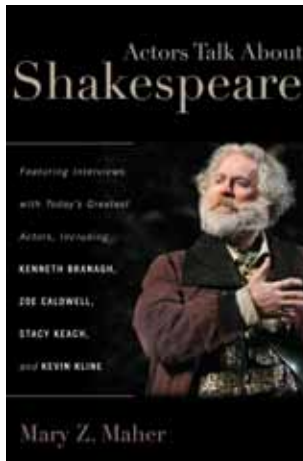




ACTORS TALK

Author Mary Z. Maher saw her first onstage *Hamlet* in 1982. "After the intermission," she writes, "I followed a father and his young son back into the theater. Hanging on to his parent's hand, the son looked up anxiously and said, 'He isn't really crazy, is he, Daddy?'" Mad or not, Hamlet has long bedeviled, inspired, and sometimes thwarted actors. In her new book, *Actors Talk About Shakespeare*, Maher asks some well-known thespians about the challenges of playing this complex and demanding role.



Derek Jacobi, *Hamlet*, PBS TV movie (based on the Prospect Theater Company production), 1980. PBS/Photofest. © PBS.

DEREK JACOBI

I did Hamlet in Peking and Shanghai, and there was a lovely old professor who came to see it...and brought this twenty-five-page thesis about why it should have been "sullied" and not "solid" flesh... [Afterward] he said... "In the performance you said the word and I understood the word, whether it was sullied or solid. It doesn't matter in the context of the whole because you were showing me your feelings, and I was receiving your feelings... I was understanding what you were saying." ...The great debate only applies in the confines of a study, or a classroom, or a library. In the theater, the impact, the communication, is immediate. ■

Derek Jacobi describes it as "the greatest straight part ever written."

—Kenneth Branagh



ABOUT HAMLET

KEVIN KLINE

I have been asked, "Why is Hamlet the hardest role for actors?" Because it draws on everything. You need every bit of spiritual, psychic, emotional, and physical reserve to play it. It happens at such a pitch that you've got to be *full* when you go onstage. You need to cast an actor whose emotions are very accessible and communicable. In fact, you need an emotional wreck to play Hamlet, one of those actors that is so highly strung and neurotic that if you look at him funny, he'll burst into tears.

Sometimes I find it very difficult, watching stage productions, to give a damn about Hamlet. He's a problem. I don't care about him when he dies—sometimes I'm sorrier for Horatio!

It may be because I'm not made to empathize—because some actors play him as "a guy like me." The character has to be larger in scope than that. As big as life gets, that's what Hamlet has to be—any Shakespearean role, really. ■

STACY KEACH

The first one, in 1970, may have been my favorite, because the theater was small and intimate, unlike the later two. The pressure was also on because young actors see a good Hamlet as the whole objective and goal of their careers, so just getting over the intimidations of the role—even just memorizing the horrendous number of lines—was a huge challenge.

By the time I got to the second production, I had learned so much during those six weeks in New Haven that I was raring to go and couldn't wait to do it again. The same was true with the third production in Los Angeles. In a funny way, you never feel like you get Hamlet *right*. You don't play it, it plays you. And since you are always changing, he changes.

When we meet Hamlet in that opening scene, a lot has happened. His father has died, his mother has married his uncle, and he's bitter and angry about that. That's what we know. The quality of behavior has to go beyond that color. It's how you deal with *that*. Are there glimpses of madness in the scene? Is there laughter? You start thinking—hmmm, laughter. Should I make this gesture (or phrasing) or that?



Stacy Keach as Hamlet, *Hamlet*, 1974, Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum. Photo by Steven Kuell.

But all the pre-planning has to go out the door. One thing I've always felt about Hamlet is that he is not someone who is sitting around trying to find which direction to move in. Instead, he moves in one direction and it is wrong, and then he moves in another which is wrong. Yet those are *active* choices, as opposed to becoming frozen or immobilized and saying, "Which way should I go?" Always active. Only one of the soliloquies is inner-directed—the others have the energy directed vitally outward. ■

You don't play Hamlet, it plays you.

—Stacy Keach

Kevin Kline, *Hamlet*,
New York Shakespeare
Festival, 1986. Photo
by Martha Swope.

Kenneth Branagh, *Hamlet*,
1996. Columbia Pictures/
Photofest. © Columbia.



KENNETH BRANAGH

It's a role where you discover the process of playing—whether across a run or through a number of different productions—is a changing entity. Your views develop. They amplify (if you are lucky) when your consideration of the role and the depth of the production is good, and so both intensify. You might decide Hamlet has a mother fixation, and then weeks or months into the run you might decide he has a father fixation. You might change the emphasis on different kinds of scenes. Across the sweep of acting it several times, what becomes important to you can shift dramatically.

Derek Jacobi describes it as “the greatest straight part ever written.” It's a personality part in a way that is distinct from most other Shakespearean heroes and characters. The audience expects, the tradition suggests, and you are invited to bring as much of yourself into the role as possible. It's one of the reasons why people go to see my Hamlet and then go see someone else's. The two are going to be completely different by virtue of our different personalities.

In our film of it, when Hamlet is being pursued by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and various guards, he goes through one room after another and one door after another. You feel that playing Hamlet is like that. You make a breakthrough, you open a door, and there is another vast hall for you to cross through and look at and consider, so that there is limitless potential in your attempt to understand your engagement with the role. The challenge is to maintain that sense of exploration.

The landscape of *Hamlet* is vast, and the history of its production suggests that it can be interpreted in a million different ways. So, that's true for an actor as well. I think the role has limitless possibility across any actor's engagement with it in a lifetime.

Gielgud said that with the hundreds and hundreds of times he's played it, it was still a new experience each time. Even as he finished a radio recording of it in the 1950s, he continued to find new things in it. ■

As big as life gets, that's what Hamlet has to be.

—Kevin Kline

NICHOLAS PENNELL

There is the *Variorum* edition of *Hamlet* that has a line of dialogue at the top of the page and the rest of the entire page is footnotes. I used to read it solemnly in my one-man show. Especially the academics would roll on the floor—without realizing they were looking at themselves in the Big Mirror (the “mirror up to nature”).

I got ready to open in *Hamlet* in a state of absolute terror. To take my mind off it, I decided to go back and read all the notes in the *Variorum* for the scenes that I wasn't in. I got to “Go, get...me a stoup of liquor”—I looked down the pages and I saw “Go get thee to Yaughan and fetch me a stoup of liquor.” Well, I'd read a historical account about this line—apparently, Yaughan was the fellow who ran the pub across the street from the stage door at the Globe theater. It was as if Shakespeare had stretched his hand across four hundred years and said, “What are you worrying about? I was writing *commercials*, for God's sake!” I had a large drink and went to bed.

I knew an actor who performed with Ben Greet's company in Stratford-upon-Avon. He went out for a drive one day and got hopelessly lost and came upon two men. The actor asked the men for directions back to Stratford, and then he asked them about their work. The thick-set hedges in England were made by cutting the hazel twigs in half on a slant-cut through the stem and then bending it and winding it in with other hazel twigs. The man said, “Yessir, that's what we do, sir, he and I work together near thirty year now. He rough-hews them, and I shapes their ends.” Here was a stage image [found in *Hamlet*, V.ii.10, “There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will”] wedded directly to the earth and not available in most of the scholarly books. ■

Mary Z. Maher is the author of the performance classic *Modern Hamlets and Their Soliloquies* and the biography *Nicholas Pennell: Risking Enchantment*, as well as numerous articles on Shakespeare in performance onstage and in film and television. After a teaching career at the University of Arizona, she retired as professor emerita to Ashland, home of the renowned Oregon Shakespeare Festival and continues teaching, coaching, lecturing, and writing.



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Nicholas Pennell as Hamlet, *Hamlet*, 1976, Stratford Shakespeare Festival. Photo by Robert C. Ragsdale. Courtesy of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival Archives