

## ACTORS' ROUNDTABLE

### ACTING SHAKESPEARE: A Roundtable Discussion with Artists from the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2019 Production of *Hamlet*

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**Featuring:** Michael Don Bahr (USF Education Director), Brian Vaughn (Director), Jacqueline Antaramian (Gertrude), Andrew May (Claudius), Quinn Mattfeld (Hamlet), Emma Geer (Ophelia)

**Bahr:** We are thrilled with what we're going to hear this morning. Let me introduce Isabel Smith-Bernstein, the dramaturg for the production of *Hamlet* this year. She is torn because she would like to attend the seminar presentation on *Henry VI* so if she leaves in the middle of this roundtable, it's not out of offense. I know we're going to have a great time here, so thank you very much.

**Smith-Bernstein:** I'm Isabel Smith-Bernstein, I'm one of the dramaturgs here. I've been with the festival for five years and I have been a classical dramaturg for a decade. I'm also currently working on a PhD. in Shakespeare, so "Conference Land" is very familiar to me. I'm going to start this session with a bit of historical context, just very, very lightly, about *Hamlet*. But first I would like everyone to introduce themselves and your role in the production.

**Vaughn:** I'm Brian Vaughn. I directed this production.

**Antaramian:** Jacqueline Antaramian and I played Gertrude.

**May:** I'm Andrew May and I played Claudius.

**Mattfeld:** Quinn Mattfeld. I played Hamlet.

**Geer:** And I'm Emma Geer and I played Ophelia.

**Smith-Bernstein:** Thank you. *Hamlet*, of course, was written sometime between 1599 and 1602. It really depends on who you ask and what version of the text you are looking at. It comes at a period of Shakespeare's life after one of his twins died, of course Hamnet, and it's a play that is often looked at as the birth of English Renaissance humanism because it's Shakespeare's most interior play. *Hamlet* really looked inward and is very introspective in a way that a lot of Shakespeare's title characters have not been leading up to this point. *Hamlet* is a remarkable play because the play is kind of like Shakespeare himself. It is like a cypher so the play takes whatever themes and ideas you throw at it and it just sticks to it because it's such a beautifully written play. It is the kind of play that whatever mindset you are in as you arrive to it, the play is going to give you something great. Brian, it would be great if you would talk a little bit about the concept—your idea of the play.

**Vaughn:** Well, as far as this particular production, I was really drawn to our current world—something that was at the forefront. I knew at first I wanted to make a modern production of *Hamlet* and if we were anywhere else except Utah Shakespeare I might have done that, [laughs] but because of our audience here, they are quick to judge a modern production as sort of negative, which is just a weird thing, something were trying to shift a little bit. I knew I wanted to put it into a period where it was a little bit distanced from our own sort of reality of now and add a beautiful landscape that this was something—a kingdom that actually needed to be upheld. Sometimes it can be bleak, and I've always felt that that's a little odd because why would you be willing to preserve a country that's bleak and not worth saving. I started thinking about the play because it deals with the very idea of being present and seeing what is in front of you in the moment. I was really drawn to Russia, and what is happening in our current global world; about questions that revolve around Russia and our relations with Russia. I started to read the play and felt that Claudius had a kind of tyrannical quality—someone who is willing to kill to get the throne and to

keep people at bay. That sort of led me to Putin, and our relations with Russia right now. There are so many questions that we don't know. What is truth and what is fiction? All of those things are what Hamlet is going through, discovering the truth. So, I was drawn to Russian history. At first, I was looking at a more bleak, sort of Stalin-esq idea, but the more I started thinking about it, the more I was drawn to imperialist Russia during the reign of Nicholas II, because it was very ornate and very beautiful on the outside but the internal elements of it were troubling, as was the populous around those in the country. I was also drawn to Tolstoy and Chekov, who are two of the most brilliant writers the world has ever seen, and how that related to *Hamlet* was something that was I was really drawn to. The play does not take place in Russia [laughs], but I was drawn to creating a landscape that had a mirror to that world—another image in the play is this idea of holding the mirror up to the truth. I was drawn to the theatrical quotients of what that is, with Chekov representing what's really the father of modernism and the naturalist quality that the player king can represent to Hamlet to see truth personified in front of him. The players became the Chekhovian world and the court world became the opulent, beautiful, ornate world, and underneath it is the sea of corruption and fear. That to me was the end point of the production. I knew I wanted it to be operatic because I feel like it's kind of a giant aria within this grand, beautiful landscape that iris's down to the lone individual seeking truth within, and what Shakespeare gives us, which is a revenge tragedy as well as an existential drama and the discovery of self in the midst of that huge revenge tragedy. That's sort of the inkling to where it was. Within that also I was trying to give Ophelia some agency, and the female characters in the play some prominence—another theme in the play that can sometimes be blurred. For me the two female characters are pivotal to Hamlet's journey. They are the two places in the play where Hamlet seeps into madness and slowly gets pulled back out by each of them. He says to Ophelia during the nunnery scene "and made me mad." And he says to his mother "this ecstasy is very coming." Then he says that these two female figures really become links to his own truth—and really his heart—that could slip away. So, I knew I wanted to focus on that, but I probably shouldn't as well just do *Hamlet* [laughter] because it's the greatest

play ever written and it will always be relevant; it will always reveal new things and there is no bad time to do *Hamlet* ever. It's seen right now in our world, a play about people finding authenticity and truth was necessary.

**Smith-Bernstein:** Thank you. Quinn, in rehearsal Brian often said that the production *Hamlet* really shapes around the actor who plays Hamlet. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your process of doing Hamlet this time and also your great use of comedy and humor. Would you could talk a little bit about that in this production?

**Mattfeld:** Sure. This was a really great process because we treated it like an investigation of the play. I've done it two times before in progressively larger and larger productions, and this felt like a chance to really test the theorems that have come out of those experiences earlier in my life. We had a lot of dialog, Brian and I, and Terry, our stage manager, would sit and talk a lot. We would work on some of the soliloquies—"what do you want to work on today"—we would talk through the issues and I kept a notebook of all it. I was writing all of that stuff down and I was still reviewing it during the show. Tather than just "Oh this role that you're going to do for Utah Shakespeare," I wanted to treat it like an artistic project that doesn't end once we open, that's just the incipient phase of this investigation. So, Brian and I kept charting the simplicity upon which we can layer all the complexity of Hamlet; what is the arc; where does he start; what changes; where does it change; why does it change? Almost every time you think "Oh this thing changes," it's because it is in the middle of a pivotal scene with one of the other characters. For instance, where I was talking with Ophelia and Gertrude. Or, it is because of what Herald Blooms talks about—Shakespeare's characters overhearing themselves. Shakespeare overhears himself saying "to be or not to be, that is the question," there's the rub, right? It's one of the places where character development starts to change in drama because it's self-motivated, it's not the gods are changing you, the circumstances aren't necessarily, it's actually an internal change. It was charting where that change is ,and what the arc of the characters' journey is just as an individual. And it's huge, it's enormous; it's like every human's journey through any kind of crisis—their psychological, their spiritual journey through that—so its huge. It was really

great to be able to approach it like an artistic project rather, than another role that I get to play. The size of it, the scope of it, and the importance and depth of it allowed me to be a little bit selfish and say “let’s really take these six months and investigate!”

In terms of the humor, people are surprised by it. When we originally talked about it, Brian said, “You know one of the reasons I think you should play Hamlet is because we see it the same way, you either think irony is humor or you don’t.” [laughs] At one point Hamlet says “I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth,” which tells you that at one point this was a very mirthful person, a very funny guy. With that level of intelligence you know they’re probably very smart, or very funny. What happens in the play is that Hamlet takes the humor that clearly has been part of his life—the levity that has been part of his life—and starts using it as a weapon, a defense mechanism, to let steam off and to keep himself sane. For me, I keep finding opportunities where Hamlet is using humor because I don’t think that comedy and tragedy are mutually exclusive. In fact, I think that those two mask on stage next to one another, deep in one another, and that Shakespeare does that intentionally. He put a dirty joke in Gertrude’s speech about Ophelia dying—he can’t help himself. He also knows it’s a pressure release valve. And I find that, just for myself, I have more access to the darker or sadder parts of Hamlet’s journey when the entrance to that experience is through humor. I always think of the Yorick speech—that it comes from a beautiful memory of this guy who used to make him laugh when he was a kid, who is now gone, and the difference between then and now. He says “now” four times in that speech. It is such an ephemeral, but it is wrapped in humor, and wrapped again in this fun, mirthful experience of the character and of the play.

**Smith-Bernstein:** I know you have a bunch of questions, but first question is usually about Ophelia’s death. It is the first question I get every seminar, so I think we will just go ahead and talk about it. Brian, can you talk about that a little bit, and then Emma if would you talk about the experience of the madness in creating a strong Ophelia?

**Vaughn:** Yes. The idea for that came because I find Gertrude’s speech confusing. Because, all of a sudden she gives a beautiful description about this death. The whole time I hear it I say, “then

why the hell didn't you do anything about it? Why didn't you describe trying to save her?" Nothing. And so, it just linked this thing. It's such an odd speech. I think it's for Laertes benefit to make it a beautiful thing that he can take with him. But when we were building this world, because I believe the social elements around the play informs all the internal elements inside the play, it made me think, what if she was killed, what if Claudius had her murdered? This is a guy who killed somebody else to get the throne—actually killed his brother to get the throne—and then he starts saying "I'll kill Hamlet because he knows the truth, oh let's get rid of them." That is somebody who would be capable to get rid of anybody who was willing to expose the truth to them. And that's why it's in this play [laughs]. It does make Gertrude's actions suspect, but I also think questions are good because in the very next scene the gravediggers ask, "Is she to be buried in Christian burial when she willfully seeks her own salvation? The crowner has sat on her, and it proves so, but how can that be?" It's questions. They don't know the truth. Nobody knows what happened. It becomes this huge question mark. And to me that was more interesting than putting that element into the play. Because I think Ophelia is a threat to Claudius' journey—a threat to Claudius—because she's one of the closest people with Hamlet, if not the closest. Certainly, the most intimate, I believe. So that was where that came from. Then it became about constructing that, obviously, in the world and what the relation between Andrew and Jackie is in that final moment. How she relates that information, and why and what that threat may be. What I find really sad is Gertrude's unraveling in the course of the play. In fact, I find that sometimes more tragic than any moment and any other journey of the play because it's obviously somebody who, like Ophelia, was falling and was raised up for a brief moment, and then fell back into the abyss. The language that Gertrude uses in the play, to me, is mostly evocative of her own personal journey. Of how she felt like she was drowning in her former relationship with the ghost. She was, for a brief moment, raised up and saved by Claudius, and then the truth about who Claudius was propelled her into the deep abyss where she says twice "drowned... drowned." Three times Shakespeare uses that word right in a row "alas then she is drowned... drowned... drowned." I wanted to put in multiple

layers of reality because it's a confusing event, and I thought it might be dramatic and interesting. Some people don't like it, some people find it confusing, and you know what, great. Because it propels people to go inside the play, and there are things in the play that actually are open to interpretation, and confusing. And so, for this production that was the direction I wanted to go.

**Geer:** Well I think it makes people angry, and rightly so. A lot of people say it made me want to do something. And it is supposed to make you feel pissed off when things are going really south. I wanted to expand on Brian's thoughts about "yes, I, as Ophelia, am a threat to Claudius because I am so intimate with Hamlet, and I know things, and I'm involved in this world." But I think when Ophelia becomes ill, she's no longer within the normal confines of human—I'm not going to do things the way everybody else is going to do them. I proved that I say things I shouldn't say. I say things that make no sense to everybody in the room. I get angry quickly. I cry quickly. I scream. I laugh. I do things that are not what everyone is comfortable with, and that makes me a threat because who knows what I'll say or what I'll do and he [Hamlet] needs to get rid of me. Making that scene has been really challenging and I'm proud of where it is now, but it is a big hurdle. One of the reasons it is such a hurdle is because there is a lot to achieve in that scene. I have a lot of things I need to say to a lot of people and a lot of things I need to do. What you don't understand is what I'm saying, or they don't understand. It has been very clear to me. I have a couple tasks I need to achieve and until I've done that, I cannot leave the stage. It is incredibly challenging and very cathartic. I get a lot of things out even if they are not understood and she's fighting all the way through it. That is one of the biggest things, in terms of her strength, which a lot of people won't talk about. I think Ophelia is strong, brave—I love her so much. I don't think Hamlet would use somebody who wasn't these things. I think she's very bright and she has a good sense of humor, and I think they would have really made a wonderful husband and wife if they had the chance. I think a lot of people see this production and don't see that in her. I wanted to make that as clear as possible and the way I found—the way we found—to do that was to make her a fighter. To make her fight no matter what. She gets battered and bruised—she is collateral damage. There is no way around

that. That's the play, that's the role—to make her fight all the way through. I loved that she is fighting in the mad scene and I love that I am even fighting when they are killing me. I love that I never stop trying to fix it or make it better, or live, making her a strong Ophelia. I think she is strong. I think she's written strong. We just hope to make you feel that and make it as full as it possibly can be as we try to do it every night.

**Smith-Bernstein:** Thank you. And one final thing I just want to touch on is the *tecnicimos* text that Denmark is an elected seat, it's a constitutional monarchy. So, Claudius really becomes a figure who has won an election, probably against Hamlet. He has charisma but we also see in him this kind of impulsive, scary figure. Andrew, if you can talk about that a little bit, and Jackie too, about creating the royal couple and what's in it and a family for Gertrude.

**May:** Well, what Brian was saying earlier, when you read some of these speeches you can fight against them or you can fight with them. We were talking about Gertrude's speeches so described, why? When you look at Claudius's first speech to Hamlet, it's basically a tirade and it is in public, and it is done in front of everybody. My first instinct as an actor is "how do I tone this down?" [laughs] "How do I make this conversational that people wouldn't listen to?" You can do that all day, but you are still saying things like he says. And they are in a row "this, that, this that." "You're wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong." There's no fighting that. So, when you get into it and you realize, "ok it's a tirade," then it really is very fulfilling. But you know, we can't even play [laughter]. We're just getting to know who these people are, and this guy comes shooting out of the gates screaming at Hamlet, and that's interesting, really, really interesting. This isn't solely my idea. We were talking with Bria and we wanted to make him very active. All too often Claudius's are benign. They come out and say they're thing and have their one nice speech where, "boy I killed my brother" [laughter] "is there any chance for me?" Maybe not. And that's really the conflict of the psychotic killer of this play. Because this man has killed his brother, as he says, the primal sin of mankind—Kane and Abel—he killed his brother. And we know that going in. The ghost says it, I say it, everybody says it! It's a proven fact, and so, how is that man benign? I don't know. I have



no idea. Therein lies the some of the truth in the platform from which we can springboard to go into a character. And also, the justification is the relationship between Claudius and Gertrude. There is love there. There is attraction there. There is sex there. It's sexy, as opposed to "Well, will you marry me?" [laughter] "That'll be convenient." It's not that. I think the back story is that they were attracted to each other from the get go. From my story, old Hamlet was a very good warrior, but not a very attentive husband, and that's where I can slip in. There's the background. They had something going. [Laughter]

*Antaramian:* Yes, in terms of Gertrude, the way I perceive the start of play is that, yes, she loved old Hamlet. Probably was not in love, but loved him—thought he was a good man. But, the way I play it, her son reminds her of her father, of old Hamlet. But, when he dies there was always an attraction. You know you can't help but feel the electricity of attractions of certain people. I mean, I don't know about anybody here, but I've made some bad, uh....

*May:* Do tell! [laughs]

*Antaramian:* I've made some bad decisions of people who were not right for me. Now, I never made such a bad decision that someone has killed for me, but I do know that happens. I think Gertrude was very attracted to Claudius and when he is elected and he is wanted by the populous to be king, she loves that. That she thinks it is great and that they should now be husband and wife is also something that actually feeds her heart and the sensuality. And so, the problem is that she is in denial of how it all went down. And when it all starts to unravel, especially in the scene with her son, actually right before, when she sees Claudius's reaction to Hamlet, in the play within the play, and the poisoning, things start to stir up. And, right before the scene with her son, she's thinking "no that can't be possible. Why did he get so mad? No, no. I'm going to put it in the back of my head. I'm just going to chastise my son. Why did you do that?" Then the whole scene unravels and that's why she comes so fast to say, "ok don't say anymore. You have brought all this attention to the forefront. I see the black of what happened." And still he says "a murderer." Gertrude responds "I cannot deny that that's possibly what happened," and she becomes completely her son's ally, knowing that he has offered up the truth for her to see. The rest of it is still—you know, you're in love with

the people you're in love with, whether they're bad people or good people—a little bit of, “I still love this man. I cannot believe he did this. And if he did this, he did this for me. And that everything that has happened thus far is because he did it for to be king and for my love.” And so it's a mistake, or it's all my fault. I don't know if I answered anything I was supposed to. [Laughs]

**Smith-Bernstein:** Thank you. Ok so now I will open it up to audience questions. Yes.

**Audience member:** I thought overall it was a great production, particularly the energy level. Three things that I particularly liked; you began the opening scene beautifully, created an atmosphere of assistance, and curiousness. . . danger, eeriness, and all that. Nobody knows what's going on. Something is very, very wrong. Then I liked the fact that you start feeling a bond between Hamlet and Ophelia. And also, the fact that you made this menacing force in the character of Claudius very clear. But I was wondering, of course you have to cut the text because it's very long [laughter], given that cutting is inevitable, I did notice that from the opening scene, the whole sequence about the cock's crow, the birth of our Savior, and the rising sun was taken out. There's quite a bit a scholarly commentary about that sequence that it creates a moment of stillness, holiness. The opening scene closes on a note of watchfulness and purity and a note of hope and renewal with the rising sun. Horatio says, before he brings Hamlet's name up, “look the morning was a phantom cloud who walks high on the eastward hill.” I was wondering why that—because our Savior—it's the only time in all of Shakespeare, Christmas is directly referred to. It brings, in my opinion, a note of hopefulness, renewal, redemption into the play. I was wondering why that sequence was cut.

**Smith-Bernstein:** We used that as a hallmark of the timeline of the play interiorly, and personally, to know what time of year it was and what was happening and then cutting the text. There was an interest in preserving as much of it as we could and including moments that are often cut, like the Reynaldo/Ophelia scene, Hamlet's soliloquy after reading Fortinbras. In doing that, all the other scenes just had to get trimmed, and trimmed, and trimmed. If it wasn't directly relevant to the story, it would sometimes get trimmed. That's the short answer. Brian will you...

**Vaughn:** There's so much exposition in that first scene by Horatio. That he is going first off about Fortinbras and old Fortinbras and this is the situation of the kingdom, and I think it's about this. I just wanted to move it along, because I feel like people will catch up with it. We did have that line in there initially, but, then I compressed it because I wanted the immediacy of those characters. I didn't want them to stop and reflect. I wanted them to propel forward to try to solve. And that to me is indicative of what Hamlet is going through. Unfortunately, I think it's one of those scenarios where, as a scholar you're reading—I will say this, every cut in *Hamlet* bleeds [laughter]—so it doesn't matter what you cut. There's always something that you go "Oh, I love that passage," but we have to get rid of it. The show is about 2:50, without intermission, so its running at 3:05. There is some buffer there. We have a three-hour time gap because of change over for the next show. If I could, I would have a four-plus-hour production of *Hamlet*, because I think it is interesting. But there is stuff that a normal audience just may not need, and it's just one of those little things. I love that line. I have had it in another production that I directed. When we got to it in this, I was concerned with the structural component of where we were in the play, that it's both an interior and exterior world, but I didn't want to draw too much attention to the exterior world of it. I wanted that to be visual, not necessary oral. So, some of those things, like the snow falling and all that, while it's an exterior sort of world, it is not necessarily saying "Oh we're outside now. We're inside," and that was one of those lines that I just wanted to get propelled with momentum of what Horatio is saying, "let's go tell Hamlet what's going on." That's the only reason for the cut. It's not for love of the passage because I get it and I love it. It is also, as Isabel said, that there were structural things I wanted to keep in place in this production, because you don't see them.

**Babr:** Can you talk about those?

**Vaughn:** Well, the play is basically about three sons—Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbra—avenging the death of their father, and I wanted those three pillars. A lot of times Fortinbras gets cuts, gets left on the table, and I felt that it was important. It's important for Hamlet to see someone else taking action in the height of a military state. That was really, really vital and I think it's one of the most

important monologues—soliloquies—how do all occasions form against me—a speech that often gets thrown away. I think it's such a pivotal moment for him, when he leaves and then comes back, because you see a changed individual when he comes back. And to just see him go away and then come back, it just seemed like the guy, who the entire play that Hamlet/Shakespeare is saying it's all about his conscience, who is doubting with his conscience. Doing what is right and wrong. He's always saying "should I do this, should I not do this" to not have that speech, and to see him come back changed seemed weird to me. So I wanted that. Voltimand and Cornelia were important links to that, because it talks about the military state, and the uncertainty of what Claudius may or may not do by giving Fortinbras passage through his kingdom. By giving him a passage through his kingdom he rallies around the other side and basically comes back. It's a deterrent from Claudius and it's something that is descriptive. That is showing him not thinking about the big picture, but obsessing about the internal picture—which is Hamlet—which is fear of people discovering that he killed somebody to get it. On the outside of that is a whole military world encroaching onto his kingdom, that he's not completely aware of. So that was important and I wanted to put it in there. And then the Reynaldo/Polonius stuff is often cut and I think the hypocrisy of what Polonius says is vital, because you have this guy giving this tremendous, beautiful advice to his son and then at the same time he's saying, "Go spy on my son and see what he says." That is a sycophant, it is a loving father who just makes bad mistakes and is a social climber. I wanted that theme in there. So, some of those things that often get trimmed so you can keep some of the more poetic stuff in the play, it just became a necessity to include it.

**Smith-Bernstein:** Thank you. We had a question in the back.

**Audience member:** I had a two-part question, one for the director, one for the actors. Brian, I was wondering if there's any sort of—let me talk through it—so *Hamlet* has a lot of cultural capital in a really bizarre way, not if you think it's the best play ever, but if you don't, it is like a weird thing about *Hamlet* that everyone thinks they know what it is whether they've seen it or not. So, I was wondering if you had any practices in directing that you either had to institute for specifically directing *Hamlet*, or put

aside for specifically directing *Hamlet*? And for the actors, I was wondering, how did you balance expectations of Hamlet versus your own process? Especially in the areas that were cut or that are so standard that you had to fight against them directly.

**Vaughn:** That's really what this is. It's like having played Hamlet, the fear of playing Hamlet is always in front of me [laughter] because so many people have either seen it, they know it, or they relate to it. It is one of those things Quinn mentioned about how the person embodies the role. Which is the truth. The same thing in directing. YAt some point you just have to relinquish yourself and say this is my production with these people, here, now, telling this story, let it live. Somebody can link on to it. Somebody can hate it. That's their thing. My focus would be on the storytelling of it now, with these people, for this particular thing. It's why we keep coming back to the play. The fear of doing it? Yes! The play is bigger than all of us. It is the most produced play in the world. It is, as they say, done every second of the day. There is production is going on somewhere. You know you will never live up to the expectation of it, so the thing to take away is just to do it and to just be in that. That's hard to do when you want it—when you love it so much. You want it to resonate. You want people to see it. And it is just the struggle of being a director or actor. You have to do what Hamlet does, put it out there and let it be, you know what I mean? But yes, it's daunting; it's scary. I'm guessing the same would be for these monumental pieces of theatre; *King Lear* is another one. You have so many people reading it and identifying with it in their own sort of world, that to match that is really almost impossible, really. You will never have a perfect thing because someone will always relate to something you don't, and that's actually the beauty of the piece. It's why you read it. It's why you keep coming back to it. It's why you have new discoveries. That's why you grow with it in all these things. And it's actually the beauty of playing it. Maybe Quinn should talk about that, but that's Brian.

**Mattfeld:** Yes, what I said every time in between rogue and peasant slave and to be or not to be, my Quinn brain goes “now I got to go out there and say the most famous speech in the world.” [laughter] There's no value in pretending that that isn't the case. But, there's a phrase I keep coming back to—I like to think of

theatre as a ritual, and we do this ritual however many times we do it, sixty, fifty times this month specifically, but the goal of any ritual is to do it a thousand times as if it's the first—and it comes from a nefarious character in history. The goal of any sort of endeavor is to learn to act or to do beyond the lust for result. It really helps me to stay out of the world of worrying about how something is going to be received, or what a preconceived expectation is, verses thinking “I need to figure this thing out. I need to get her to save herself. I need to find a way for him to wander in, to stumble into his own doom. I need to get him to make a mistake.” If I can focus on the very practical things that are happening in the show, and Hamlet need, that those things that he needs to achieve, and pursue that with all of the power of my brain and all of the fight in my guts, then I don't have time to worry about—I really like the way you said it—the cultural capital that we have to contend with in this play. But the more that I can keep my brain out of “this is a really important speech or moment,” and sometimes I will walk off stage and say “God, that sucked, why did I suck so much,” [laughing] because the whole time I'm sitting there thinking [whispers] “how's this going.” [laughing] Instead of, and it does happen, it happens to everybody all the time, actors, it's just the battle we constantly go through instead of “Oh my gosh, I just figured it out,” there's the rub. The action of discovery as a Shakespearian character is so important, and it's hard, because in a soliloquy it's such a mental game. The action of a scene is different. I have somebody to play off. I have somebody who I know how close I am to getting what I want. When it's a soliloquy, it's me, myself, and the audience, and the action is discovery. Well I already know that stuff [laughs] so I have to play it as if I don't. That mental action is made even more complicated because of the fact that it is *Hamlet* and everybody has a feeling about the way it should go. But really, it's not useful to any of us to worry about how it's going to be received. We just have to go back to the simplicity of telling a good story. That is what we've spent our entire lives working on, and going back to relying on those sorts of tools in that facility is the best way to get around that, or to meet that problem.

**Vaughn:** What's really funny is the only way to act Shakespeare is on the line. You teach students that. And it's easy to say, and so, so hard to do. But, it is also the simplest thing—act on the line.

Ironically, Hamlet's speech to the players is exactly the roadmap of how to do it. It is really just so all inclusive. It really is a kaleidoscope of morals.

**Mattfeld:** Yeah and it's such great meta-theater. You know what I mean? The central metaphor of the show is playing within a play, acting and pretending, verses truth, and how sometimes wearing a mask actually represents a kind of truth. [laughs] There are so many layers, and layers, and layers in this matrix. It is such a unique experience. It's unlike anything else you get do in the theatre.

**Geer:** Well, the mad scene is such a famous scene, and I've seen so many versions of it. I didn't know how to wrap my head around it. When I was on the plane coming here I said "I'm not even going to think about what the heck I'm going to do when I get there. I can't be so intimidated by it." All you can do is approach it like you would any other scene or role, which is to try to not have judgement of it. To try to find your way in, and to try to figure out what you want. To try to understand. So, I sat down and said "Ok, what would I do if I was in her world?" Ultimately her father is murdered, and the person she loves. I don't think I would be immune to losing my way. I'm not above that. I thought ,this is like a schizophrenic episode that was underneath and her father is murdered by the person that she loves. She probably hasn't slept in six or seven days. She's also so completely heartbroken and devastated, that her world is shattered. Her brother is gone. She cannot trust her father before he is killed. She's angry. She's hurt. She's betrayed. She has all these things going on and then this happens. I felt like I just needed to be empathetic to the incredible complications of that in and of itself. She's a victim of trauma and she's grieving. I've seen people act in incredible ways that they can't believe themselves—I can't believe myself when I've been in circumstances that feel larger than life. And I have not been even close to that world. But, whatever grief I have had in my life has changed me and made me unrecognizable to myself for moments of a time. I just try to come at it from as little judgment as possible. That's all you can do in things that are just so large. I know other people will judge it. I know other people have many, many opinions and this is our version of it. It's not going to work for everybody but I can't come at it from that place and analyzation.

**Mattfeld:** And I think it is cool too that that all works into the rehearsal process, and one of the reasons why this was so great is because we got to challenge a bunch of things. I have a number of very specific beliefs about how this thing works, and Brian will go “well let’s try this.” and I’d be like “Brian, it’s clearly not how this is.” [laughs] And then I would do it and go “Oh this kind of works,” and it’s a much better choice. Somebody was talking earlier, before we started, about killing Claudius, and we kill the hell out of Claudius. That comes from my thing that the moment has to be satisfying and I was annoying in the room about it. We all come to it with our own idea of the way it has to be. But the cool thing about this process was that there were so many moments of “no it doesn’t have to be like that, it can actually be something else.” And because of that, because of that loosening of the preconceived notions, I think it made for a better story, I think for a better play, too. [Laughter]

**Audience member:** That’s a good point, I actually wanted to ask about that. This production apparently changes some things—some big things but also some small things, like Claudius’s death. But also, both of Hamlet’s soliloquies. There are other actors in that theatrical space. Ophelia’s there for the first one; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are there for the second one. And then having Claudius assault Hamlet after the mousetrap and then put his head in water. Were those inspired by other productions you’ve seen, or the different ways you’ve read the text? Because, while I have seen Ophelia on stage during the soliloquy before, none of the other ones I’d ever seen, and I thought they worked really well. I wanted to know where those moments might have come from.

**Vaughn:** Well, some of it was me [laughs], and a lot of others in the room being on board with it. That’s the thing about these collaborations; you put stuff out there and it might not work with people or you try to make it work—try to dance around a new idea and find it together. It goes back to the people you’re doing it with in the moment, that is sort of the beauty of it. I think people come back to these plays more, and more, and more, especially the *Feelgoods* of the world and the *Branaghes*. You see that they have done these plays many times and there is probably a reason for that. But as far as the sort of weird things—the Ophelia thing is weird to me because it doesn’t say she exits; he says “walking here.” We



even tried it a couple times with him delivering it to her, which, if you look at it on the paper it could be many things. If you look at it based on what it is, she is the character who kills herself in the play, and here he is contemplating his own killing, suicide. So, you could play that that way. That she gets that idea—somebody with a heightened sense of turmoil could perish themselves—that initially was the endpoint for that. But then, I obviously went in a different direction with how she ended up killing herself. I felt like it was important for her to overhear that, to see her lover in a state of uncertainty, which he says later in the scene “what should such fellows as I do? Crawl in between earth and heaven?” Where inherently, a guy who’s literally on the precipice of not knowing anything, of just being on a tightrope, her awareness of that seemed like it would help propel her emotional vulnerability to try to help him through that. And their distance sometimes; it just doesn’t seem like she’s as engaged, and it seems too easy for her to give it over. That was something we talked a lot about. The other stuff was the reaction of Claudius. I feel like Claudius is someone who has a trigger and that led to idea of him really making it obvious that he did it. How good of an actor is he? Well he is the guy, as Andrew says, “’tis unmanly grief,” he says to him with a very first scene. “Buck up” basically—get over it. As the guy is blatantly just an asshole. Let’s face it, he covers it in the sort of social thing, which is “everybody needs to agree with me here” right? Right. And then to see the antithesis of that in the height of that moment and that that could trigger somebody to react. To be like, “I’m going to kill you for exposing what I did,” accurately seems to me dramatic and interesting. The head in the water thing was just another element of him potentially doing it to somebody else, and then he has somebody else do it for him later. That was the idea of that thread.

*Mattfeld:* I literally wanted to talk about yesterday; look how cool is it that Claudius tries drowning Hamlet or putting Hamlet’s head in the water and then Hamlet making Claudius drink the poison drink. There is just a little bit of symmetry there. But I never realized that until yesterday and that is kind of cool.

*May:* And the other one was the Rosencrantz. Was that how all occasions are there?

*Mattfeld:* Yes, that’s actually my favorite soliloquy in the whole play.

**May:** Me, too. It's such a great idea of him actually seeing somebody taking action and prompting him on a big, global-size issue like that is just. . .

**Antaramian:** And knowing they are not even going to win—that they're taking action—and also acknowledging that it's a worthless piece of ground.

**Vaughn:** Yes, that is something. But, they are still going for it. And the idea that those two guys—it just seemed weird again that he would say “Go a little before, I'll come”—would still be trying to keep an eye on him. And then having them walk back and him say, “From this time forth, my thoughts be bloody.” Because that's the first action he takes, which is to swap the letters, make sure that they get killed. He takes action at the end of that speech toward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and you see that later with Horatio where he's says, “They're not near my conscience.” That this is somebody who is in a sense of being right after that, and it happens in that moment. So, seeing them there was, I think, kind of important.

**Audience Member:** It didn't ruin the scene by any means; it's just I had never seen that done actually with them still in that theatrical space. It's always been Hamlet looking out at the audience, you know, maybe making eye contact and all that.

**Vaughn:** Yes. I see the soliloquies like a clip in time too. I considered almost letting it go, and then I came back to it, and in that moment I was thinking, “I got to go get my groceries, my daughters are over here, I gotta go do. . .” I'm thinking about my stuff—and I do think that some of that is what Shakespeare does with these soliloquies—he stops time.

**Mattfeld:** That's kind of a convention you established, too, with the church scene. It's literally in the moment, because originally, we had me walking around and then you said, “Let's try it where you're just frozen in that moment,” and that's just kind of what that is as well.

**Vaughn:** Yes, there are other people present when that thing is happening.

**Audience Member:** One of the things that was really interesting to me was the use of props in this production, from the guns in the beginning—I have never really thought why is Denmark in this high state of alert at the beginning of the play, you know, before

the process attacked or that sort of thing—to the book Ophelia is holding. I was especially interested in that book with the cross on the front, and then the decision to have those flowers be pages of the book and I wonder if you could maybe talk about that.

*Geer:* That was me and Brian jointly. We were in the mad scene and we were trying to figure out what could we use? Real flowers? Forks and knives? We can use whatever we want. But Brian felt strongly that we wanted to bring something that had significance, not something random that you don't have any association with. The only other prop that I have are letters and we can't use those, I would never destroy love letters. So, we had this book and we had a lot of thoughts about it being a Bible. Ophelia, in that scene and in multiple parts of the play, talks a lot about God. In her madness she talks multiple times about saints—all of these things that have a lot to do with faith—and what she's grappling with is the murder of her father and unjust non-burial of him. He's basically been thrown into a pit. And she is trying her best—at this time they talk a lot in the Claudius monologue, "If you can't atone for your sins before you die, you don't go to heaven,"—to give him a burial, in a sense, and a funeral. She's trying to make her own amends to her father. I have a lot to say to him, and there is just a lot going on in terms of trying to get into heaven, and it may be a fruitless attempt, but there is so much there that has to do with faith. I think, just as much as Hamlet is struggling with what he believes, so is she, and the chaos of it all. So, a Bible to me ended up feeling like I could totally be on board with that, and that it worked for my sense of what she's struggling with, what she is trying to figure out and it is destructive. But it doesn't feel—it's hard to explain—it doesn't feel like the Bible. It just feels like tools to do the things she needs to do and she's not quite in a logical state, and then they become flowers. It is a way for her to create beauty in a moment that is not beautiful, and there are a lot of those moments. I have watched people in my life experience horrible things, and immediately go "Ahh" [sigh]. And I'm sorry about it and I have literally seen people rope it back in, I've done it, and I feel like she's attempting that at multiple moments when it gets too hard and too scary. She sees what she needs to see. She gives to people what she needs to give to them. Rue and fennel, columbine, these all have meanings, and it's very direct as well.

**May:** I also made the connection of the props. The book. She has such a physical relationship with the book in this play. Dan gives her a book and says look natural (laughter). Then literally kicks the book out. And then there's this thing—make use of the book. Then at the very end, she's just ripping the book, and I like that. That for me, from a distance, was how everything comes together such as the wasted idea; it comes back, like everything.

**Mattfeld:** I also like that it has a shade of undoing the certainty of something. We start in a place of Protestant Denmark, right, and then a ghost shows up.

**Geer:** A Catholic ghost.

**Mattfeld:** A Catholic ghost shows up. So, all of a sudden, the theological structure that we all accept as truth goes, "Oh? Wait. Whoa." I always thought it was kind of a cool thing that every one of those pages is another question, poking holes in the very carefully constructed truth in which we all live

**Geer:** And that's the whole scene. She's poking holes. She's trying to figure it out and she is not afraid. That's part of the virtue of not being sane in regular people times. That's really the gift of it, that I can do whatever I want to figure out what I need to figure out, and no one is going to stand in my way. I have to figure this out. So, again, I can destroy. Because the questions are too huge and I need the answers.

**Smith-Bernstein:** I'm going to say that is one of the things that struck me, too, is that everybody felt so intentional. I've certainly seen *Hamlet* done where Hamlet and Ophelia and Gertrude seem like victims of fate. They have no control of everything. I felt like your characters were doing what they meant to do, and I think that the madness was more emotional than mental and that idea of "I'm going to make these flowers. I'm going to make this funeral happen for my dad. Nobody else is going to do it. Well, I can do it," and all these would have it and that's really interesting.

**Geer:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Vaughn:** That's exactly it. That idea about her own agency in this world. This is not an overly-religious production, although that is element of it that makes me think it might be [laughter]. I have certainly seen productions where the sort of theological element of the play is very heavy because you have a character who is going to school in Whittenburg—which is about existential

thinking—thinking outside of the Catholic-Protestant sense of being. That is something that's happening at the base level in this play, and was, in England at this time, obviously. So the very idea that Shakespeare's players had to get approval for certain things, what was right and wrong, was the sort of thread of what was happening. I think it's really interesting that this one character in the play, everybody is trying to put into a box—her brother, her father—all saying “you need to act this way, act this way. Read on this book. Subscribe to this, don't sleep with Hamlet, deny his letters, you've been too forward with him.” All these things and in the midst of that whole journey are people kind of going there is nothing either good or bad that thinking makes it so. As Hamlet says, “there is no right or wrong, there just is.” And that is another layer in the play about sinning, and people feeling like they can't have agency based on some bigger picture. Hamlet even has the literally “to be or not to be,” which is, I don't know what my after life will look like, because I've seen my father basically walking in purgatory. Walking into the depths of Hell, potentially. A state of unknowing.

Then there's Ophelia, to whom everybody is saying, “Be pious. Be chaste. Be pure. Don't sleep with anybody. Have this Christian life thing. Live in this type of thing.” It was really interesting for me to say, “No, I'm not going to have that. This is all false. This is a false reality of who we are. My thing is my thing, you're thing is your thing.” That sort of global thing on top of the religious element in the play I think is actually really, really vital. I do think it's something that Hamlet discovers through the course of the play and almost becomes a kind of Buddhist way of thinking, which is living in the moment, and it just is and it is. We don't know what the afterlife will be. We don't know any of that stuff. So, somebody saying to somebody “you have to be like this to get here,” seemed to me hypocritical in this world where a woman is trying to find agency, and is obviously deeply in love with this guy. And what she says, the flowers, the meaning behind all those flowers, is specific. One of them is rue. Rue was an herb that caused abortions at the time. Shakespeare's audience probably would have known that. This is a person who she says, “When you went into my bed, you promised me to wed all this stuff I came I dub the chamber door, that in the maid and out the maid never departed more.”

They have slept together. That is my thinking. They have gone farther than they probably should have in the social construct of this world. Which propels her to such a level of guilt that people are saying, “you can’t be this.” So, in that mask, I felt like there was another layer of her own reality, which is exposing her own truth in this thing. The heiress—I knew I wanted to bring the heiress back because it’s this a blood stain thing, which is a representation of Polonius. And then in rehearsal, Emma even taking that and collecting it, and all of a sudden to have this childlike image there with “Yes, keep it! Keep it!” Because it’s another layer of what potentially might have happened in their own relationship, their own love affair. We don’t know what that was. But I think those herbs are specific of what Shakespeare is saying. Why would he have said rue if it wasn’t about that at that time? And it’s also this idea of purging the truth, that idea of cleansing of one’s soul, all that is a religious metaphor in the play. So, to be honest, the idea that she’s ripping a Bible is sacrilegious. At first, I just didn’t know, but then I decided to do it, because [laughter] that’s what she’s doing. She’s exposing the truth of the people who are living and lying, who are being hypocritical. And in the midst of that is death and carnage and pain and destruction. And all these things, because of him.

**Geer:** And no wonder Brian, correct me...

**Vaughn:** How does that make you feel?

**Geer:** . . .that’s precisely what I’m doing.

**Vaughn:** So, the meaning—it’s kind one of those little happy accidents in some ways—just opens up a whole layer. We talked about bones. We talked about what the flowers are, and I knew I didn’t want to be literal because it just seemed that this is not a literal production in that sense. There’s subtext underneath what’s happening. That’s also kind of the Chekhovian name of the play, which is basically what the father of Chekhov is. And Shakespeare is, as Andrew says, acting on the line. Living in the moment. But, there’s multiple residence in a lot of the things that he says, and so I think you can act on many layers.

**Audience Member:** I was really intrigued by the way you described Gertrude’s account of Ophelia’s death and the possibility that Gertrude might be making this story up. It’s not really what happened; it is Gertrude’s story to cope with what happened. And

I was thinking that when she is telling the story of Demeter and is watching as Persephone is singing and gathering flowers and gets snatched away by the god of death, maybe this gives her some agency. Maybe Gertrude is having some hope from it. She can change that story. She can turn it around. She can be like Demeter, the avenging mother who rescues the daughter back from the jaws of death. So one time not to tell about women's vulnerability, but now all that put women down is this, you go to Job and he says, "Sorry, I can't do anything about that," but Demeter can't stop spring from happening. She's not going to stop it until she gets that daughter back. Maybe it what looks like Ophelia's most vulnerable moment, there's some hope that women are going to take power into their hands and change that story around. I've always puzzled about "why doesn't she do anything." But maybe it is that she wasn't there; she's making up a story about what if I was there; maybe she's making up a story about "you know what, I can turn things around."

**Antaramian:** Beautiful thought—analogy. I think that's very valid and the beautiful thing is that you can take away what you want of me as the actress playing it. I don't agree with Brian in that I didn't think this was a confusing speech when I came to it. Now in this production, with what we want to do with it, it poses challenges. To me it is exactly what you say, except that you have a more interesting take on it. [laughter] But no, it's beautiful. It is her state of mind. She comes and she says, "One wolf follows another," and "they were on each other's heels, they're just going so fast." [laughter]

**Mattfeld:** This is why they work. [laughter]

**Antaramian:** Yes, and this is what comes of that. She says, "Your sister's drowned." He doesn't say how; he says where, "Oh where?" We have now made it where I have not noticed that Claudius is in the room, and then I notice before I say, "There is a willow aslant a brook." Claudius is there and he is still fearful of what he can do to Hamlet, even though he has been sent to England; there is still fear, and I think that is important. That's the reason why no one is completely doing too many things, because he still is a very powerful and fearful figure. So, I feel like the speech cannot be a lie. He doesn't work as an actor going into it; first of all, because then there's no place in the script where he says

she was lying. I think Shakespeare says what he says and “if it is a lie, it is found out.” So I feel like she did see this, whether it was in her mind, she saw most of it. She was going to the willow tree. And the tree and then the stream, and it was all these things. That’s the state of her mind when she came to the point that Claudius killed her, or in the original, she was just doing these things and she drowned and I (Gertrude) didn’t do anything. I didn’t do anything is because I couldn’t do anything. In my mental state, I could only watch. And in some ways, that is the most beautiful death she could have had—that she was enveloped like a beautiful mermaid—there was nothing I could do anyway. I literally was frozen. So that—in her guilt of “I didn’t do anything,” whether she was murdered or drowned—she still didn’t do anything. I think that it speaks to her state of mind, “I don’t have agency. I can pretend that I can try to get agency, but I don’t.” And the women in this world can fight for it, but they are both pawns. They’re both used by the men to get where they need to.

**Vaughn:** It’s interesting, too, idea in this play of the other theme, which the player king literally shows where he says “did nothing.” In their vengeance, in their actions, they did nothing, that they caused in a state of unknown. So, the idea that she doesn’t do anything, you can definitely see that she herself is polarized and in inaction basically.

**Antaramian:** Exactly.

**Vaughn:** Like her son. And anybody who is debating right and wrong, what to do.

**May:** One reaction to this play about this particular moment that I find absolutely fascinating, having talked to a lot of people who have asked me, “Why did Gertrude kill Ophelia?”

**Mattfeld:** I asked you the other day!

**May:** Wow! I guess I want to flip the mirror around and say “how did you see that?” [laughter]

**Audience Member:** The main reason that that is what I came to was after Hamlet and Gertrude have their chat, and Hamlet tells Gertrude to not spend time with Claudius, and at the end of every scene, there is a moment where Claudius would beckon Gertrude to come, and she would pause, and then she would come. I can see the struggle of Gertrude being torn in between, and so it wasn’t so much that I thought it was Gertrude who had the agency to



decide “I’m going to kill Ophelia,” but more so I didn’t see a clear moment where Claudius ordered it, and so what we saw was that Gertrude was the accomplice and it was her dirty work to get the guards to go do it; that’s why she’s watching.

*May:* This is my failure.

*Vaughn:* No, no it’s not; it’s mine. [laughing] It’s mine because there is a moment where he looks to the guards and he gives them a look. But. . . it’s across the stage in the wake of Laertes, who is also down. She is just left. It’s easy to miss his look to those guys. I saw this as I watched the play and I go, “Ok, Brian, if you ever come back to this. . .” [laughter] It’s a moment where he whispers in the guy’s ear. It’s a literal thing and then they go out. But there is a look that happens between the guards. They watch her go, they look to Andrew, and Andrew gives a head nod, and then they go after her.

*Mattfeld:* I’m just not sure why suddenly the two guys who have been following orders from Claudius the entire time, who have been doing everything Claudius says, and getting nods, all of a sudden go, “Now let’s do Gertrude’s work. That’s the thing I don’t get. Like the pattern.

*Vaughn:* It is not a literal time and space thing. Although some people think it is a literal time and space thing. Because she’s in the room and then she comes in and..

*Antaramian:* Well we are doing it as she witnesses it, and it is still the same thing—there’s inaction. Whether it’s a murder or whether she actually drowned—whatever interpretation the play production does—she still is in inaction. And it’s interesting what each of you took away from it, which is all valid, of course. After her scene with her son, he says, “Ok, you can’t tell them I’m pretending to be mad, right?” And she follows and says, “Oh my God, he’s crazy, he’s mad.” And he says, “Come on, let’s go.” It would be reckless for her, because she still has to help Hamlet with all things he wants to do. She still has to follow the king’s direction. Again, she doesn’t have that much agency as a woman in this court, even if she is a queen. It’s just a gradual, “I’m not, okay, I’m going to.” She has a lot of “I shall obey you” in the first act. She never says that again. And she never does that again. She begrudgingly holds her place to make sure that Hamlet does all the things he needs to do with that. Those are the nuances that either show up or they don’t. But that’s what we’re trying to do.

**Audience Member:** I think a wonderful thing about the situation is, like you said earlier, how many questions it brings up. Throughout this whole play, at no point did I feel like anyone was very passive—all of the characters. It's a very common critique of *Hamlet*. He decides that he wants to kill his uncle, and then he never does it until act five. But in this play the questions all led to tension, all led to action.

**Antaramian:** And, I'm so sorry to interrupt you, but I wanted to go back to the beautiful imagery that you had in that speech. I think that when Gertrude is, maybe backing on what you're saying, there's so many different intentions and things you can take away from it, no matter what, it is not passive. I think that there's some value; that's a beautiful thing in Gertrude: "I don't have agency. I don't have ability for action, and I can imagine," but this is the rescuing of the woman. The beautiful imagery you had, maybe that is what she was thinking. Because maybe she's going through a version of her own madness, except that she's not going to that extreme—that she's starting to unravel herself in terms of reality.

**Vaughn:** I have something that's interesting—the idea of painting a picture more idyllic than what the reality may have been. I think this is another kind of theme in the play. I think about that with the ghost all the time, "How good a king was King Hamlet, really?" Nobody else talks about him. Everybody else acts like it's a pretty good kingdom right now with Claudius leading the pack. Everybody seems pretty happy. She seems happy. Everybody in the court—he won the public opinion. It's a pretty good state of affairs. And it does make me think "What was King Hamlet really like? What's the reality of what that is?" And, again, that goes back to another theme of the play; What is truth, and what is fiction? Why are people playing a role to be something that they're not? It's interesting and it very well could be that this is an idyllic, beautiful sort of thing. But when you think about drowning, it's often violent...painful...when people are drowning. So, what the reality of that is, is up to those that view it at the moment. That's how I feel many times, and Jackie is so beautiful in this, and in helping go on board with all of my [laughs] ideas on the play and executing them was such panache and grace. But I understand the other side of it for sure, you know, with her just describing what that event is. That's how I have been in it every

time I have been it. To me it just seemed interesting because I've read a lot of scholarship on it where it's questionable. It's one of those things and it has always been this little thing in the back of my head, which is why didn't you do anything. And maybe that's what that theme is, because, like Hamlet, she was in inaction, lost and in inaction. But she paints it in a way that it is a beautiful thing, which means, it seems to me, that it is for Laertes's benefit in taking a beautiful memory of his sister with him, when ultimately it may have been very painful and very tragic. So, we're kind of playing the duplicity of that.

**Audience Member:** So just on the topic of the drowning, I've never seen a drowning on stage before. Just really quickly could you maybe pull the curtain back a little bit and go into the fight chore . . . and how it was safe, and also praiseworthy.

**Geer:** Yes. We worked it out so there are very specific things that you're doing. And I'm doing all of it, so it's wonderful. Luke and Quinn, who are killing me, are barely touching me. They do a really good job of looking like they are tensing their muscles, but I'm doing everything; it's very, very safe.

**Audience Member:** What's in the trap?

**Geer:** Water.

**Audience Member:** Yeah cause it's so real. I'm curious about it.

**Geer:** I do put my head in water; I mean I put my whole face in it. It's about this much water?

**Mattfeld:** It is like a tub for dishes.

**Geer:** Yes. It's that much water. I start by putting my whole face in it. It's just a little trick. I slightly shift my face from mouth and nose in the water to mostly like eyes and forehead so that my mouth and my nose can be slightly out, and I can breathe. I start by making lots of bubbles and then slightly shift and breath for a while. I fake, I fake, I fake, and then I pull out and I cough and sputter and they plunge me back in. I've been doing this weird scream [laughs]. . . I am truly in water. It's just when I feel my breath starting to change, and I need to breathe, I just slightly turn my head, and that means I can take however long I want so . . .

**Audience Member:** You can drown as slowly as you need to!  
[laughter]

**Geer:** I do and wait for you all as long I possibly can. I can just take my time. It's really all in my control.

**Mattfeld:** It's the same thing with Claudius and me. Andrew barely has any pressure on me when I'm in the water, but I put my face in to here (signals with hand). The first thing I do is blow out with my mouth to make it sound like my mouth is underwater, and then as I lean forward to make it look like I'm going further in, I'm actually pulling my mouth up above the water, and breathing.

**Audience Member:** And that works even from the balcony angles?

**Geer:** Apparently. [laughter]

**May:** No literally, every time I do it, I'm thinking, I hope I'm not drowning you. [laughter] because it really does, from my perspective, look real.

**Vaughn:** It is a great scene though.

**May:** It's got to look good from the audience perspective.

**Mattfeld:** Every time I think, why didn't somebody put apples in this thing? [laughter] What is really great about it, too, is when you do that and you have all the scenery people saying don't get water on deck and don't do this and you think, "Let me drown somebody and try to keep them in this 3 by 3 box. We do have some contingency plans, too, because we have to fight on that stage after you get drowned..."

**Geer:** With my big heavy wig. [laughter]

**Mattfeld:** Yes. So sometimes there is still water there and often Horatio, (Jeremy) who's the fight captain, will come up and be like, you know, unlike the readiness is all empty, and then he comes, starts wiping... (laughter) because it's a safety issue, right?

**Geer:** It does happen a little bit on the steps.

**Vaughn:** We want to think that everybody has a lot of the commentary has seen the humor in the play, which people are very surprised at and I want to circle back to that. I love it actually, because irony and ambiguity is Shakespeare's world. And so to play that irony—so much of the humor to me is just that. I also love the fact that the one character that Hamlet is taken back by in the wave of death is the king's jester, Yorick. That he sees in Yorick somebody who can speak the truth by putting on an antic disposition, this vain sense of being, and in the midst of that is this resonance of truth, and that's where the madness is in the play. Underneath all that madness is this layer of sheer truth. It's the same with *King Lear*—anytime people are mad or just crazy,

everybody else has gone crazy, but underneath that is just this searing truth that pulls people back down to earth, and I love that Shakespeare's done that. I love that he actually says "here is this thing," that really embodied who Hamlet is. Of somebody looking at something, and turning it, and giving it multiple resonance, and not afraid to do it, and is also in front of him, dead. That he's contemplating this thing. It is such a rich metaphor. It is really beautifully structured and, for me, it's things like that that keep you coming back to this play; where you see a Hamlet who layers into the comic irony of the thing, and reveals this whole other thing that you sometimes haven't even thought of when watching the play. "Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick to this favor she must come," and no matter how much you pretend to be something you're not, you will always end up here. It's just really profound. Turning people on a dime. Taking them off kilter. Throwing irony back in their face. "Oh, that's great. You're not truthful right now." Every person, he says, "Are you, are you honest? Your news is not true." It is just this thing which is so necessary in our world, that somebody who is going, "Nope. You're lying, and here's why. Here is what it is." And that takes great conviction. In many ways that's what I think Shakespeare is really trying to weave in himself in this play as a playwright, of theatre, as a representation of truth. And he uses that construct and the psychological thing, which is about life and death. It's just so poetically rich and profound. It is why we keep doing it and coming back to it.

**Mattfeld:** Madness and laughter are so cleansing. Especially in this world, that madness is clarity, its hyperclarity and the man's comic element, too. The very last thing that happens is that Hamlet dies laughing, because he says, "the rest is silence. I have been talking for three hours." [laughter] Hamlet never stops talking, and in the last moment he says, "I'm not going to talk anymore." That's hilarious, you know what I mean. I think there's real clarity in that the thing that tyrants—that authoritarians—hate the most is to be laughed at.

**Babr:** You just described the joker. [laughter]

**Mattfeld:** Now you're talking! I like that! Someday Michael will have to have a symposium on Batman as a successful Hamlet.

**Smith-Bernstein:** On that note. Thank you. [Applause]