamlet makes his jokes about Polonius being "at supper," after which she exits immediately. In my mind, I'm the first to find him, because I run out there before anyone else. The eavesdropping gives Ophelia more of a journey to take into her madness. Her love for the other characters is so great that when her brother leaves the country, her father is slain, and she discovers that Hamlet has killed him, she goes mad. I think she has gone through such a slow burn from the closet scene, through the nunnery scene ("O what a noble mind"), and into all these later discoveries and losses that she can't help but go mad.

There's also some debate about whether Ophelia really does take her own life. For me, the moment of realization is in the mad scenes when she sings to herself, "Go to thy deathbed." Although

Gertrude comes back and says, "The limb broke," and it's quite possible that Ophelia just didn't struggle, I think it's a stronger decision and more "active" decision if Ophelia takes her own life. When I found out I was doing this role, I was living in Chicago, and I watched people on the elevated train who were having conversations with themselves. Ophelia doesn't know she's mad, so she's trying to sort out her problems. I think that when she really makes the decision to die, that's her sanest moment.

Flachmann: The eavesdropping helps me as an audience member because, otherwise, all you have is the out-of-synch "courtier's, scholar's, soldier's, eye, tongue, sword" line to indicate that your mind is starting to degenerate. Jim, Brian talked earlier about the theatricality of his antic disposition. How do you see that fitting in with the lovely device of the actors setting up the stage at the beginning of the show, which introduces the concept of artifice in the production?

Sullivan: So much of the play is about theatricality. The text completely provides that motif, most obviously with Hamlet's advice to the players. The business about Ophelia witnessing much of the action of the court wasn't my idea originally; I got that from a production that I read about in Sweden. The idea was to give her more presence so the full weight of Hamlet's killing of her father can help break her.

Flachmann: Ashley, there's a controversial moment involving you right before the duel when the poisoned and unbated sword is ready for you to grab. Osric sets it up for you, but you deliberately pick one of the bated, non-poisoned swords to begin the fight. Only after you become incensed do you go back and exchange the first sword for the more lethal one. Can you talk about that decision a little bit? I've never seen it done that way.

Smith: I'm not sure was if it was Jim's idea or Robin McFarquhar's [the fight director]. Robin is an excellent choreographer, and he was not only interested in the moves and the weapons, but also in figuring out what story we were telling with the fight. As you may know, the scene is usually done with Laertes taking a bated, un-poisoned sword first from the rack and then making a show of saying, "O, this is not the right sword for me; let me see another one." Then he selects the poisoned sword, and that's what he fights with. But Robin came up with the idea that Laertes is indecisive about whether he can really go through with killing Hamlet. As a result, he initially takes the poisoned sword, as if that was the plan, and then has second thoughts and takes a safe sword, with which he begins the fight. As the duel

progresses and gets a little bit out of control and Hamlet begins to humiliate him with his new-found expertise, Laertes starts to lose his cool and grabs the poisoned sword about halfway through.

I thought this was a very interesting choice that showed Laertes as a well-rounded, fallible, insecure person, rather than as a one-dimensional guy hell-bent on revenge. He's conflicted about killing Hamlet, which is realistic because they probably grew up together. Hamlet was the golden boy, the favorite son and heir to the throne, but at the same time they were no doubt good friends as they were raised, which means there's probably a lot of love there to complicate the issue for Laertes.

Flachmann: There's a nice moment in the second scene when you touch him on the shoulder before you and Ophelia exit the stage. I think that was a terrific decision, Brian.

Vaughn: Yes, Laertes and I are mirror images of each other in our revenge.

Flachmann: Michael, I wonder if you could explain a little more about the love Polonius has for his children? I'm also interested in the "neither a borrower nor a lender be" speech, which is often seen by scholars as a collection of clichés, but you make it really come alive. Talk about that, would you?

Connolly: Yes, I think you just put your finger on it. It's easy in scholarship to dismiss it as a collection of *sententiae*, easy to poke fun at. And I think this is probably the departure point for many actors and directors about Polonius because they look at the commentary on the speech and infer that he's clearly an egregious, self-important, pompous ass, so let's go ahead right from the very beginning and play him that way. On the other hand, you could also see Polonius being quite prescient at the moment. I mean, we say goodbye to our children with the assumption that, barring some act of madness, we are going to see them again. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, however, to say goodbye to someone who was traveling to Paris carried with it no assurance that they would ever return. Polonius is giving advice to Laertes as if it's the last time he will see him, which raises the stakes considerably. He's ensuring a kind of intellectual and moral patrimony, which seems to me the core of it.

I have to look at the speech as an actor. I can't interpret it the way a scholar does; I can't search for all the various sources from which these moralisms are drawn. I have to find my "action": What do I want to do with my son, and what am I trying to instill in his character so that when he goes to Paris—the great Catholic cesspool of the world in the early seventeenth century, right next

to Vienna then and only trumped by Rome—he is protected. Why is it necessary for a good Protestant boy to get this kind of advice? I think that's the reason. I don't believe I'm ever going to see him again. We had to cut the speech significantly in the interest of time. But what I try to do every night is invent it on the spot, as opposed to another production I unfortunately witnessed where Polonius had a crib sheet on which he checked off all the pieces of advice. I really wanted to avoid that. I don't think Polonius is a fool. I wanted to sidestep that naïve interpretation. Does that answer your question?

Flachmann: Beautifully! Thank you very much. Bill and Leslie, I wonder if you want to talk about your back-story. Enquiring minds want to know if there was hanky-panky before old Hamlet was killed?

Brott: If you want to know whether we were fooling around before Hamlet was killed, read John Updike's novel *Gertrude and Claudius*, OK? The ghost says that with his wit and his gifts, Claudius seduced his "most seeming virtuous queen," and I think that's plenty of information for you to devise something in your heads about what went on. It certainly was plenty for me, but you do have to listen to the play [laughter].

Flachmann: That's great. Bill, what percentage of your desire for the throne is lust for power, and what percentage is lust for the beautiful Gertrude next to you?

Christ: Well, I would say that the lust for power dominates Claudius.

Flachmann: Thank you. Another question that comes up often in seminars of this type is how much of your portrayal of the character is yours and how much is the director's? Is it possible to parse these things, or is the process so complex and technical that you can't disentangle your role from the director's suggestions?

Smith: He's in the room, you know [laughter].

Flachmann: Do you want to hold your ears, Jim? [laughter]

Smith: There's a tricky thing that happens for me: I'll have an idea about what I'm going to do, and then a director will say, "Hummm, maybe we should try it a different way." Sometimes that can rub you the wrong way, but I think a good director is someone who can guide you rather than imposing his ideas on you. I think Jim is very good at looking at what we are doing and then guiding us to some new ideas and discoveries. Now that we've been running for four or five weeks, I don't actually remember which ideas were originally mine and which were his, because I sort of feel like they were all mine [laughter]. I respond

best to that kind of direction: being guided rather than being pushed.

Connolly: I've done three shows with you, Jim. It's always been a cooperative experience. The expectation is that the actor will show up loaded for bear, and that the director is certainly going to be loaded for bear, and then the next several weeks are what the Italians call a *conversazione* kind of exchange. Then when you are running the show, the audience will teach you things as well. At this point in the second week in August, the only time you are aware that "this was Jim's idea" or "this was my idea" is when the idea isn't working, and then you have to negotiate with yourself to find a choice that will work and will satisfy your director's vision and the play's storytelling narrative needs. There's a lot of crap written about actors and their ego, and the bottom line is that there is very little ego involved in this process. We serve the director; we serve the playwright; and we serve the audience. If you let your desires get in the way of any of those three elements, I think that's when you start to become a monster.

Leslie: Jim and I have worked together four or five times, and it's always been a happy association. He really helped me this time because I could not get out from under the weight of "Hamlet, the Mt. Everest" thing. I teach acting, but I could not always see how to play the positive choices in each scene. This is what we do in life, of course: We try to fix the situation, to bring it back to equilibrium or a pleasurable balance. I was originally playing the problem because I knew the end of the play; I knew it carried heavy casualties, many bodies on the stage. I didn't have confidence in my effort, and Jim always steered me back toward believing as a character that the most important thing I could do was to fix the problem in the moment: preventing somebody from being killed, trying to restore somebody to their psychological equilibrium. Whatever I wanted to fix, he kept pointing me back towards the positive. Moreso than in our other associations, I really had a lot of difficulty getting out from under the weight of four hundred years of scholarship. Usually I'm just brilliant without him, but this time I really needed him [laughter].

Flachmann: Thank you, Leslie. Jim, do you want to chime in on that?

Sullivan: When I directed *I Hate Hamlet* at the Festival few years ago, which I really loved doing, David Ivers was in that show, and there's a moment when the television actor is going to be in the Shakespeare in the Park production of *Hamlet*, and he says, "*Hamlet!* Whoa!" That was the Mt. Everest moment again.

That show is about the ghost of John Barrymore coming back to coach the guy. We all need help in life. We need help everyday. Mary Tyler Moore used to tell a story about Carl Reiner, who got the Mark Twain Prize for Humor for writing the *Dick Van Dyke Show* and other brilliant work in comedy. She said that whoever had the best idea, that's what they went with. And if that meant that the guy who came in to change the water cooler happened to watch the scene and had a great idea, that was what went into the mix.

I think the actors respect me for my eye and my ear because they know I am on the outside of the process watching them, and I respect them because they are the play. If we can be in a situation where we can help each other get to the bigger thing, which is the play, that's all that matters. I have had situations, less than ideal situations, where an actor wasn't ready to give to the others in the cast, and I have had to come in and deal with that firmly. Ultimately, we are playing this play together, and that includes you as audience. When the play starts, the audience has an important voice in the performance. This summer company is a very fine group of actors, and that has made all the difference.

Flachmann: Great, thank you. There's so much richness and ambiguity in the script. We've just spent three days with the Wooden O Symposium talking about some of the shades of meaning, and you can't watch a brilliant production like the one we have here without being aware of that. From an actor's point of view, can you play "ambiguity"? Can you play "richness"? Or do you have to go for specific moments and let them all meld together into an artistic whole that can be described later as "ambiguity"?

Brott: As an actor, no, I don't think you can play ambiguity, but hopefully there will be some ambiguity when you as audience members reflect on the production. If we play specifically from moment to moment, the production supplies its own ambiguity. But you've always got to play the text with absolute concrete specificity so the audience can hear the subtleties.

Flachmann: What was the toughest scene or moment for you to do in this particular production?

Christ: I don't want to flag anything that the audience can notice tonight [laughter].

Connolly: There are still a couple of moments in this little role where every now and then I come to the theatre and think, "How's this going to work?"—which I believe is a healthy reaction. There are still two little moments where every night I have a new decision about what is happening, and they both have to do with

listening to Brian and responding. That's fun because he comes up with new stuff almost every second, so that's a great ride.

Brott: The toughest moment for me is trying to figure out what is really bugging Hamlet in the closet scene. I don't want to say the specific lines, but there are a couple of lines where every night I say to myself, "Faker, faker, lousy faker; you should be fired" [laughter]. If we could restore about fifteen of Brian's lines, I think I could get it.

Vaughn: Many scenes are tricky for me to play. John Gielgud said that the most difficult scene for him was the Ophelia-Hamlet "nunnery" scene. What I find especially interesting in playing the part is the moments where you feel like something is not happening correctly, yet the problem is in the character and not the actor. If you're going through a struggle, more often than not the character is going through the same difficulty you are. That was particularly clear to me in the first part of act 2, where Hamlet comes back after seeing the ghost and begins to put on his antic disposition. In the midst of this, I said to Jim one day during rehearsal that I felt like I wasn't doing anything, that I was just reacting to what was happening to me on stage. While I was playing the truth of these moments, Hamlet begins to talk about the fact that he's not doing anything. And that's exactly what's happening to Hamlet and the actor at the same time! And I think that's frequently true with Shakespeare. The tricky part about my scene with Ophelia is maintaining the balance of doing one thing to her and feeling another thing inside. That scene is driven by love for her, but in the midst of it I'm also trying to discover who's plotting against me, so that was a perilous balance to play.

Trask: What's the most difficult and scary part, other than being lowered into the grave? [laughter] Actually, that's not me at all; I get to sit that one out. It comes in the "nunnery" scene, but actually it's after Hamlet leaves, which is the only time Ophelia is truly alone with her thoughts. As I explained earlier, in my particular take on the character, it's all about her love for other people—especially Hamlet. To keep that moment honest and active and connected to other people when I am alone on stage is always a challenge for me.

Smith: For me it's when Gertrude enters in act 4, scene 7, and tells us that Ophelia has drowned. Laertes' response is, "Where?" It's not the kind of response I would personally make. If I were writing the scene, I probably would have written something like, "O my god! You're kidding!" I would have written this long speech, but Shakespeare doesn't give me that. For a while, I just

kept trying to figure out what I should be doing there: What's my job in this moment? And finally I talked to Jim about it, and we just tried not doing anything, just being still. When Gertrude is describing Ophelia's death, there's really nothing to do there. But I still get that voice in my head—"Shouldn't you be doing something right now?"—and then I have to relax that and just be still.

Flachmann: Great. Jim, did you find any particular moments or scenes that were especially challenging to stage?

Sullivan: The hardest moment for the director is when the play opens. You are the most useless person in the room at that point. I love this show. And I love these people doing it. So the hardest thing for me is to let go of it, as they would probably confirm [laughter]. I'll be watching a movie or a TV show, and I'll look at my watch and think, "O, they're doing the nunnery scene about now."

Flachmann: It sounds like "Directors Anonymous" here [laughter]. What about Hamlet's epiphany in the nunnery scene when he seems to realize that Ophelia has lied to him?

Trask: Can I change my mind and say that's the most difficult part in the play for me? [laughter]

Vaughn: Well, it's a gray moment theatrically. There's a realization that somebody is there, that she's being stage-managed, which is very painful for me because she's the one person in this entire kingdom who, I hope, would be truthful with me. This mixture of deceit and passion is particularly chilling because I know she's a victim in this whole situation. When he sees her being lowered into the grave later, he wants to go back in time and do things differently. I firmly believe that those two characters have to be deeply in love. So in that earlier nunnery scene, there is such a communion of spirit, of mind, of body, and of soul, and in the midst of that she can't be truthful. And I have to make a quick right turn in the scene. All this stems from the regret and the loss and the pain.

Flachmann: Jim, did you want to add something?

Sullivan: I just wanted to say one word about that—he's not Prince Valiant; he's Prince Hamlet. He makes mistakes. He's a human being, not some storybook character, and he's paradoxical. He's noble, but there are times when he has to be vicious. He's all these things, and in the arc of becoming who he is by the end of the play, he goes through that process.

Flachmann: You all get so close to these characters during the rehearsal and performance process. Do they ever encroach upon your real lives?

Brott: I'm really glad Gertrude doesn't blur into my life. There's a fatigue level that affects me, but I'm just a person who wants to go home and go to bed and read a book or have a drink or gab at my friends [laughter]. I'm glad my parts don't blur over because I've played some scary people. Michael [Connolly] will probably tell you that I actually am Judith Bliss [laughter]. It's my job, and when I take the makeup off and go home and have a shower, I'm done.

Flachmann: Brian?

Vaughn: I agree with Leslie, I don't think you should embody the character. If I were playing the Scottish king, that's the last thing I would want to be doing. Or Iago! Taking him home with you might be dangerous. Actors have said to me, "You will be a different actor after you play this part; you will be a changed individual." Laurence Olivier said this play haunted him his entire life. There are insights in the play that I reflect on every single day. One of the brilliant insights about Shakespeare is that his plays are so much about the human condition, and that's why we keep doing them.

Brott: I tell my students that as an actor you do not have the luxury of living an unexamined life. You have to think about what it means to be alive. I'm not a religious fanatic, but I played one. And I had to do so with compassion. I'm intellectually stimulated 24/7 because I'm an actor.

Flachmann: One final question for Mr. Sullivan: When you direct a play, do you ever wonder what Shakespeare would think if he were sitting out in the audience?

Sullivan: Well, I wish he were. I have questions [laughter]. First of all, I'd want to know him. I'd want to know everything I could about that heart and mind and the experience of writing these plays. But I also would expect that he would say something along the lines of what Michael Connolly said earlier: All that matters is what works. You know he had a specific company that he wrote for, which accounted for their ability to mount these plays successfully maybe two or three times in a year. I read a description of Richard Burbage, who played Hamlet. He was violent, truculent, and not very honest, so he probably had a volatility that must have made that first *Hamlet* pretty exciting. Can you imagine creating the role of Hamlet? That's something to really think about. I believe Shakespeare's big idea is that the theatre is the world. As William Saroyan says in *The Time of Your Life*, "It takes a lot rehearsing for a man to get to be himself." So I think of myself as holding up the torch to that idea as best as I can.

Flachmann: I'd like to thank a number of people before we adjourn. Please join me in a round of applause for Mr. Sullivan and his wonderful actors [applause]. It's such a joy to have you share your craft with us. We discover again, as we always do with these roundtable discussions, how bright and engaged the actors are and how incredibly hard they work at bringing these productions to life. And I want to thank Michael Bahr for setting all of this up: He and his staff do a wonderful job with the Wooden O Symposium [applause]. And finally, thank you to the audience for supporting this place that we all love so much [applause].