

**AS LEVEL**

*Candidate Style Answers*

# **DRAMA AND THEATRE**

H059

For first teaching in 2016

## **Section A – Question 1**

### **Hamlet**

Version 1



# QUESTION 1 – HAMLET

1 “I think what makes people fascinating is conflict... Nobody wants to watch perfection”.

Discuss modern rehearsal techniques an actor could use to build a role illustrating the imperfections of a character. Justify your ideas with examples from at least three scenes from the performance text you have chosen for this question.

[20]

## SAMPLE ANSWER

Hamlet – William Shakespeare

The internal conflict with Hamlet is as exciting to a modern audience as it would have been to Shakespeare's contemporaries. Shakespeare's language makes public the inner conflict of a character who is so tortured by the need to exact revenge for his Father's murder. He is a young man struggling to do the right thing in a world that has been sent into turmoil. As the play unfolds we see Hamlet move from a tortured son to a cruel lover to a violent murderer. The challenge as an actor is to make a decision as to how we wish the audience's reactions to Hamlet to fall. Do we want a sympathetic reaction or a shocked response to his violent and uncontrolled behaviour?

I believe that Hamlet should be played as a tragic figure, his actions should be seen as shocking but understood as being a reaction to the huge wrongdoing that has been done to his Father and a passionate desire to exact revenge on his Uncle who perpetrated it. Because of this it would be necessary in the rehearsal period to gain understanding of his emotions as well as planning for his delivery of lines.

A key scene where we see Hamlet's turmoil is in the famous 'to be or not to be' speech. As an actor playing Hamlet, I would want to show the audience the enormity of the situation Hamlet finds himself in. The ghost of his Father has come to him and asked to him to seek revenge on 'foul and most unnatural murder'. In this speech he is deciding what to do – whether to live or to die, whether to kill his uncle or himself. In order to prepare for this, I would think about a time I had found myself in a dilemma and use my emotion memory to capture those feelings. I would think about how those emotions made me feel and the physiological responses to them. For example I might find myself gritting my teeth or clenching my teeth – or rubbing my head to try and remove the thoughts. As Stanislavski promoted, I would hope that connecting these real emotions to my acting would help to make it more honest and believable.

I would then separate out both sides of Hamlet's dilemma and look at them as a whole. The first words of the soliloquy show the crux of his dilemma 'to be or not to be'. I would imagine that the stage was divide in half and have each side representing one side of his dilemma. I would imagine that the 'not to be' side would involve being closer to the ground, with the centre of gravity being pulled down. He would need a quieter voice to show defeat and his movements would be more helpless and defeated. In contrast the other side of the stage would represent the 'rub'; the fury, anger and fighting spirit to stay alive and bring revenge upon the man who has wronged his father. He would pace about and control the stage more, using a louder voice and more confident movements. The contrast between the two sides would give an impression of 'madness' or lack of consistency in character. This could be seen as an imperfection but the passion with which he is torn between the two sides would invoke feelings of deep sympathy and, if honestly performed, great empathy from the audience to draw them in and become more connected with Hamlet rather than writing him off as 'mad'. It would be essential in this speech to show Hamlet's motivation – he does not start off mad but is made so the huge responsibility placed upon him. I would emphasise this by thinking about how Hamlet begins a boy and becomes a man during the course of this speech. This could be explored by taking individual lines and changing the voice and body language used to convey them. He would begin higher and more free in his movements and gradually become more deep and insular.

The next moment I would prepare for would be Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia. I would want the audience to understand the reasoning behind his cruel treatment of her and blame the situation not him as a character. To ensure there was still some sympathy towards him, I would make sure that he seemed tortured and saddened not just angry. In between his rejection of Ophelia I would include moments of closeness and intimacy to see that he would love to continue their intimacy but is too repulsed by the idea of romantic love after seeing his Mother in a sexual relationship with his Uncle. I would improvise scenes between Hamlet and Ophelia from before the death of his father and try to show snippets of this innocent intimacy in freeze frame moments intersperse with his rejection of her.

I would also want to understand why Hamlet is rejecting Ophelia. I would improvise a scene in modern day language where he honestly tells her that he can no longer trust women and that his Mother's relationship with his uncle has put him off all intimacy. The fact that he is unable to communicate this to Ophelia rationally shows an imperfection in his character, but to show glimpses of it through a tender look or hesitant pause will allow the audience to see beyond his apparently cruel rejection of her. This would be particularly embodied as he leaves her and 'peruses her face with intensity'.

Ophelia's reaction to Hamlet is key to the audience's reaction towards him. She is portrayed as innocent and undeserving, which make Hamlet's harsh treatment of her even more disturbing and reveals the harsh treatment of women in society at that time. I would play some physical theatre games where we see Hamlet physically control Ophelia – almost as if she is his puppet to show the control he has over her mind and body as a male and social superior. The contrast between this Hamlet and the one we saw beating the floor in desperation during his soliloquy the floor should be shocking.

A third important scene that shows his imperfection is when Hamlet argues with Gertrude. He starts off rational but is overcome by passions and ends up impulsively and accidentally killing Polonius. To prepare for the great crescendo in this scene, I would divide it up into units together with the actor playing Gertrude. I would then choose one line each for each section which epitomises what is happening 'Hamlet you have thy Father much offended' 'Mother you have my father much offended' for each of these units I would create a still image and then experiment with different ways of delivering the lines to show the changing relationship between the two of them. As with Ophelia, I would want to show that Hamlet is torn between loving his Mother and hating her. The conflict inside his brain causes him to act inconsistently and I would aim to experiment with different ways of delivering the lines in order to surprise the audience – and Hamlet himself! He is no longer in control of his passions as his temper rises. I would rehearse this speech with a piece of music which rises to a crescendo. As the music gets faster I would imagine Hamlet moving and speaking more quickly. One of the most shocking things about this scene is the disrespectful and even sexual way Hamlet talks to his Mother. He uses vile language as he accuses her of weakness and lust as she 'lies in this rank ensembled bed' with her dead husband's murderer. The delivery of these lines would be very important and I would speak them over and over again to find the physical reaction to the words – such as the baring of the teeth and clenching of the fists. Physically I would show Hamlet coming closer and closer to his mother – whereas he has pulled away from Ophelia. The audience should be terrified of him as he becomes more and more enraged.

Hamlet is not an easy play to watch but it is entirely fascinating. In order to fascinate the audience throughout the four hours of Shakespeare's longest play it is essential for the actor playing Hamlet to be fully prepared and able to show a changing and imperfect young man. The rehearsal process would be key to developing this and it would be vital for any actor playing Hamlet to explore his changing and inconsistent character and his motivations in depth.



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