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*Dramatic Publishing*

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Based upon the play by  
**William Shakespeare**

Drama/Comedy by  
**Nancy Linehan Charles**

# Hamlet <sup>or</sup>

**Does Father Reeeeeeeally  
Know Best?**

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# Hamlet

## or Does Father Reeeeeeeally Know Best?

*Drama/Comedy. By Nancy Linehan Charles. Based on the play by William Shakespeare. Cast: 2m., 2w., 11 either gender.* William Shakespeare was big on what can happen if you make the wrong move. And in his world that meant letting greed, jealousy, power and revenge get out of hand. He was always telling his audience, "Pick your friends well—watch whom you listen to." Well, Hamlet listens to a ghost and makes his choices. The ghost tells him to get even with his uncle who, by the way, deserves it, and everybody ends up very dead. Three wise, sassy, irreverent storytellers relay this story and, believe it or not, make you laugh at the craziness of the human condition and gasp at the universality of human behavior—whether in 15th-century Denmark or 21st-century \_\_\_\_\_ (*pick any city on the planet!*). There are big chunks of Shakespeare's language juxtaposed to kid vernacular. It's a rich soup served up to make Mr. Shakespeare part of the playground landscape. The Bard's cautionary tale will send your audience home asking new questions about their contemporary world. *Simple staging. Approximate running time: 50 minutes. Code H94.*

Photos: Pacific Resident Theatre, Venice, Calif., featuring (front) Elijah Atmore and (back) Jacob Varela and Alicia Maldonado. *Photo: Camille Browne.*

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**or**  
**Does Father Reeeeeeeally**  
**Know Best?**

Adapted from Shakespeare's play  
by  
NANCY LINEHAN CHARLES



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*HAMLET or Does Father Reeeeeeeally Know Best?* was first produced at Mark Twain Middle School in Mar Vista, Calif., on April 17, 2008. It subsequently moved to Pacific Resident Theatre in Venice on May 3, 2008, with the following cast:

Storytellers . . . . . Barbara Betancourt  
Stephanie Machado  
Brian Menjivar  
Ghost of Hamlet's Father . . . . . Donna Feria  
Hamlet . . . . . Elijah Atmore  
Claudius . . . . . Isaiah Eisendorf  
Gertrude . . . . . Abeli Hernandez  
Polonius . . . . . Jacob Varela  
Laertes . . . . . David Monterrubio  
Ophelia . . . . . Alicia Maldonado  
Marcellus. . . . . Edwin Graciano  
Horatio . . . . . Brian Menjivar  
Gravediggers/Players . . . . . Jasmine Daboul  
Shirley Lopez

Producer . . . . . Candi Lira  
Costumes . . . . . April Clemens  
Set . . . . . Norman Scott  
Lighting . . . . . Fabian Rodriguez  
Asst. Director/Fight Choreographer . . . . . Will Rothhaar

Directed by . . . . . Michael Rothhaar

Special thanks to: Aldis Browne, Clabe and Thea Hartley, Greg Parkos, Pacific Resident Theatre and maryjane, Kate Kausch, Mariel Roderiguez, Ricci Luca, Dr. Mary Reid, Connie Vandergriff, Ron Thiel, Ric Lira, Kent Clemens, Toni Boyette and the parents of all the actors.

## ADAPTOR'S NOTE

I discovered early on that kids hear Shakespeare through their hearts. They hear it on a level to which, sadly, many adults—and often very academically accomplished adults—are tone-deaf. Someone who works on an intuitive level with Shakespeare's language explained this to me: that Shakespeare writes mostly in iambic pentameter, which rhythm sounds like a heartbeat—ba-bom, ba-bom, ba-bom. Five of these to a line. Hearing their heartbeat more clearly than perhaps us jaded adults, children respond instinctively to the song.

I began searching years ago for ways to bring the stories of Shakespeare and a good chunk of the language to children. When my younger son Will (named after Shakespeare) was in the fifth grade, I adapted *Macbeth* to the stage for a school fund-raiser. I called it *Macbeth, According to the Fifth Grade*. It was a runaway hit. So much so, we moved it to a professional venue for five weekends and made \$4500 for the tiny, struggling public school that had originated the production.

I was off and running. I've since adapted five of Shakespeare's plays for kids—all published through Dramatic Publishing.

*Hamlet* is particularly close to my heart because at thirteen, I stumbled into a rehearsal of that play and fell instantly in love. I remember what I was wearing, I remember the texture of the carpet I was standing on. No, I didn't understand the words immediately, but it sang! I was never the same again. I fell for acting and Shakespeare in the same instant and knew what I wanted to do with my life.



I know this stuff works. I've had the supreme pleasure of watching kindergartners race to the playground to gather sticks from Birnham Wood and prepare to slay the evil Macbeth—right after hearing the Bard's story. I've heard middle-schoolers quoting Iago in the hallway between classes; and one teenage girl at her locker in a south central Los Angeles high school was heard to rebuff her boyfriend with Hermia's exact words to Lysander in *Midsummer Night's Dream*: LIE....FURTHER...OFF!!!

If I could be the lady who brought Shakespeare to kids, I would die a happy woman!

# HAMLET

## or Does Father Reeeeeeeally KnowBest?

### CHARACTERS

HAMLET . . . . . prince of Denmark

CLAUDIUS . Hamlet's uncle and current king of Denmark

GERTRUDE . . . . Hamlet's mother and queen of Denmark

OLD HAMLET (GHOST). . . . . former king of Denmark:  
Hamlet's father

POLONIUS . . . . . old, trusted advisor to Danish Royalty;  
a little dotty

LAERTES . . . . . a college student and son of Polonius

OPHELIA . . . . . daughter of Polonius and sister of Laertes

HORATIO. . . . . Hamlet's best friend from college

MARCELLUS . . . . . a soldier in the castle

2 PLAYERS

2 GUARDS/2 GRAVEDIGGERS (played by the same  
actors, if need be)

3 STORYTELLERS (can be male or female: the names  
can be changed)

Cross-gender casting is possible and, indeed, encouraged. Only Hamlet and Claudius should be male; Ophelia and Gertrude should be female. Everyone else can be cross-cast, gender-wise. We usually cast everyone who auditions—what castle couldn't use a few more courtiers?

# HAMLET

## or Does Father Reeceeeally Know Best?

*AT RISE: As the audience enters the school or theatre lobby, there is a GHOST wandering among them. The GHOST should be wearing a helmet (see back notes to learn how to make a cheap helmet out of a plastic gallon milk container) and have a sword on his belt. He is wearing very white make-up. He should be on the edges of the room or crowd to begin with, but as they gather, he should be more obvious. He never speaks. When the house is ready to open, the GHOST should beckon the audience in. Always silently.*

*First Storyteller (SAMANTHA) is standing downstage center with her hands on her hips, looking at the audience as they come in. Two other Storytellers (ERIC and JEN) flank her.*

SAM. Well, come on in, come on in. Don't be shy. Don't pay any attention to him (*indicating the GHOST*). He was a king, but he's dead. Just take your seats and we'll get started. Here! We'll give you a hand.

*(All three STORYTELLERS jump down off the stage and whistle back toward the wings.)*

STORYTELLERS. Come on, you guys. Lend a hand here.

*(Out from the wings stream all the actors, dressed variously as soldiers, a student (HAMLET), a king (CLAUDIUS), a queen (GERTRUDE), an old man (POLONIUS), a young girl with flowers in her hair (OPHELIA), a young man with a briefcase or book satchel (LAERTES), etc. And the GHOST wanders through them all. They go about helping the audience to their seats, chatting, showing a bit of mild swordplay here and there. Whenever the GHOST passes the players, they stop talking and kneel before him...then stand up and watch him pass, shaking their heads.)*

*When all the audience is seated, we hear another whistle from SAM. All the players make their way back to the stage and off into the wings. The Ghost (OLD HAMLET), CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE and YOUNG HAMLET remain on stage, standing downstage right—GERTRUDE hanging on CLAUDIUS, HAMLET looking dark and sullen, the GHOST standing silently. Downstage left stands POLONIUS, LAERTES and OPHELIA.*

SAM *(to the audience)*. Well done!!! You guys are an orderly bunch. Mostly. It's a good thing because the story we're gonna tell you tonight is anything BUT orderly.

ERIC. The guy who told us the story is named William Shakespeare. Ever heard of him?

*(If the audience sits there silently, JEN says:)*

JEN. Well, don't just sit there being orderly. Really. HAVE you ever heard of William Shakespeare?

*(The STORYTELLERS then prod the audience for a response.)*

SAM. Well, all right then. That's better. For those of you who don't know him, he wrote plays.

JEN. And then he died.

ERIC. Well, not BECAUSE he wrote plays.

SAM. He just got old. But this guy was one HECK of a storyteller. He lived about 400 years ago...

JEN. But we won't hold that against him.

ERIC. So. The story we're gonna tell you tonight is about THIS guy.

*(HAMLET waves sullenly to the audience.)*

SAM. His name is Hamlet, and if you check your program closely, you'll see he's the main guy. You can tell 'cause Shakespeare named the play after him.

JEN. That's his mother, Gertrude (*GERTRUDE waves*) and his uncle Claudius (*CLAUDIUS salutes*) and his father, Old Hamlet, who's dead but still has a few things to say.

OLD HAMLET  
Boo!

ERIC. The story takes place in Denmark.

SAM. But Shakespeare didn't stop with just ONE dysfunctional Danish family. He wrote about this other family as well. There's old, wise, dotty Polonius, who's an ad-

viser to the king and queen (*POLONIUS waves*) ... Ophelia, his daughter, who used to be kinda Hamlet's girlfriend (*OPHELIA curtsies*) and Laertes, his son (*LAERTES bows briskly to the audience*).

JEN. So, see...this story is basically about these two families.

ERIC. Let's all say their names together so we'll remember them as the story goes along.

ALL THREE STORYTELLERS. Hamlet.

(*HAMLET waves again.*)

AUDIENCE. Hamlet.

(*The STORYTELLERS go through each character's name, always prodding the audience to participate by repeating the name. If they're slow to do it, SAM says something like:*)

SAM. Wha'd'ja think? You're gonna get a free ride here? Speak up!!

(*After the name recitation, HORATIO comes onto the stage.*)

SAM. Oh!! We forgot someone. This is Horatio, Hamlet's best friend from college. I don't wanta spoil it for you, but he's the only guy left standing at the end of this play, so remember his face.

*(HORATIO comes downstage center and pushes his face out to the audience. Then does profiles so the audience will remember.)*

ERIC. OK. So say his name. Don't be shy: Horatio.

AUDIENCE. Horatio.

JEN. I've never seen a cuter audience. One more thing. Sometimes in our play, girls will be pretending to be boys. Don't get bent out of shape. In Shakespeare's day BOYS played ALL the parts.

SAM. So it's payback!!

ERIC. All right, actors: PLACES!!!

*(All the actors run into the wings. The three STORY-TELLERS take their places on various levels of step ladders. Two actors, who will act as SOLDIERS to the king, come on stage carrying two chairs—fancy chairs to look like two thrones. CLAUDIUS and GERTRUDE sit on these. The SOLDIERS stand to the side. HAMLET lies on the floor with a book...his back to his mother and stepfather.)*

JEN. To begin with, the old King Hamlet has just died and right away, Hamlet's mother Gertrude marries her dead husband's brother Claudius.

ERIC. Like before you can blink. Whamo! Here's what Hamlet says about that.

HAMLET

Thrift, thrift... The funeral baked meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

JEN. Cool. The way he talks, huh? So anyway, Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, becomes king. And Hamlet thinks there's something fishy goin' on. And he gets real gloomy about it. And the new king and queen keep buggin' Hamlet to snap out of it. Put on a happy face.

CLAUDIUS

Now Hamlet... How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

GERTRUDE

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,  
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.

CLAUDIUS

We pray you, throw to earth  
This unprevailing woe and think of US  
(*CLAUDIUS indicates himself.*)  
As of a father.

GERTRUDE

Hamlet, I pray thee, stay with us.  
Go not to Wittenburg.

ERIC. That's Hamlet's college.

HAMLET (*sullenly*)

I shall in all my best obey you, Madame.

(*The KING and QUEEN, the chairs and actors, go off stage. HAMLET stands alone.*)



HAMLET

O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,  
 Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew.  
 That it should come to this:  
 But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two.  
 Within a month—a little month—she married with  
 my uncle.  
 My father’s brother, but no more like my father  
 Than I to Hercules.  
 But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

SAM. But then his best friend Horatio comes in to tell him that he’s seen Old Hamlet—the ghost of Hamlet’s dad, the guy you just saw in the lobby—wandering around on the battlements of the castle.

*(During SAM’s last speech, HAMLET walks around the center of the stage with HORATIO, and the latter pantomimes telling him about seeing the GHOST.)*

HAMLET

I will watch tonight.  
 Perchance ’twill walk again.  
 I’ll speak to it, though hell itself should gape  
 And bid me hold my peace.

*(HORATIO bows to HAMLET and walks off.)*

HAMLET

My father’s spirit in arms! All is not well.  
 I doubt some foul play. *(HAMLET runs off stage.)*

SAM. Meantime...Laertes is about to go off to college. He's packed up his clothes and his i-Pod (*or i-Mac or i-Phone or whatever's hip*) and now he's talking to his little sister Ophelia. Giving her the old brotherly advice.

LAERTES

For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor...  
Perhaps he loves you now,  
But you must fear; his will is not his own.  
Then keep you in the rear of your affection,  
Out of the shot and danger of desire.

OPHELIA

I shall the effect of this good lesson keep  
As watchman to my heart.

*(POLONIUS comes toward them.)*

POLONIUS

Yet here, Laertes? There, my blessing with thee.  
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.

ERIC. Oh boy. Now Laertes gets the advice.

POLONIUS

Neither a borrower nor a lender be,  
For loan oft loses both itself and friend.  
This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.  
Farewell. My blessing season this in thee.

LAERTES

Most humbly do I take my leave, my lord.  
Farewell, Ophelia, and remember well  
What I have said to you.

OPHELIA

'Tis in my memory locked,  
And you yourself shall keep the key of it.

*(LAERTES exits. POLONIUS looks at OPHELIA.)*

POLONIUS

What is it, Ophelia, he hath said to you?

OPHELIA

So please you, something touching the Lord Hamlet.

POLONIUS

Ah! 'Tis told me he hath very oft of late  
Given private time to you...

ALL THREE STORYTELLERS. UH-OH!!!

OPHELIA

He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders  
Of his affection to me.

POLONIUS

Affection, puh!!!!

SAM. Did you hear that? Puh!! It's that kinda thing makes you know, Shakespeare is right down there in the street with the rest of us. Puh!!

POLONIUS

From this time,  
Be something scater of your maiden presence.  
Do not believe his vows.  
Give not words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.

OPHELIA

I shall obey, my lord.

*(OPHELIA and POLONIUS exit.)*

JEN. See...nobody argued with their dad back then. No. I think dads are more reasonable today. Let's hear it for our dads!!

*(STORYTELLERS goad the audience into cheering the dads in the house.)*

ERIC. Meanwhile, back on the parapets of the castle, Hamlet and Horatio and another soldier, Marcellus, are keeping the watch and looking for the ghost of Hamlet's father.

*(Indeed, HAMLET, HORATIO and MARCELLUS come on stage with swords drawn.)*

SAM. It's getting late and they've been wandering around the castle fortress for hours with no luck.

End of excerpt. Following are production design notes.

## A WORD ABOUT PRODUCTION DESIGN

Think child's pick-up game. Cut-off broomsticks for swords, a drumstick strike on a trash can lid for the sound of clashing swords, cut-out cardboard for crowns, ladders for the castle parapet. A painted SEAL OF THE KING can suggest the castle, which is basically where all the action takes place.

Everything should come out of the imaginations of the kids and what's at hand—including basic costumes. DON'T RENT FANCY COSTUMES. Basic black pants and black shirts, which a child can bring from home, should be the pallet from which creation begins. Then add a bright scarf and skirt for the queen, something metallic-looking for the king, fake flowers for Ophelia's hair and a pretty skirt. Simple. Stuff they can scavenge from home.

I've been involved in high- and low-end productions of these plays and, believe me, an overly ornate production hurts the effect. It should all look like children pulling together their version of the story.

A note about helmets for the two guards. A plastic gallon milk container is ideal: cut off the spout and about two inches of the carton; cut off the front where the handle is (for the person's face); cut four lines up from the bottom about two inches (the plastic will curl out); color with grey metallic paint (for use on plastic). VOILA!! A medieval helmet!

Safe swordplay: use wooden swords—no sharp, pointy ends. The basics are thrusting and blocking the thrust. Plan it like the steps of a dance and have them rehearse it before every performance.

## PROP LIST

3 stepladders

Helmet for Old Hamlet

6 or 7 wooden swords (half broomsticks will do)

2 foils (thinner swords)

Plastic flowers (Ophelia's mad scene)

2 crowns

Briefcase or satchel—Laertes

2 chairs (thrones)

1 book—Hamlet

Large picture of the Globe Theatre in London

2 large ferns

A pair of oversized binoculars

Vial of poison

1 arras (a small, imitation Oriental rug will do)

5 or 6 tombstones (cardboard or foam board)

2 shovels

Funeral sheet—Ophelia

Big, round pearl

2 goblets or cups