



RSC



A close-up portrait of a man with dark hair and a light beard, looking slightly to the left. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong blue/purple hue on the right side of his face and a warm orange/yellow hue on the left side. He is wearing a dark, textured sweater.

HAMLET

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

TEACHER PACK



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ABOUT THIS PACK

This pack supports the RSC's 2025 production of *Hamlet*, directed by Rupert Goold. The production opened on 8th February, 2025 at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The activities provided in this pack are specifically designed to support students attending the performance and studying *Hamlet* in school but all activities can be adapted for learners of different ages and abilities. These activities aim to help students explore some important features of the text and production, using the RSC's rehearsal processes.

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These symbols are used throughout the pack:



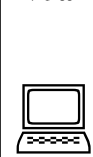
READ
Notes from the production, background info or extracts



ACTIVITY
A practical or open space activity



WRITE
A classroom writing or discussion activity



LINKS
Useful web addresses and research tasks

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

This 2025 production of *Hamlet*, set aboard a sinking ship, examines the true nature of tragedy - the pursuit of justice in the face of inevitable doom. Directed by Rupert Goold and designed by Es Devlin, it explores timeless ideas of leadership and governance against the realities of modern politics and of course, human nature.



Photo: © Mark Brenner

In this pack you will find a selection of classroom activities to help you work with students in exploring the story, characters and themes of *Hamlet* through the lens of our 2025 production.

EXPLORING THE STORY



SYNOPSIS

GHOSTLY ENCOUNTER

Fresh from university, Hamlet discovers that his father (Old Hamlet) is dead and his mother Gertrude has married his uncle Claudius, who is now king. This instability in rule has led to threats of invasion by Fortinbras, a soldier from a neighbouring state. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears to him, accusing Claudius of his murder and urging Hamlet to take revenge.

MADNESS

Unable to trust himself, his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or his girlfriend Ophelia, Hamlet pretends to be mad as a cover whilst he pursues proof of the murder. Helped by the loyal Horatio, he gets a travelling group of actors to re-enact the story of his father's murder in front of Claudius and Gertrude, hoping to guilt-trip Claudius into confessing. During a dramatic face-off with his mother, Hamlet kills a hidden eavesdropper who turns out to be the King's adviser, Polonius, father to both Ophelia and her brother, Laertes. Polonius dies.

REVENGE

Claudius has Hamlet arrested with a view to having him killed but Hamlet escapes to pursue revenge and dwells deeply on the meaning of life. Ophelia, having been violently rejected by Hamlet, hears of her father's murder. She loses her mind and drowns herself. Her brother, Laertes, returns with an angry mob. Claudius tells him that Hamlet murdered Polonius and offers to help Laertes take revenge.

DEATH

Claudius convinces Laertes to challenge Hamlet to a deadly fencing match. As a back-up plan, Claudius poisons a glass of wine which he means to offer to Hamlet. However, Gertrude drinks from the glass and dies. Hamlet is wounded by Laertes, who has poisoned his sword tip. The swords are switched in the fight and Hamlet wounds Laertes with the poisoned one. Realising that Claudius has manipulated him, Laertes forgives Hamlet and dies. The poisoned Hamlet finally avenges his father by forcing Claudius to drink the remaining poisoned wine. With his dying breath, Hamlet asks Horatio to tell his story accurately.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

A Doomed Ship

For our 2025 production of *Hamlet*, director Rupert Goold made the bold choice to set the entire play onboard a vast ocean liner. He worked with designer, Es Devlin, to turn the RSC main stage into the deck of a doomed ship at sea. Here are some of the main decisions that were made:

- The huge luxury liner / military flagship represents the power and glamour of the ruling family and is named after Hamlet's family 'The Elsinore'.
- We see the routines and activities of a large passenger liner. Bells and whistles punctate scenes. Characters embark and disembark, accompanied by luggage and the bustle of the crew.
- In the very first scene, we see Hamlet's father being given a burial at sea, his coffin dressed in a flag. We are made aware of his death as a recent event.
- Crew with binoculars replace guards on battlements and the sound design includes Morse Code, roaring engines and whistles to help set the atmosphere of ship life.
- The back wall of the theatre is projected with images of the ocean or portholes, depending if we are above or below deck. Above the stage is a tilting ceiling piece which reflects the sky or the ship's bulkheads to add perspective and scale.
- Hatches on the stage floor create extra entrances and exits and a handy place for props and furniture to appear from.
- Movement sequences between scenes include crew manhandling luggage and ropework. These add much chaos to later scenes when people are abandoning ship.
- The stage floor itself tilts dramatically when the ship starts to sink, allowing actors to literally fall into the ocean when they die.



Photo: © Mark Brenner



ACTIVITY 1: Messages From a Doomed Ship

“The brilliant podcast series, ‘The Rest is History’ has six episodes about the Titanic. It actually says in one episode, that ‘the ship took three hours, 49 minutes to sink - the length of a Shakespeare play!’ Ours lasts less time than this (two and a half hours) but we have two digital clocks either side of the set, counting down to the inevitable tragedy.”

Es Devlin, set designer, Hamlet, RSC 2025.

This writing and performance activity, in two parts, allows students to piece together the plot of this doomed story by dramatising it, both in their own words and those of Shakespeare. (You will need pens, paper, copies of Resource A: Messages From a Doomed Ship.)

- Discuss the various ways that messages and information have been sent, both in the past and in present day. *For example: morse code, radio bulletins, written logs, social media posts, carrier pigeon, message in a bottle.* Write these up on a whiteboard for reference.
- Discuss how the language of a message changes depending on how it is sent. *For example: fewer words for a telegram or X post, capturing footage for Instagram or Tiktok etc.*
- Organise your students into eight groups and give each group one of the messages from Resource A to expand on. (Depending on numbers, you can give out more than one to a group.)
- Explain that they are to write an emergency report either to another ship or to the world. Add that they must include all the facts and quotes given in their message.
- Challenge them to think of the language their message might use. How desperate is the situation? Is it more of an emergency plea or warning or a factual news bulletin?

Reflection Point:

What are the different ways in which our media dramatises news and what are the dangers in doing this? Examples might be:

- Catchy headlines and ‘clickbait’.
- Creating fake news including AI generated photos or deep-fake video footage.
- Leaving out certain facts to distort the truth.

Extension:

Encourage your students to choose their favourite quote from the play and turn it into a message from a sinking ship to be displayed together. They can choose one of the following:

- a) morse code
- b) a message in a bottle
- c) a crew member’s log

PRODUCTION NOTES:

Ticking Clock

During the performance, a digital clock can be seen on either side of the stage. It lasts precisely two and a half hours, during which the ship sinks. This image was chosen for various reasons:

- To create a sense of tension, of time literally running out.
- To reflect the nature of tragedy, there is an inevitable doom that can't be avoided: these people, whose story we are following, will die.
- To reflect Hamlet's thoughts on life and death. There is very little that separates them.
- The clock is digital, which jars with the period in which the play is set, reminding us that tragedy is timeless and can hit at any time.
- It also reminds us that even the steadiest, most stable of things can be destroyed and come to an end. The Titanic was deemed unsinkable when it was built.



ACTIVITY 2: A Play Within a Play

"We've really leaned into the Player King being the ghost of Hamlet's Father and Miranda (Colchester) as the Player Queen is trying to connect with Gertrude throughout; there is this kind of mirroring. Together with the dancing and the masks, it creates something quite abstract and eerie."

Sophie Drake, assistant director, Hamlet, RSC 2025

This performance activity will allow students to use the same trick as Hamlet and perform a short 'play within a play' to uncover a hidden truth. *(You will need pens, paper and copies of Resource B: Play Within a Play. There is a primary version of this.)*

- Discuss the function of 'a play within a play'. Can your students think of any other Shakespeare plays that use this device?
- Organise your students into a circle and hand out copies of Resource B. Read the scene between you, taking a sentence or line each and discuss the following:
 - What is Hamlet trying to do to Claudius and Gertrude by organising this performance?
 - How could it be staged to put the focus on the people watching?
 - Why did Shakespeare use mime (a dumb show) and why did he call it *The Mousetrap*?
- Organise your students into groups of six or seven and hand out pens and paper.

- Explain that each group is going to perform their own version of this scene, using whatever style they choose. They can use improvisation or write extra lines but every member of the group must be used. Challenge them to use different performance styles to suit their tone:
 - Still images or tableaux.
 - Narrated or physical action.
 - Movement and dance.
- Remind them to consider the following:
 - How to make the watching Claudius and Gertrude the focus of the action.
 - What Hamlet is doing during the play.
 - How subtle or obvious they can make the acted murder to provoke the right reaction from Claudius.
 - How do Claudius and Gertrude make their exit - loudly in anger perhaps or covering their faces?

PRODUCTION NOTES:

The Look of Status

Hamlet is a story about corruption and revenge within a governing royal family. Setting the play on board a ship creates the perfect place to show the status (social importance) of each role, from the king himself to the lowest crew member.

We can tell a lot about a character from what they wear. Here are some decisions made by our costume designer, Evie Gurney:

- The play was loosely set in the 1910s-1920s but, as much of the costumes of this period restrict movement, many practical changes were made such as no stiff collars or tight corsets.
- Wealth and power is shown in the uniforms of state occasion and ceremony such as the burials at sea.
- The hierarchy of a ship, the crew and its 1st, 2nd and 3rd class passengers is very like that of court life.
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are shown as wealthy socialites but still wear clothes to set them apart from each other. Rosencrantz is a 'Gilded Age American' in tennis whites and white tie. Guildenstern is more of a scholarly student.
- Gertrude is dressed almost as a Vogue model, a look that is gradually destroyed as her conscience unravels.

EXPLORING THE CHARACTERS

“Period costume can be tricky, as you can get tangled up in detail and lose the emotion... It needs to look and feel dynamic and, on a practical level, not restrict the actor’s voice or movement.”

Evie Gurney, Costume Designer, Hamlet, RSC 2025



Photo: © Ikin Yum



ACTIVITY 3: Class and Character

This performance activity, in three parts, allows students to explore the characters’ status within the world of the play by examining what they say and how they move. *(It is best suited to a hall or large classroom. You will need copies of Resource C: Passenger Inventory, scissors.)*

a) The Battle of A and B

- Discuss the meaning of the word ‘status’ with your group. Who do they feel has highest and lowest status in their school, family, country?
- Teach these four simple lines of conversation to your group:

Character A: Hello.

Character B: Who are you?

Character A: You're late.

Character B: I know.

- Divide your group into two groups along a long invisible line in the centre of the room and name one group A and the other B. Explain that the As are the highest status characters they can think of: royalty, dictators, celebrities etc. The Bs are the lowest characters in society.
- Invite them to walk around the room, in a manner reflecting the status of their character and have as many of the A-B conversations as they like. The As will start the dialogue each time.
- After they have done this a few times, ask the groups to swap so the Bs are now high status and As the lowest. Repeat the exercise. Invite them to continue the conversation into improvisation if they wish and see what happens.
- Discuss the results as a group. What was it like having such extremes of status? Did this change at any point in the dialogue?

b) Line up

Cut out the character lines from Resource C and hand them out (with larger numbers, you can print this out a few times and give students the same character).

- Ask the characters to line up in order of what they think their status might be, choosing one end of the room as the highest and the other as lowest.
- Starting from the high status end, ask each character to say their line in turn, together with one gesture that best suits their character's status. Add that if their character has no line, they can make one up together with a gesture that they feel is suitable.
- Ask if any characters feel they are in the wrong place and give them a minute to rearrange. Once settled, go down the line again with everyone saying their line and making their gesture.
- Discuss the results. Were there any surprises in status? Was it difficult to place certain people and why was this? How were the female characters placed? Does being female affect their status in this world?

c) All Aboard

This is a group improvisation game which builds on from the previous activities. Go through the steps together before starting so the students are clear about the order of events.

- Organise your students into two groups, based on the characters they have just been: passengers and crew. Ask the passengers to stand to one side, ready to board the ship.
- Ask the crew members (Captain, sailor, steward, etc) to prepare the ship for boarding. They can improvise their own dialogue, play music, arrange chairs on deck or line up in a special

formation, ready to welcome each passenger. When they are ready for boarding, they must shout “ALL ABOARD THE ELSINORE!”

- When they hear this, the passengers can begin to arrive one by one. They must all be appropriately greeted and helped on board by the crew. (You can assist the timing of this by calling out the passengers’ names.)
- When boarding, challenge them to think of the following:
 - What status they are, compared to everyone else they meet
 - How they have arrived at the ship and what they are expecting
 - What luggage they have with them - a vast amount or one bag
 - Whether they are impressed by the ship or not
 - How they treat the staff and each other
 - How they make themselves at home and interact with the crew and other passengers
- When all passengers have boarded, give them a few minutes to interact with each other and then ask them to FREEZE.
- Invite them to move to a place on board the ship that most represents their character at the start of the play. Discuss the results. What was it like for the crew to meet these characters and what do they think of them? Did they like their character?

PRODUCTION NOTES:

Contradiction of Scale

“Huge global events happen around us constantly and yet our own intimate relationships and personal choices absorb us the most.”

- Rupert Goold, director, *Hamlet* RSC 2025

One reason director, Rupert Goold wanted to set *Hamlet* on board a vast liner was to play with time and scale.

In the film *Titanic*, people are wrapped up in the small matters of their own lives - whether love affairs or petty quarrels - whilst the ground is tilting, the ship is literally sinking under their feet.

In *Hamlet*, the kingdom of Elsinor is sinking into rot and ruin whilst Hamlet deliberates on how to act. Many characters, including Ophelia and her descent into madness are casualties in the enormity of it all.



ACTIVITY 4: OPHELIA'S VOICE

"Ophelia is lifted into the air in a moment of stylised movement after her scene with Hamlet suggesting a sense of her becoming untethered from reality."

Rupert Goold, director, Hamlet, RSC 2025

This writing activity allows students to explore the language that Ophelia uses, together with their own, in order to track her deteriorating state of mind. (You will need paper, pens and copies of Resource D: Ophelia's Two Voices and Resource E: The Mind of Ophelia. There is a primary version of this.)

For this activity, it may help to watch this link to an RSC video on iambic pentameter:

https://youtu.be/Ee_M1qUQ9nY?si=aLquF6_Hl8qC_QPx

- Organise your students into a big circle sitting down and hand out copies of Resource D. Read speech A, line by line, taking a line each in turn. Does anything stand out: certain words, rhythm, images, etc?
- Now read speech B and compare the two. What has happened to the rhyming structure and the rhythm? What major changes has Shakespeare made to Ophelia's language and what does this tell us about her?
- Try beating out the rhythm of the first few lines of speech A and B as a group. Do the lines fit the Shakespeare heartbeat rhythm (iambic pentameter) regularly?
- Organise your students into pairs and hand out Resource E and pens. With primary groups or students who do not know the play well, hand out the version with prompts and ask them to match each quote from column A with a meaning from column B.
- If using the version without prompts, ask them to fill in what they think Ophelia could be meaning next to each quote.
- Discuss the results. These quotes are in order of where they come in the play, so what is Shakespeare saying about her change in mental state? What is Hamlet doing to her?

Extension Activity:

Invite students to imagine a different ending for Ophelia, one in which she is able to collect her thoughts and communicate them successfully to Hamlet. This might take the form of a formal letter, a recorded voice note or video. Challenge them to think about which words she might use, her tone of voice, how she decides to present herself and whether she is hoping for a future with him or not.

If you have time, invite your students to read out, play or perform these alternate versions. Which would they like to see in an alternate *Hamlet*? Might this be the start of a sequel starring Ophelia, and if so, what would they call it?



Photo: © Ikin Yum

PRODUCTION NOTES:

First Families

The term 'First family' is an unofficial title for the family of a head of state, such as the president of the United States.

Much thought was put into creating the image and power of the First Family of Elsinore in our 2025 production. These ideas included:

The old king Hamlet is given a ceremonial burial at sea, including his coffin being draped in a flag, just like modern state funerals and indicating the death of a great leader.

Claudius is dressed in well cut suits and tailcoats and Gertrude in rich dresses of luxury fabrics.

Claudius's war cabin contains models of boats, making him appear much larger than life and and a master of the seas.

The ship itself, The Elsinore, is depicted as a huge luxury liner. Boats have been status symbols of royalty, powerful leaders and the mega rich throughout history. The Titanic, the most famous 'unsinkable ship' was a symbol of wealth and luxury before its tragic end.

EXPLORING THE THEMES

Theme 1: LEADERSHIP



ACTIVITY 6: Good & Bad Government

“Social media has brought unprecedented transparency, exposing (and often exaggerating) the flaws of modern leaders in ways that their predecessors could avoid.”

Sergei Guriev, Co-Author of Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century

The following performance activity, in two parts, allows students to connect different forms of leadership, both in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and in the modern world. (*You will need: a large, clear space, pens and copies of Resource F: Leadership.*)

- Discuss these three ways in which *Hamlet* shows us corrupt leadership:
 - A. **Corruption spreads:** Claudius murders his brother to get the crown and, as a result, destroys his whole kingdom.
 - B. **Echo Chambers distort:** Claudius holds onto power by surrounding himself by ‘yes men’ such as Polonius, people who go along with him, no matter what.
 - C. **A Change for the Better?:** when a leader is bad, people want a change but there is no proof that Fortinbras (who ends up ruling Denmark) will be better.
- Hand each group ONE speech from Resource F. Explain that each speech represents one of the above examples of corrupt leadership.
- Ask each group to cast two of their members as King Claudius and Queen Gertrude and two others as Hamlet and Polonius. The rest of the group can assume other characters from the play or invent their own.
- Explain that Claudius is going to deliver his speech to the group and, as he does so, the rest of the group must show their responses:
 - A. **Corruption spreads:** by letting his words infect and poison them one by one, slowly and them dramatically.
 - B. **Echo Chambers distort:** by following Gertrude and Polonius’ lead and agreeing with everything he says and does.
 - C. **A Change for the Better?:** by following Hamlet in calling for a change in a new leader: Fortinbras.
- Explain to the listeners that they can change sides if they lose or gain faith in their Claudius or are persuaded by either Hamlet or Polonius.

- Challenge each Claudius to add their own lines or argument and to use their Gertrude as an ally.
- Invite each group to show their scene of government to the whole group and discuss the results. Which were the most powerful images? How did Hamlet feel in each of these scenes? What about Gertrude?

Reflection:

There are many bad examples of leadership in the world today. Can you think of any good ones? Would you say the following were good or bad examples? Is it sometimes difficult to decide and if so, why?

- Volodymyr Zelensky - elected as the President of Ukraine in 2019. His leadership during the Russian invasion of Ukraine won him global praise.
- Malala Yousafzai - Pakistani female education activist, film and television producer, and the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize laureate at the age of 17.
- Elon Musk - a leading technology entrepreneur, business magnate, and investor.
- Taylor Swift - American singer-songwriter. Known for her autobiographical songwriting, artistic reinventions, and cultural impact.
- Jeff Bezos - founded the e-commerce behemoth Amazon in 1994 out of his garage.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

A Tilting World

In the second half of our production, the stage starts to tilt as the ship sinks. This is to represent the world of Elsinore being thrown off kilter with a rotten murderous leader.

There were many challenges and benefits that came with this design decision:

- **The actors did a workshop with a tilting floor in the rehearsal room to get used to the change in gravity and movement.**
- **There was a physiotherapist working closely with the actors and movement director to ensure no-one was injured by the severe rake in the stage.**
- **When characters die in the play, they can literally slip off the tilting 'deck' into the sea.**
- **Two areas of actual water were placed downstage between the deck and the audience for actors to walk through or fall into.**
- **There are five or six settings of the tilting floor that increase as the play ends and the ship sinks. The greatest drop created was a maximum of 4m; it reached this extremity in the final scene.**

PRODUCTION NOTES:

The Famous Ghost

The ghost in *Hamlet* is one of many famous Shakespeare ghosts and has been portrayed in many different ways over the years.

Compare the following images of the ghost in *Hamlet* from past RSC productions:



Photo by Angus McBean (c) RSC



Photo by Manuel Harlan (c) RSC



Photo by Reg Wilson (c) RSC



Photo by Keith Pattison (c) RSC

Theme 2: JUSTICE & REVENGE



ACTIVITY 7: What's Stopping Hamlet?

"It is a big shock when Luke (Thallon) who plays Hamlet discovers that the Player King has the same face as his father's Ghost (both played by Anton Lesser). The Player King is also carrying Yorrick's skull as a prop. These disturbing links are all prompts for Hamlet to take action."

- Sophie Drake, assistant director, Hamlet, RSC 2025

The following physical and performance activity, in three parts, allows students to explore the deep and complex feelings within a scene from the perspective of an actor playing in rehearsal and researching their role. *(It is best suited to a large hall or clear classroom. There is an access version of part b). You will need copies of Resource G: Inner Chaos.)*

a) Blockade

- Discuss the things Hamlet does after finding out his father has been murdered. Such as:
 - Getting help from the Players
 - Hesitating to murder Claudius when he's praying
 - Pretending to be mad as a 'cover'
 - Talking a lot
- Invite two volunteers to play Hamlet and his father's Ghost and ask both to stand on opposite sides of the room. Explain that Hamlet's objective is to get to his father's Ghost to pledge his (Hamlet's) revenge by touching his shoulder and saying "I AM SWORN!"
- Invite three volunteers to represent the reasons Hamlet hesitates. Their job is to hold Hamlet back and physically stop him reaching the Ghost. Add that they must only stop Hamlet SAFELY, avoiding any vulnerable places such as the neck or face. Be sure to adjudicate this and stop the action at any time. You can also employ a safe word for Hamlet to use if necessary. Make sure the rest of the students are sitting clear of the physical action.
- After Hamlet has made their attempt, discuss the result. What was it like to be held back from action? What was it like for his father's Ghost to watch this? You can repeat this with a different Hamlet and Ghost.

b) Corridor of Revenge and Doubt

**Access alternative: this activity can be done with a deck of cards or skittles. Set up your corridor but instead of taking steps forward, Hamlet is given six playing cards or skittles. Each time they feel like moving towards Claudius, they put down a card or knock down a skittle. When all the cards/skittles are down, Claudius is killed.*

- Organise your students in two lines facing each other like a long corridor across the room, with enough space for one person to walk through the corridor and ask them to sit down.
- Explain that one line is Hamlet's Revenge (who want him to kill Claudius) and the other side are his Doubts (who do not).
- As a whole group, brainstorm reasons why Hamlet thinks he should murder Claudius (e.g. his love and duty to his father; his uncle is a murderer and has married his own mother) and reasons why Hamlet does not murder Claudius (e.g. overthinking; he doesn't want to take another man's life; unsure about the words of a ghost).
- Ask for two volunteers to play Hamlet and Claudius and ask them to stand at opposite ends of the corridor, with Claudius praying. Explain that if Hamlet hears a persuasive reason to murder Claudius, they must take a step forward towards Claudius and if he hears a good reason why he shouldn't murder Claudius, they must take a step back.
- If Hamlet makes it to Claudius, they are to touch him on the shoulder and cry "FOUL MURDER!" Claudius must fall to his death dramatically. You may then recast your Hamlet and Claudius and start another game. If Hamlet does not make it to Claudius after end minutes, end the game and recast.
- Encourage your corridor of Revenge and Doubt to think of as many reasons as possible and to wait until Hamlet is near them to voice their reason. They must remain seated and not touch Hamlet. Remind them if everyone shouts out together, Hamlet will not hear.
- After each game, ask your Hamlet which reasons made them move back or forward. What are the most powerful things they can say to make Hamlet move either way? What does this say about Hamlet as a character?

c) Inner Chaos

"During Ophelia's disturbed speech to Claudius and the Queen, we see passengers frantically abandoning or preparing to abandon ship, to emphasise a bizarre world gone wrong."

- Sophie Drake, assistant director, Hamlet, RSC 2025

- Organise your students into a big circle and invite one volunteer to read the Hamlet soliloquy from Resource F. Discuss the meaning of the word soliloquy and this is one of many times Hamlet shares his inner feelings with the audience.
- Organise your students into groups of six to eight and hand out the text scraps from Resource G. Explain that one person is to read the speech as Hamlet and the others are to create a scene of physical chaos around him, as if the ship is sinking and he is the only one not preparing to abandon it.

- Challenge them to choose suitable actions, e.g. putting on life vests; packing precious items; hauling ropes; playing instruments (as happened on the deck of the Titanic), and turn these movements into a form of performance, such as:
 - dance or abstract movement
 - group patterns or formations
 - mime or a series of frozen images
- Invite them to use the text scraps as prompts for Hamlet to take action or not. Challenge them to use this text in different ways, such as: a group chorus, cries of help, crew emergency announcements, whispers in Hamlet's ear etc.
- Invite each group to show their scene of chaos and discuss the results. What was it like for Hamlet to be surrounded like this? Did any of these scenes represent what might be going on in his mind? Might this explain Hamlet's behaviour and if so, how?

Reflection Point:

What things can stop us taking action? Can students think of particular examples – either in their own life (if appropriate) or in the world at large? What can we do about these things that block us?

Ask your students to consider the following statements. Which do they think are true or relevant in today's society and why?

- A chaotic environment can confuse us into not thinking clearly.
- Big emotions such as fear or grief can overwhelm us, making us incapable of action.
- Too many possible outcomes can paralyse us - what if what we choose to do is wrong?
- A bad situation can make us depressed, leading to apathy – what is the point of doing anything?



Photo: © Mark Brenner

PRODUCTION NOTES:

Our Ending

At the end of our production, the inevitable happens and the ship sinks. Director Rupert Goold had many reasons for choosing this ending and many creative decisions were taken to achieve it:

- Even though the clocks have been literally counting down to the end, it is still a shock to us when it happens. This reminds us not to ignore the big picture when going about the daily drama of our lives.
- The deck of the ship reaches its most severe angle, making the fights dramatic with characters clinging to ropes and falling into the ocean. It shows that everyone is lost in their personal battles and totally ignoring reality around them.
- In most productions of *Hamlet*, the stage is littered with bodies at the end; in this production, the bodies end up in the ocean and the stage is empty. This emphasises that no-one comes out of this tragedy alive.
- Hamlet does not die on stage but stays on deck awaiting his doom as the ship sinks. After a play full of speeches about the meaning and value of life, we see him finally accepting his death.
- The role of Fortinbras has been cut so the play no longer ends with his victory speech. This leaves us with a sense of unease - no-one is there to give us a sense of renewal - the future is bleak and uncertain.

RESOURCES

Resource A: Messages From a Doomed Ship

Message 1:

- The Old King Hamlet is dead and has been buried at sea.
- Hamlet has boarded the ship to be told that his father is dead and his mother, Gertrude is now married to his uncle, Claudius, who is now king.

CLAUDIUS We pray you throw to earth
This unprevailing woe, and think of us
As of a father

- The kingdom has become unstable due to these events and there are rumours of an invasion by Fortinbras, a soldier from a neighbouring state.

HAMLET All is not well: sit still my soul: foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.

Message 2:

- Strange sounds have been heard in the engine room. The crew are investigating a possible collision.
- There have been ghostly sightings at night. Some say it is Old Hamlet seeking revenge for his murder.

GHOST The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown.

- Hamlet is behaving strangely. He has treated his girlfriend, Ophelia, badly and some say he is mad.

OPHELIA O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!

Message 3:

- Water has been seen dripping from the ship's hull.
- Meanwhile, more guests arrive, including Hamlet's old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

HAMLET **I have of late — but wherefore I know not
lost all my mirth**

- Hamlet has hired a travelling group of actors to re-enact the story of his father's murder in front of Claudius and Gertrude, in the hope that Claudius will confess.
- During the performance, Claudius walked out in rage.

HAMLET **the play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.**

Message 4:

- Hamlet has confronted his mother, Gertrude about why she married the man who killed her husband.

GERTRUDE **Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grainèd spots**

- During this meeting, Hamlet killed an eavesdropper who turned out to be the King's adviser, Polonius, father to both Ophelia and her brother, Laertes.
- Claudius has had Hamlet arrested, hoping to persuade Laertes to kill him.

CLAUDIUS **The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England,
For like the hectic in my blood he rages**

Message 5:

- Hamlet has escaped to kill Claudius but, having found him praying, could not bring himself to do it.

HAMLET trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, whereto it goes.

- Ophelia, having been violently rejected by Hamlet, then heard of her father's murder.
- She has since lost her mind and drowned herself over the side of the ship.

OPHELIA They say the owl was a baker's daughter.
Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be.

Message 6:

- Claudius has convinced Laertes to challenge Hamlet to a deadly fencing match.

CLAUDIUS And for his death no wind of blame shall breathe,
But even his mother shall uncharge the practice
And call it accident.

- As a back-up plan, Claudius had poisoned a glass of wine which he intended to offer to Hamlet. It was Gertrude, however, who drank from the glass and died.
- Abandon ship!

GERTRUDE No, no, the drink, the drink — O my dear Hamlet
The drink, the drink! I am poisoned.

Message 7:

- During the duel, Hamlet was wounded by Laertes, who had poisoned the tip of his sword.

**HAMLET The point envenomed too!
 Then, venom, to thy work.**

- The weapons were switched in the fight and Hamlet wounded Laertes with the poisoned sword.
- Before dying, Laertes realised that Claudius manipulated him and forgave Hamlet.

**LAERTES Lo, here I lie,
 Never to rise again. The king, the king's to blame.**

Message 8:

- Hamlet finally avenged his father's murder by forcing Claudius to drink the remaining poisoned wine.

**HAMLET Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damnèd Dane,
 Drink off this potion. Follow my mother.**

- With his dying breath, Hamlet asked his friend Horatio to tell his story accurately.
- The ship is sinking! The ship is sinking!

**HAMLET I die, Horatio:
 The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit.
 The rest is silence.**

Resource B: **Play Within a Play**

Characters: King / Queen/ Poisoner / Claudius / Gertrude / Hamlet

Enter a King and Queen very lovingly, the Queen embracing him. She kneels to him, proclaiming her love. He takes her hand and lays his head upon her neck. He then lies down upon a bank of flowers to sleep. Seeing him asleep, the Queen leaves him.

HAMLET Madam, how like you this play?

GERTRUDE The lady protests too much, methinks.

CLAUDIUS Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?

HAMLET No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest: no offence i'th'world.

A Poisoner enters, removes the king's crown, kisses it, then pours poison in the King's ears, and exits. The Queen returns, finds the King dead, and shows her grief. The Poisoner re-enters and joins her in grief. Then the Poisoner woos the Queen with gifts: she seems unwilling at first, but in the end accepts his affection.

Claudius stands, affronted.

CLAUDIUS Give me some light. Away!

GERTRUDE How fares my lord?

HAMLET What, frightened with false fire?

Claudius exits, followed by Gertrude.

Resource B: **Play Within a Play (Primary version)**

Enter a King and Queen, in love. The Queen embraces him. The King lies down and falls asleep. The Queen leaves.

HAMLET Madam, how like you this play?

GERTRUDE The lady protests too much, methinks.

A Poisoner enters, takes off the king's crown and kisses it. He pours poison in the King's ears, and exits.

The Queen returns, finds the King dead and is upset. The Poisoner enters again and comforts her.

The Poisoner offers the Queen a gift. At first she won't accept it, but in the end she does. The Queen exits with the Poisoner

Claudius stands, angry.

CLAUDIUS Away!

GERTRUDE How fares my lord?

HAMLET What, frightened with false fire?

Claudius exits, followed by Gertrude.

Resource C: Passenger Inventory

CLAUDIUS, king of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle

“My crown, mine own ambition and my Queen.”

GERTRUDE, queen of Denmark, Hamlet's mother

“O Hamlet, what a falling off was there / From me”

GHOST of old Hamlet, former king of Denmark, Hamlet's father

‘I am thy Father's Spirit / Doomed for a certain term to walk the night’

HAMLET, prince of Denmark

“Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?”

POLONIUS, councilor to the state of Denmark

“I hold my duty as I hold my soul / Both to my God and to my gracious King”

OPHELIA, Polonius's daughter

“O, woe is me / T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!”

LAERTES, Polonius's son

“willingly I came to Denmark / To show my duty in your coronation”

REYNALDO, Polonius's servant

“Very good, my lord.”

HORATIO, Hamlet's friend and fellow student

"I am more an antique Roman than a Dane"

CAPTAIN of the ship.

ROSENCRANTZ, courtier and former schoolfellow of Hamlet

"Take you me for a sponge, my lord?"

GUILDENSTERN, courtier and former schoolfellow of Hamlet

"We lay our services freely at your feet"

PLAYER, travelling actor.

"But, as we often see, against some storm, / A silence in the heavens"

SAILOR

PRIEST

STEWARD

BERNARDO, the king's guard

"Is not this something more than fantasy?"

Resource D: Ophelia's 2 Voices (edited)

A

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh;
That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy: O, woe is me,
To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!

B

Well, God 'ild you! They say the owl was a baker's
daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not
what we may be. God be at your table!
Pray you, let's have no words of this; but when they
ask you what it means, say you this:
(Sings)
To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.
Then up he rose, and donn'd his clothes,
And dupp'd the chamber-door;
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more.

Resource E: **The Mind of Ophelia**

Without prompts:

A

B

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

“I shall obey, my lord.”

“Alas, my lord, I have been so affrighted!”

“My lord, I have remembrances of yours,
That I have longèd long to re-deliver”

“I was the more deceived.”

“O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!”

“And I, of ladies most deject and wretched”

“O, woe is me,
T’have seen what I have seen, see what I see!”

“You are merry, my lord.”

“How should I your true love know
From another one?”

“He is dead and gone.
At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone.”

“They say the owl was a baker’s daughter. Lord
we know what we are, but know not what we may
be.”

“And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.”

“Alack, and fie for shame!
Young men will do’t, if they come to’t”

“I cannot choose but weep to think they should
cast him i’t’h’cold sea.”

With prompts (match the prompts in row B to the quotes in row A):

A

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

"I shall obey, my lord."

"Alas, my lord, I have been so affrighted!"

"My lord, I have remembrances of yours,
That I have longèd long to re-deliver"

"I was the more deceived."

"O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!"

"And I, of ladies most deject and wretched"

"O, woe is me,
T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!"

"You are merry, my lord."

"How should I your true love know
From another one?"

"He is dead and gone.
At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone."

"They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord
we know what we are, but know not what we may be."

"And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine."

"Alack, and fie for shame!
Young men will do't, if they come to't"

"I cannot choose but weep to think they should
cast him i'th'cold sea."

B

You are drunk.

Hamlet has lost his mind.

A good man has been ruined.

I can't trust anything any more.

Nothing is certain.

I love you.

Things will get worse.

Hamlet says he loves me.

Hamlet is behaving strangely.

*I have lost more than any
woman.*

You are no longer tied to me

I thought you loved me.

All men will ruin us!

His death will be a tragedy

I am an obedient daughter.

Resource F: **Leadership**

CLAUDIUS A: Corruption Rots

But, O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
That cannot be, since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder:
My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.

CLAUDIUS B: Echo Chambers Distort

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
The memory be green, and that it us befitted
To bear our hearts in grief and our whole kingdom
To be contracted in one brow of woe

CLAUDIUS C: A Change for the Better?

Now follows that you know young Fortinbras,
Colleaguèd with the dream of his advantage,
Prick'd on by a most emulate pride
So much for him.

Resource F: **INNER CHAOS**

HAMLET

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die, to sleep —
No more — and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep:
To sleep, perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub

Tiz unmanly grief

I am thy father's spirit

Think of us as of a father

Words, words, words.

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!

To be or not to be!

I must hold my tongue

I have sworn't.

MURDER MOST FOUL!

Alack, and fie for shame!

O villain, villain, smiling, damnèd villain!

HE IS POISONED!!

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!