

The Most Famous Playwright
The Most Famous Play
The Most Famous Character

By Amy Anderson, Reviewer/Dramaturge

What is the fascination humanity has with fame? Whether the famous are fashion models, screen idols, all-star athletes, legendary musicians, popular authors, or idle rich, we love to read, hear, or see their lives, their homes, their clothes, their work, and their activities. The cinema, television, magazines, newspapers, and radio--any media form feeds our enthrallment with the famous and infamous. Imagine all the information we receive and purchase about these idols. None of the media forms are immune or naive to our love affair with the rich and famous. Therefore, can we blame the media, a business, if they capitalize on the joys, successes, awards, and heroics, or the faults, failings, crimes, and deaths of the eminent and popular? After all, according to ratings and sales of the different media forms, the press is only giving us what we seem to want. For instance, a 70-car pile-up on a foggy mountain in Virginia will not sell magazines, newspapers, and airtime as well as a princess and a millionaire dying in a car accident in Paris. 45,000 people, on average, die on American highways each year according to the Insurance Institute on Highway Safety, but we only remember the car accidents and deaths of James Dean, Grace Kelly, and Princess Diana.

Around 30,000 suicides take place on average each year as suicidology.org reports, but we only wonder about sexy Marilyn Monroe, terminally ill Ernest Hemingway, or young Kurt Cobain-- not the faceless, nameless thousands, who feel that suicide is the only way out.

Our fascination and obsession with prominent people and their lives and deaths follows any tragedy we can imagine, and as we can guess, the media is there to show us every angle that can be imagined. Think of the press coverage with the plane crashes involving John Denver, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Buddy Holly, or "John-John" J.F.K. Jr. The press does show and discuss the usually dramatic crashes involving aircraft, but we often only hear about the number of victims not the individuals.

Sometimes even disasters themselves are remembered due their impact on society's conscious. The most famous shipwreck, the **Titanic**, is remembered because it is so tragic, but what made the sinking so tragic? Some may think it is so well-known because so many died: 1523 on June 12-13, 1912, although 22 documented shipwrecks have more fatalities. For instance, the **Dona Paz** collided with the oil tanker Victor in the Tablas Strait on Dec. 20, 1987, and 4341 lost their

lives. Actually, the **Dona Paz** is minor in comparison to the **Wilhelm Gustloff**--Jan. 30, 1945. It was sunk by torpedoes from a Soviet-sub S-13 in the Baltic, where 6000 to 8000 German refugees died; the exact number is uncertain, according to "Some Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea." What makes the **Titanic** victims memorialized? If we consider who sailed on the **Titanic**, the honor, the memory, and the pages and pages written on the **Titanic** makes sense. The very wealthy, socialites and industrial moguls went down in the icy North Atlantic.

Every 24 minutes a murder is committed in the United States, or 217,853 homicides are reported between 1987 and 1997, claims the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The numbers are staggering, but I ask again, which murders do we remember: Sharon Tate, Selina, and Charles Lindbergh's baby. Or how about illustrious and renowned people prosecuted for homicide: Robert Blake, Claus Von Bulow, or arguably the most famous well-known figure on trial for murder was O.J Simpson. As Court TV.com explains, "O.J. Simpson's trial for the brutal murder of his wife [Nicole Brown Simpson] and her companion [Ronald Goldman] lasted nearly nine months and divided the country." What made the Brown Simpson and Goldman homicides open too such media "hype?" Was it that the possible murderer was a sports icon? O.J. was a Heisman Trophy winner, inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame, a sportscaster, and an actor. Again, our fascination with fame created a media circus with all three major networks and CNN televising the entire trial. To many, there was a question as to what impact O.J.'s popularity and the media's focus had on justice and the outcome of the case.

This question about how the role of fame and the media effect justice is a major theme that Steven Breese explores in his play: *The Trial of Hamlet*. To investigate this idea, Breese has brought William Shakespeare's play, The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, kicking and screaming into the media limelight of the 20th and 21st centuries. Oddly enough, in his examination of this theme involving fame, Breese has managed to adapt a play from the most famous playwright in the world. Shakespeare appears on the same list with the **Titanic** of the top ten most written on people and events in western culture.

Moreover, Breese has chosen to work on arguably the most famous play. Of course the battle continues between whether *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream (comedy) or *Hamlet* (tragedy) is the most produced and performed dramatic work in the Shakespearian canon. However, Breese wants to write on a tragic event--"the fall of a great one," so it is only logical to adapt arguably the most notable tragedy, and according to Sir Lawrence Olivier, one of the most renowned actors in the 20th century, "*Hamlet*, in my opinion, is pound for pound the greatest play ever written."

Even more of a coincidence is that the tragedy tells the story of one of the most famous tragic heroes of all time: Hamlet. The character, Hamlet, is a noted literary figure, but even in the "world of the play", he is an illustrious, a celebrated, and a prestigious prince. He compares to Prince Harry and William today in terms of popularity, importance, and observation. And conveniently, Hamlet commits a murder. He stabs Polonius, counselor to King, Claudius, through an arras in Hamlet's mother's room.

We have a prominent person who commits a crime, so Breese has the topics of fame and justice covered. Next, he needs to bring the media into the story. Breese asks the question: How would the press react to Hamlet's crime? Breese places Hamlet today, so the characters must handle the media spotlight and deal with the presses microscopic scrutiny. In the original play, of course, Hamlet is whisked off to England for his punishment after he kills Polonius. However, currently, would the press allow this? Today, the media hounds would have surrounded the castle after smelling the first whiff of the homicide. Claudius would never have been able to send his "nephew-son" to England for swift "justice." This action, nowadays, might appear to the suspicious press as a powerful "uncle-father" trying to protect the "nephew-son" and keep him from having to go to trial. This would be no case to "sweep under the rug". If Hamlet was a nobody, Claudius might have been able to easily dispose of Hamlet, but with the media's attention caused by our obsession with the rich and famous, "the eyes of the world" would be on these events involving the extremely-popular-almost-ruler. Therefore, instead of having Hamlet sent away on a ship bound for England with the order's from King Claudius to have Hamlet killed as in Shakespeare's text, Breese has Hamlet go on trial in what will surely be "the trial of the century," and Breese is able to make artistic and social commentary on the media's role with justice involving well-known people.

For whatever reason, we are enthralled with the kings, queens, and nobleman of our time. The press has a financial stake in our continued interest in the eminent and notorious, so until we change our perception of human value, the media will continue to provide us with our favorite escape from our seemingly bland lives.

Ironically, according to Crime Library.com, the only supposed witness to the Brown Simpson and Goldman homicides was a white Akita, but no one listened to or paid any heed to the canine. He or she paced up and down, barking constantly for almost an hour on the bloodstained path where Brown Simpson and Goldman's bodies lay. Even Steven Schwab, who was walking his own dog, didn't understand the Akita's distress until after the dog followed Schwab home. At home, he finally noticed that the Akita was covered in blood. It was two hours after the dog's initial barking, which began at about 10:15 p.m. on June 12, 1994, that the Akita was able to drag Schwab and some neighbors back to the bodies. Maybe if the Akita was Lassie, Old Yeller, or Rin Tin Tin, someone might have paid attention sooner.