

The modern
transformation and
reinvention of a
classic: hamlet, slings
and arrows,...



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“ Hamlet will be Hamlet, a fabled tragedy of the human spirit that still resonates, even today (Slings and Arrows, 1. 2).”

Hamlet by William Shakespeare is one of the very few plays that have survived throughout the ages and is still referenced in modern times. Hamlet seems to be eternal- it is adapted and still somehow relevant to society in the year 2018. A Hamlet adaptation has a simple formula: Someone is killed by their brother, a ghost tells their son, the son wants revenge. However, Hamlet itself can also be the base of an adaptation. This is seen in Slings and Arrows, a Canadian T. V series also in Paul Rutnick’s play, I Hate Hamlet. Although these two forms of media are not complete copies of Hamlet, the actor playing the role carries the prestigious notion and the incredible emotional weight of the role.

How is it that Hamlet, written between 1599-1602, still has such an impact on modern culture? De Grazia in her book, Hamlet Without Hamlet, states that “ The basis of the identification [of Hamlet] is so obvious now that it hardly needs to be stated. (De Grazia)”. The author even goes on to say that Hamlet has been “ hailed as the inaugural figure of the modern period: “ the Western hero of consciousness”...” a distinctly modern hero” (De Grazia)” even further explicitly saying the popularity of this play and the impact it has on modern culture. The concept of a play within a play, or metatheatre, has been seen in plays dating back to Ancient Greece roughly 2, 500 years ago, with Sophocles’ Oedipus at Colonus (Dunn) as an example. Hamlet itself famously houses a play within a play - Hamlet requests the players to perform a play that is a staging of his father’s murder. A major parallel between the two adaptations and the original is this fact of metatheatricity,

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with a play within a performance. Explicitly say this ^ I Hate Hamlet was written in 1991, while Slings and Arrows first aired in 2003, and there are still productions of the play being performed constantly around the globe.

Hamlet is such a coveted role that brings a great weight to the actor, not only is it nearly 4100 lines to memorize, but it carries a high status in the acting community. This theme and commentary of the role of Hamlet is shown in both I Hate Hamlet and Slings and Arrows. Both Andrew Rally, from I Hate Hamlet, and Jack Crew from Slings and Arrows both undergo this pressure, causing Andrew to nearly quit the production. This pressure also causes Jack to leave the night of the performance.

I Hate Hamlet by Paul Rutnick was written in 1991 and was performed as a Broadway production short after. I Hate Hamlet is a short play that follows around a television actor named Andrew Rally as he takes on the role of Hamlet. In typical Hamlet-esque fashion, the protagonist is followed around by a ghost and in this instance, the ghost is of the former actor John Barrymore. The play is heavily influenced by the author's own experiences, some of these influences coming in the form of a German agent who had an affair with a relative of Barrymore, while Rutnick began living in Barrymore's apartment, and some sort of Hamlet performance (The New Yorker). The location of Barrymore's apartment primarily inspired the setting of the play, and the presence of Barrymore. There are also several parallels to Hamlet that are scattered throughout the play: a protagonist followed by a ghost who gives him advice and a girlfriend who wants to attempt suicide by drowning (only to not go through with the plan).

In this play, Hamlet is hailed to be one of the finest works in English literature, with Deirdre expressing her love for the play as it is the “ most beautiful play ever written. (I. I. p19)”. This extreme glorification of the role puts a pressure on Andrew, as he even says to himself that “...it’s supposed to be this ultimate challenge? Because everyone is supposed to dream of playing Hamlet? (I. I. p19).” as he himself is caught up in the weight of the role, leaving him anxious that he cannot do the character justice. Outside of fiction, Lanier explains this fascination with Hamlet and theatricality by stating: “...Shakespeare is aesthetically refined, timeless, complex and intellectually challenging, concerned with the lasting truths of the human condition and not fleeting political issues, addressed to the few willing to devote themselves to the laborious study, produced by a single genius ‘ not of an age but for all time.’ (Lanier).” Barrymore goes to the great lengths to tell Andrew that he is ungrateful for his opportunity - “ Enough! You unbearable brat! Your sniveling is a disgrace! The words of Shakespeare - be worthy! The role of Hamlet - be grateful! (II. I. p53)” even further proving the cultural commentary that the role of Hamlet is one of the most highly regarded roles in theater.

Slings and Arrows also has plot points that nail the idea that Hamlet is an eternal play and is still highly coveted in the acting community today.

Directed by Peter Wellington and first airing on Canadian television in 2003, Slings and Arrows takes on the tale of a struggling theater company which sees its artistic director, Oliver Welles die in a car accident. This leaves his old friend, Geoffery Tennant to step up and fill his role, while also eventually taking over as the director of their Hamlet. The Hamlet parallels begin much

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sooner just before Geoffery and Oliver themselves, as the title *Slings and Arrows* is a nod to the famous “To be, or not to be” speech from *Hamlet*. However, the resemblances further wander through to when Oliver’s ghost begins to haunt Geoffery, as he is constantly giving him advice on how to deal with the stress of his job. Geoffery goes “mad” and suffers a psychotic break prior to the series beginning (ironically during his own performing of *Hamlet*), which similarly resembles *Hamlet*’s own mental disintegration that takes place over the course of the play. In *Slings and Arrows*, we also see the emotional weight and pure fascination of playing a role from *Hamlet*. Kate, who eventually gets to play Ophelia during the show, expresses her own dream of playing the role of Ophelia, even as a child to Jack. “I wanted to be Ophelia ever since I saw Ellen play her, I was twelve...I used to dance around as a child with flowers in my hair, singing...I read it [*Hamlet*] when I was ten (*Slings and Arrows*, 1. 5).” Shakespeare’s story of a melancholy Danish prince even touches elementary schoolers, leaving them with the dream to star in a play that seemingly will never expire. The role of Ophelia is also held to this golden standard, because arguably without an Ophelia we would not have a *Hamlet*. The role of fascination with *Hamlet* contributes to the longevity of the play’s history.

Jack undergoes much pressure for his role as *Hamlet* as well, shown by when Geoffrey goes out of his way to tell Jack that, “...there are a lot of people here that don’t think you can pull this thing off, I think they’re wrong, but you have to do it...(Slings and Arrows, 1. 5)”. There is a high expectation for the actor playing *Hamlet*, as not just anyone can take on this difficult role, and they have to be an experienced member of the classical theater community -

especially not a T. V. actor. He even says that to raise his “ legitimacy” as an actor, that “ playing Hamlet in Canada ups your credibility in the States (Slings and Arrows, 1. 4).” His insecurities overcome him when he is told that essentially as a television actor, he is not expected to perform well and only sell tickets. These words pushed him to run and leave the production temporarily (Slings and Arrows, 1. 6). However, in the end he proves them all wrong by delivering a fantastic performance (which contrasts Andrew’s own performance, as he absolutely butchers his). No matter what century the play was being performed, the criticism weighed equally on these insecure actors. This criticism is so easily available when it comes to Hamlet due to the popularity and history of the play, and this combination of the expectations and ideals weigh heavily on the actor.

Today, and among audiences with varying degrees of exposure to Shakespeare, Hamlet is so universally known that making it a base to build on for any type of adaption would already have some guaranteed success. Even from a marketing standpoint, both I Hate Hamlet and Slings and Arrows have such a common thread that allowed them to be successful. Taylor says in his book Reinventing Shakespeare that since Shakespeare died in 1616, “ We have been reinventing him ever since” (Taylor). These reinventions can come in such a variety of media: from more plays based on a play to television shows.

Hamlet is a timeless masterpiece, and also works as a base for a metatheatrical work. I Hate Hamlet and Slings and Arrows both act as the metatheatrical end of adaptation spectrum, commenting on the cultural stressors and importance of Hamlet in the modern age. These prestigious <https://assignbuster.com/the-modrn-transformation-and-reinvention-of-a-classic-hamlet-slings-and-arrows-and-i-hate-hamlet/>

and “ high-culture” ideals of Hamlet lead to the highly regarded culture surrounding it. This primarily leads it to be identified as one of the most the highly regarded plays in the English language, and these adaptations both show the impact that the Danish prince has on the modern theatrical world.

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