

The Trial of Hamlet was written in collaboration with William Shakespeare . . . at least in collaboration with his words. Although phrases from *Hamlet* can be found interspersed throughout the text (sometimes fashioned subtly, sometimes obviously), the play's verse is largely original.

I proffer this note to the reader in preparation for what might seem a bit irreverent—after all, as theatre artists we acknowledge *Hamlet* as an inherent "truth." *The Trial of Hamlet* tempts, teases and finally embraces that truth.

THE TRIAL OF HAMLET

Synopsis

Popular culture and classical literature collide as Shakespeare's most popular character is thrust into the modern media spotlight. The result is a new play that ponders the essential "what-ifs" of Hamlet's psyche and motivations. Drawn from modern media-trial frenzies and laced with a keen sense of humor, this contemporary re-examination the Bard's classic play finds Hamlet defending himself for the brutal murder of Polonius—the forgotten crime embedded in the complex and mysterious world of Shakespeare's most engaging tragedy. With a cast of characters only Shakespeare could create, this classical courtroom drama takes a pointed and sometimes irreverent look at our legal system, the media and our culture's fascination with the famous and infamous.

The play opens in the middle of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Within minutes, the audience witnesses the murder of Polonius and a new journey begins. Hamlet is to stand trial for murder defended by the only new character to the drama—Shayla Spire. Councilor Spire convinces the court that her client cannot stand trial until his competency is assured. Is Hamlet competent? Is he sane? The play often hinges on these ever-fascinating questions.

The courtroom scenes—three in all—are at the center of the play. The media is a dominating presence and although the trial is unique, it often reminds us of recent public courtroom clashes. King (and judge) Claudius presides over the trial. This device offers fertile dramatic value — where “one of the most beloved royal figures of all time,” is being tried by the very person that wants him convicted and executed. In the world of the play Claudius holds the power, yet the media “hold him to account.”

The play is intricately plotted and often very suspenseful — weaving its ways in and out of the courtroom while speculating on what “could have happened” in the dark corridors of the Castle Elsinore. The basic motivations of the characters remain intact, but the story takes us in unexpected directions. Like any good courtroom drama we are privy to strategy sessions, side-bars and the legal wrangling of the attorneys. Finally, the plot hinges on just two key witnesses — Ophelia and Gertrude. These two courtroom scenes, late in the play, are much anticipated and quite satisfying for they expose the “truth” of the characters, of Hamlet, and of the play. Gertrude, in particular, has a much expanded role in *The Trial of Hamlet* and enjoys many of the play's juiciest scenes.

How does the play end? *The Trial of Hamlet*, pushes the envelope, but does not create a new future for Hamlet or for Shakespeare's play. Like all great tragic figures, the characters of *Hamlet* cannot escape their fates. As the play comes to conclusion, the audience experiences surprise after surprise—finally overcome (and enchanted) by the play's shocking inevitability.

“After five hundred years, Hamlet has something else to say.”