

Cast of Characters

<u>Terence Portman:</u>	Founder and elder statesman of the Empire Shakespeare Company. Played by the same actor as Ornett.
<u>Anthony (Tony) White :</u>	RADA trained actor, playing Hamlet in this production.
<u>Alice St. Claire:</u>	Artistic Director of the Empire Shakespeare Company.
<u>Walter Matthews:</u>	Managing Director of the Empire Shakespeare Company. Played by the same actor as Butley.
<u>Betty Stamper:</u>	Stage manager for this production of Hamlet.
<u>Rachel Fowler:</u>	Cast as Ophelia. American, and new to acting.
<u>Ornett Fowler:</u>	Owner and proprietor of Fowler's Chicken Shack. Extremely American.
<u>Chief Inspector Butley:</u>	Basildon's answer to law enforcement. Likes chicken.

Scene

A gymnasium at the Woodland Secondary School in Basildon, England. The final dress rehearsal for The Empire Shakespeare Company's production of Hamlet.

Time

Present.

ACT I

As much as possible, a dark stage. From Hamlet, Act I, scene v; the battlements of Elsinore Castle. Hamlet is played by ANTHONY WHITE, the Ghost by TERENCE PORTMAN. The actors play this straight, at least until it goes off the rails. TERENCE is not playing with a full hand; he is definitely inebriated, though is able to carry it off without showing it until the end of the scene.

HAMLET

Where wilt thou lead me? speak; I'll go no further.

GHOST

Mark me.

HAMLET

I will.

GHOST

My hour is almost come,
When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
Must render up myself.

HAMLET

Alas, poor ghost!

GHOST

Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing
To what I shall unfold.

HAMLET

Speak; I am bound to hear.

GHOST

So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.

HAMLET

What?

GHOST

I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. List, list, O, list!
If thou didst ever thy dear father love--

HAMLET

O God!

GHOST

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

HAMLET

Murder!

GHOST

Murder most foul, as in the best it is;
But this most foul, strange and unnatural.

HAMLET

Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge.

GHOST

I find thee apt;
And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That roots itself in ease on...something...wharf,
Wouldst thou not stir in this. Now, Hamlet, hear
'Tis given out that, sleeping in my...lounge chair...

BETTY

(Off.)
Orchard!

GHOST

...my orchard,
A serpent stung me; so the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a...thingy...process of my death...
Um, really put out...and uh, misled, by a truly
unpleasant person...

BETTY

(Off.)
Just call for line!

GHOST

(Drops character.)
What?

ALICE

(Off.)
Call for line, don't make it up. Or if you make it up,
do it in blank verse! This is a fairly well-known play!

HAMLET

(Drops character.)
Are we going on? My legs are going numb.

GHOST

You know, I think I need a few minutes to collect
myself.

ALICE

(Off.)

I don't believe this! Lights, please!

WALTER

(Off.)

Alice, take it easy.

ALICE

(Off.)

Lights!

GHOST

Look, I'm sorry about this, just a little hitch. No need to worry - it'll be there on the day.

ALICE

(Off.)

Day? What day? This is the bloody day! Give me some light!

The house lights come up to reveal ALICE ST. CLAIRE, the director, BETTY STAMPER, the stage manager, and WALTER MATTHEWS, the Managing Director. ALICE comes on to the playing area.

ALICE

Thank you, it's nice to know there's someone still awake up there.

(To BETTY.)

Tony's special is still wrong, by the way.

BETTY

I got that.

ANTHONY

Could I just say...

ALICE

Tony, lovely work. Not now.

BETTY

Terence, do you need help with the lines?

TERENCE

My dear, I know this play backwards and forwards. I've just dried up, that's all.

ALICE

Terence, have you looked at the schedule lately?

WALTER

Alice, calm down.

ALICE

Walter, don't.

TERENCE

I may have glanced at it earlier...

ALICE

Well, let me just refresh your memory then. Today is the bloody dress rehearsal!

WALTER

An invited dress rehearsal, Alice, where we have guests!

He indicates the audience.

ALICE

We perform tonight!

TERENCE

There's no need to take that tone with me!

ANTHONY

Look, can we just get on with it? We don't have a lot of time.

TERENCE

Look here, young man, this is a private conversation...

WALTER

...in a room full of patrons...

TERENCE

...between two old, dear friends. There's no need for you to interfere.

ANTHONY

All I'm suggesting...

TERENCE

Listen, boy! When you've worked, as we have, to create something, truly create it, you may feel free to offer advice. In the meantime, watch, learn and be quiet! Alice, I'm going to my dressing room - my bloody head is ringing, and I need my medicine. If you wish to continue this conversation there, you are most welcome. Otherwise, I will return when I'm recovered.

He exits.

ALICE

Terence! Damn it.

BETTY

Are you going back there?

ALICE

Not yet...I don't have the strength for it right now.

ANTHONY

Excuse me, Alice?

BETTY

Not now, Tony.

ALICE

No, no - it's all right Betty.

BETTY

Walter, shall we go check on him?

They exit.

ALICE

Tony, yes. Sorry for all that, with Terence before.
I've known him for a long time, and, well...

ANTHONY

Really, it's quite...

ALICE

I wanted to tell you again, truly nice work. Your
Hamlet's truly coming along. It could be a lovely play,
it really could - if only...

ANTHONY

What do you...

ALICE

Oh, nothing. Everything.

(Laughs.)

This is my first Hamlet, did you know that?

ANTHONY

No, I...

ALICE

Never acted in it, was saving it to direct. Wanted it
to be special. Sorry. The Empire - your Hamlet would
have been lovely in that theatre. Did you ever see
anything there?

ANTHONY

Oh, yes - lots! My favorite was Othello. Your Desdemona was extraordinary.

ALICE

Ah, yes. Terence was extraordinary. Playing someone who would die for him was easy. We were younger then, and foolish. God knows I was.

ANTHONY

Yes, well I...

BETTY and WALTER re-enter.

BETTY

Alice, he won't come out. He's doing monologues.

ALICE

Who is he...

BETTY

Lear, I'm afraid. Storm scene.

TERENCE

(Off.)

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!

ALICE

Ye gods.

WALTER

He did say he wanted to speak to you - only you.

ALICE

Of course he did. Where's the whiskey?

BETTY

Is that the best idea, under the circumstances?

ALICE

It's not for him.

BETTY

Under the stage left props table, as usual.

ALICE

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more.

BETTY

I'll go back there too, to see if the rest of the cast is back from break. Walter, you need to make the announcement.

WALTER

The what?

BETTY

To the audience. They're sitting out there, waiting...for someone...to say something...

WALTER

Ah. Yes.

(She exits.)

Ladies and gentlemen, as we take a short break here, I'd like to personally welcome you, our special guests, to the final dress rehearsal for this production of William Shakespeare's Hamlet. I'm Walter Matthews, Managing director of the Empire Shakespeare company. It's a hard time for the arts, no doubt, and we've felt it keenly, more than most, perhaps. What with the loss of the Empire Theatre, to the unfortunate stories in the press about...well, let's just agree that you can't always believe everything you read in the papers. I'd like to express our gratitude to the Basildon town council for making the Woodlands School available for this production. If I may, let me introduce some of our key players here. We have Anthony White, our extremely talented Hamlet, fresh from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts!

ANTHONY

Hello, it's very nice...

WALTER

As the Ghost and King Claudius, we have Empire stalwart Terence Portman...who isn't here. The rest of the cast...is not here either. And your director, Alice St. Claire! Alice? Ah, yes - she just went backstage. Right. We're so glad to see you all here, as thanks for your support throughout the years. If I may, we are especially grateful to our chief benefactor, Mr. Ornett Fowler, owner and proprietor of the Happy Ranch Chicken Shack! Ornett, where are you?

WALTER leads applause, but no Ornett. RACHEL FOWLER, who has been sitting in the audience, stands, timidly. She speaks with an American accent.

RACHEL

Um, thanks, but I'm not him. Uh - my dad, Ornett, he's opening a new Chicken Shack in East...something...shire. I'm not from around here, so I don't...

(Uncomfortable laugh.)

Sorry, thanks.

She sits down again.

WALTER

(Recovering)

Rachel Fowler, friends! She's playing Ophelia for us - her stage debut! New talent for a new age!

(Looking offstage, hoping for rescue.)

Well, I, um...I need to go check on...something...back there. Please enjoy yourselves. I'll be right back.

WALTER leaves for backstage. RACHEL approaches ANTHONY, who seems in a bit of a funk.

RACHEL

Anthony?

ANTHONY

Yes? Oh, Rachel, hi.

RACHEL

I know I don't have a lot of experience at this, but...I don't think you should pay any attention to Terence. He doesn't know what he's talking about. You're wonderful...er, your performance is wonderful. I mean, it all is, all of it, and I'm sorry that bitter old man is spoiling it all.

ANTHONY

Thank you. I'm glad you think so. All this...it's so much harder than I thought it would be. Still, this role, it's the world to me - I'd do anything, anything at all to make it work!

They're interrupted by the re-entry of ALICE and TERENCE. He is, if anything, more soused than before.

ALICE

Right, let's pick it up where we left off. Walter! Betty! Where is everyone? We don't have much time!

WALTER and BETTY re-emerge from backstage.

BETTY

Everything all right then?

TERENCE

All right? Of course it's all right! Never better! Just a damn headache. Took my medicine, now I'm right as rain. Let's get on with it! Come on, boy - back when I played the Dane, nothing could keep me off the stage when it was time to go.

ANTHONY

I'm coming.

TERENCE

Well, stop chatting up the chorus girls, and get to it!

ALICE

Terence, we've been waiting on you. Don't make this Tony's problem.

A pause.

TERENCE

Tony's problem...d'you know what's Tony's problem?

BETTY

Are we going or not?

TERENCE

His problem is, he's no damn good! How do you expect anyone to believe that this...weed is a prince, THE PRINCE!

ANTHONY

Now, wait a minute.

TERENCE

Shut your gob. Alice, let's do this - give me Hamlet, one last time. What d'you say? I'll put on the black, run rings around this simpering nancy boy, and give the audience a real tragic hero. There won't be a dry eye in the house.

Another pause. Everyone looks to ALICE, but she can say nothing yet.

WALTER

Terence, you can't be serious. You're sixty-seven years old. Your Hamlet's done - it's Tony's turn.

TERENCE

Don't you dare talk to me, you overdressed accountant. Giving away - selling us to the bloody heathen for forty pieces of silver - no, wait, forty pieces of chicken! Go play with your abacus.

RACHEL

How can you even think...Tony's wonderful, and you're just an old drunk fool.

TERENCE

You're out of your depth, missy. Stay out of it - this is actor talk. Ah!

Feeling a pain, TERENCE puts his hand to his ear.

BETTY

None of this is helpful. We open in three hours.

TERENCE

Keep out of it - oh. Sorry, my dear. Didn't mean to raise my voice to you. Alice, please. You and I, we built this company, brick by brick!

ALICE

And brick by bloody brick, you're tearing it down!

TERENCE

Alice, we can do this! We can pull ourselves up from this. We can get the Empire back!

ALICE

How you can even speak of the Empire - after all that you did...

TERENCE

Alice, please, we go a long way back.

ALICE

Too, too long, if you ask me.

TERENCE

Well, if I'm such a liability, perhaps it's time you got rid of me.

ALICE

That's my intention.

A shocked silence.

WALTER

Terence, she doesn't mean it!

ALICE

YES, I BLOODY WELL DO!!

TERENCE

You can't speak to me like that...this is my...Ah!!!

(Clutches at his ear.)

God!

(He falls to his knees, turns to ALICE, as if realizing something.)

Alice...

BETTY

Terence!

ALICE

More bloody theatrics...just what we need right now.

BETTY

I don't think so - he's not breathing. He's dead!

ALICE

What?

A pause, as this sinks in. ALICE crosses to him.

ALICE

Terence, you...you bloody old fool!

She turns away. BETTY has found something pinned to TERENCE's costume, and she begins to read it.

WALTER

Alice...

ALICE

Not now, Walter! Damn the man - always had to have the last word. I assume it was a coronary.

BETTY

I don't think so. Listen to this:

Upon my secure hour did someone steal,
With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,
And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distilment.
Thus was I, sleeping, by a friendly hand
Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd...

And at the bottom...

ALICE

What?

BETTY

Three skulls, one of them crossed out.

WALTER

Did Terence write that?

BETTY

Typed, it's hard to say.

ANTHONY

I'll say this, whoever put that down, they don't know the lines very well, and they skipped a bunch.

ALICE

Tony, don't be thick.

BETTY

I think someone is telling us that this was no accident. Terence was murdered!

General consternation.

RACHEL

By whom?

BETTY

I'll ring the police.

WALTER

Wait! Before you call - we can't - the company can't endure another scandal. We need to take care of this...in house.

ALICE

What do you mean?

WALTER

I mean that we need to figure this out ourselves, before the police if we can. Find out who did this to Terence, and why.

BETTY

But we have to believe that one of us is the murderer. We can hardly be considered objective.

WALTER

Yes, you're right. I know! We have other witnesses! Our friends out there.

Indicates audience.

ALICE

Well, it's not the most ridiculous idea you've ever had...

WALTER

Ladies and gentlemen, as we bring the curtain down on the life and career of a great thespian, we ask for your assistance in solving this ghastly crime. We hereby enlist all of you here to use your prodigious powers of deductive reasoning; to become, as it were, private investigators on behalf of the Empire Shakespeare Company.

BETTY

On the back of your program, you will find, coincidentally, a sleuthing sheet, where you may jot down the fruits of your deductions. We can't pay you much - can't pay you anything, in fact. However, there will be prizes awarded for deductive reasoning and creative thought.

ALICE

After we dispose of Terence's earthly remains, the members of our company will circulate among the tables; these people may have special insight into how he died, or who may have wished him dead.

ANTHONY

Before we begin, I will offer two warnings. First, do not take everything they say at face value. Second, keep all knives and other sharp objects out of their reach. After all, one of the people you see up here is a cold blooded killer!

RACHEL

We should also stress this - members of the company may have information crucial to your investigations - information you cannot glean in any other way than by rigorous interrogation. So, please enjoy your salads, and please also take time to see justice done.