

ACTOR BENJAMIN BLAIS has been a veteran The Classical Theatre Project since 2007. He's proved his versatility by playing diverse characters like Mercutio in *Romeo & Juliet*, Rosencrantz in *Hamlet*, and the title roles in *Oedipus Rex*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. Read on to learn about how an actor prepares for the challenging role of the Danish prince.



What does it feel like when you get the call that says, "We want you to play Hamlet"?

It's exciting, the opportunity to play that part. It's a challenge; so many people have played the part, there are so many interpretations for it. When I got the call I was ecstatic. I'd just begun touching on classical theatre, and really begun enjoying it, and enjoyed exploring how to perform in that medium. So when the opportunity arose to play Hamlet I wanted it; there's so much to do with this role that all these ideas start flooding in your head, and when I got it, it was really exciting. And it's been a wonderful experience; there's a sense of being filled with something that's bigger and older than you, and it's a great feeling.

Hamlet is a huge role. Where do you begin?

Hamlet is one of the longest roles in Shakespeare, so it's very demanding. One of the first things an actor should do is be as familiar as he can with the text. That allows you the freedom to put the script down, actually play with the other actors on stage, play with the emotions that the words may bring up inside you, or the ideas that you've thought about and want to try out. But if you're sitting there with your nose buried in the book, there's not much you can do.

The way I learn is that I kind of soak things in; I don't see the words on the page. I watch a lot of other actors, the classic actors, the Gielguds, the John Nevilles, these old guys. And I hear the way they say it, and then the pieces have a context and a relevance to me, because I've associated things to their performance. I'm like "that's interesting", or "I understood that, but I didn't understand that," and then I look at the speech myself and it's intimidating at first.

There's a lot of poetry, a lot of words, and syntax that we don't use anymore. So I try to read the piece and compartmentalize it in the ideas. "To be, or not to be." To live, or not to live? Should I commit suicide, or not? You've got to try to understand the ideas before you try to understand the words. Because if you're just trying to understand the words, it's like trying to understand a series of numbers. So first come the ideas, and then the words almost follow suit.

We can't talk about Hamlet and avoid the question – what about Hamlet's madness?

Hamlet's a very clever character. He feigns his madness in the beginning; to mess with Polonius, to keep people off balance so he can enact his plot. But after he kills Polonius, something changes in him. It's the first bold action that he takes against the state, but it's the wrong guy, and it's at the wrong time. And it's right after he's had the opportunity to kill his villainous uncle, but he doesn't. There's all this guilt, and the madness starts to take hold, and take shape in his mind. And it begins to manifest itself in this real pain. So when he's introduced to the death of Ophelia it all just starts to fall apart, and then he becomes resigned. His madness starts off as his own creation, but then I think it gets the better of him.

What about Ophelia? Hamlet treats her quite terribly in this production.

Shakespeare doesn't fully explore their relationship in the beginning, so it's almost as if he starts to treat her badly out of nowhere. But at that point in the story, I think he's so wrapped up in the intrigue of his uncle's succession to the throne, and the mysterious death of his father, that he is just so angry at her for being a participant in this game that they're playing to catch him. He can see what they're doing. And when we're angry we don't do what we mean to do to people. This is a point in the play where this madness gets the better of him, and it becomes very real because he's hurt, and he feels betrayed. And then he crosses the line, and there he is again, doing the wrong thing to the wrong person. He's angry at Claudius, but this poor girl is the subject of his torture. He sees that and it drives him mad. It's this downward spiral. I think Shakespeare uses Ophelia to do that because she's the one person in the whole story that represents hope and light and love. It's a way to show how isolated he makes himself, by doing that to her, of all people.

Do you have a favorite scene or moment in the show?

There's a couple. I'm a big kid, so I love the sword fight at the end. It's just so much fun to do. And I like Hamlet's monologue "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" – I just love the words in that monologue, and I feel that it really sums up the way he feels throughout most of the play. Hamlet is going through this huge debate in his own mind, about what he should do, about who he is and what he feels. I love getting [to that monologue]; we've just finished doing this really high octane series of scenes, and then we get there and it's time to just sit down with the audience and recap. And hang out. He's expressing thoughts and feelings to them that he wouldn't express to any of the other characters. And he's very articulate, and it's so inward and personal that it's a really exciting opportunity for me to get everybody on Hamlet's side. That's where Hamlet is best friends with his audience.