I Hate Hamlet Study Guide

I Hate Hamlet by Paul Rudnick

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Introduction

As its title suggests, Paul Rudnick's 1991 play *I Hate Hamlet* deals with the question of just how relevant William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is for modern audiences. The play centers around a young actor who has just earned fame and fortune on a television show about doctors and is apprehensive about returning to New York to play Hamlet in the prestigious Shakespeare in Central Park festival. To add to his insecurities, his realtor has rented him an apartment once inhabited by John Barrymore, who many consider to have given one of the greatest performances of Hamlet in the twentieth century. A séance brings the ghost of John Barrymore back to the apartment where he once lived. Barrymore offers guidance to the young actor, who has to decide between the easy money that he could make with a new television series and the confidence to be gained by facing the world's most difficult acting challenge. Rudnick fills the play with laughs, as he lightly satirizes greedy realtors, vacuous Hollywood producers, pretentious but well-meaning actresses, and hard-drinking, womanizing actors.

I Hate Hamlet opened on Broadway on April 8, 1991, at the Walter Kerr theater. In its initial run, Nicol Williamson, playing the ghost of John Barrymore, immersed himself into his part, channeling the famous rogue with such fury that he once hurt another actor during an onstage duel, causing an understudy to step in for act 2. Since its initial run, the play has been a favorite for small theaters, enjoyed for its wit and its reflection on the actor's art in the modern, commercialized world.

Author Biography

Paul Rudnick was born in 1957 in Piscataway, New Jersey. He grew up in an unremarkable suburban milieu with both practical and artistic influences. His father was a physicist and his mother was involved with the *Partisan Review* and the Pennsylvania Ballet. Early on, he knew what he wanted to do with his life, writing in a grammar school essay that he wanted to be a playwright.

After graduation from high school, Rudnick studied drama at Yale University. After graduation he moved to New York City. He supported himself with miscellaneous jobs, including writing book jacket copy for novels and painting sets for the Julliard School of Drama. His first play, *Poor Little Lambs*, was produced in 1982; the off-Broadway production drew mixed critical responses, though the solid cast included several actors, such as Bronson Pinchot and Kevin Bacon, who went on to gain fame on TV and in movies. *I Hate Hamlet*, first produced in 1991, was the play that brought Rudnick national fame. In 1993 his play *Jeffrey*, about a gay man who lets his fear of the AIDS epidemic cripple his love life, successfully mixed the broad humor that had been common in Rudnick's previous plays with the sadness of the epidemic's destructive toll on the gay community, boldly taking the risk of being misinterpreted as making light of a tragic situation. The play was successfully adapted to an independent film by Rudnick, who was also the movie's co-producer.

Rudnick continued to write plays, but he also wrote for Hollywood. One of his earliest disappointments was his script for the movie *Sister Act*. As Rudnick envisioned it, starring his idol, Bette Midler, it was to be a satire of *The Singing Nun* (a 1966 Debbie Reynolds vehicle), but the final version, starring Whoopie Goldberg, was so watered down that Rudnick took his name off of the film, and had himself billed as "Joseph Howard" instead. He did uncredited script revision for *The Addams Family* and its sequel, *Addams Family Values*. His script for the 1997 film *In & Out* was acclaimed, as was his script for 2004's remake of *The Stepford Wives*. He also wrote film scripts that were critical and financial failures, such as the Jacqueline Susann biography *Isn't She Great* and *Marci X*, a spoof featuring Lisa Kudrow as a rich white woman who embraces hip-hop culture.

In the 1980s, Rudnick published two novels, *Social Disease* and *I'll Take It*. He has had a long-running film review column in *Premier* magazine under the pseudonym Libby Gelman-Waxner. His most recent play, *Pride and Joy*, was produced for the TriBeCa Theater Festival in New York in 2004. Rudnick still lives in the apartment that John Barrymore once lived in, his inspiration for *I Hate Hamlet*.

Plot Summary

Act 1

I Hate Hamlet begins with Andrew Rally□a young actor who has just gained national fame for his part in a cancelled mediocre television program called "LA Medical"□moving into his new apartment in an imposing brownstone in New York City. The apartment is large and gothic, not the sort of place where Andrew imagines himself living, but his real estate agent, Felicia Dantine, explains that she rented it for him because legendary actor John Barrymore once lived there, and she assumed that Andrew would find the connection with Barrymore to be "a match." Felicia approves of Andrew's commercial success, but Andrew is embarrassed about it. They are soon joined by Deirdre McDavey, who has been Andrew's girlfriend since the days when he was a struggling New York actor, and Lillian Troy, Andrew's agent. Lillian has been in the apartment before, years ago, when she had an affair with Barrymore. She blithely asks Andrew if he has found her hairpins.

When Andrew announces that he has been offered the part of Hamlet, which was considered Barrymore's most artistic achievement as an actor, Deirdre suggests that they should try to contact the famed actor's spirit. Felicia says that she has psychic ability and has contacted her dead mother in the past. During the ensuing séance, Felicia talks to her mother, who recognizes Andrew Rally from "LA Medical," but Andrew is hesitant about soliciting acting advice from Barrymore because, he says, "I hate Hamlet." When he says this, thunder rises; a shadow of a handsome profile, which was Barrymore's trademark feature, is cast on the wall in a lightning flash, but only Andrew sees it.

The séance is called off and considered a failure, with Felicia explaining that they do not seem to have anything Barrymore would want, to lure him to them. Lillian and Felicia leave, but not before Lillian finds one of the hairpins she lost in the apartment decades earlier. Andrew tells Deirdre that he has been apprehensive about his ability to play Hamlet, saying that he is more comfortable with easy acting roles, such as his television work, but Deirdre is romantically attracted to the Shakespearean theater. She agrees to stay at the apartment that night but refuses to have sex with Andrew, saving herself for marriage but rebuffing his proposal of marriage. Frustrated and feeling inadequate, Andrew phones Lillian, leaving a message for her to cancel his part in *Hamlet*. He picks up a bottle of champagne that Lillian brought in to celebrate Andrew's new home: when the cork pops, the ghost of John Barrymore materializes.

Barrymore announces that he is there to help Andrew with his performance as Hamlet, explaining that there is a theatrical tradition of actors playing the role calling on earlier actors for advice. He watched Andrew's modern interpretation of the part and pronounces it horrible. His advice is to play Hamlet as "a young man, a college boy, at his sexual peak. Hamlet is pure hormone." Andrew relates his sexual frustration with Deirdre. When Deirdre enters in her nightgown, Barrymore continues to talk to Andrew,

even though she cannot see him; Andrew talks back, and Deirdre assumes that he is pretending to be insane, as Hamlet did. He acts out lines from the play, with coaching from the ghost, and nearly seduces her when the doorbell rings.

Gary Peter Lefkowitz enters. A self-described "writer-producer-director," Gary tries to recruit Andrew for his next television project, disparaging theatrical acting as boring and pretentious. When Gary leaves, Barrymore tells Andrew that the money and fame he would get from the TV show are not worth what he would lose in glory. The more that Barrymore tries to convince Andrew that he could be a talented actor, the more Andrew resists, leading to a sword duel between the two. When he is injured, Andrew becomes strong and decisive, choosing to play Hamlet.

Act 2, Scene 1

Six weeks later, it is opening night of Andrew's performance of Hamlet in Central Park. Felicia and Deirdre discuss the change in Andrew, how serious he has become about acting, citing the influence of Barrymore's apartment, not realizing that Barrymore himself, unseen, stands nearby, mocking them. Deirdre explains that, because of her romantic ideals, she believes she will never meet the person that she really wants to marry. Gary enters and expresses the opinion that there might be no way of knowing if Andrew is good or bad in his role because Shakespeare is so much more complex than television and movies.

Andrew enters, dressed as Hamlet and acting grandly, like Barrymore. When Gary and Felicia leave together, Deirdre is smitten with Andrew's new seriousness. She leaves, and Andrew and Barrymore talk like comrades about the triumph that Andrew expects. Andrew asks for advice about how to act, and Barrymore recites for him Hamlet's advice to actors, from act 3, scene ii of Shakespeare's play. He tells Andrew that his fear of the role is to be expected, but Andrew points out that, after playing Hamlet, Barrymore went to Hollywood and made terrible movies to finance his drinking and womanizing. Barrymore defends himself, saying, "But before all that, in my prime□I faced the dragon. . . . I played Hamlet! Have you?"

While Andrew is off to the play, Barrymore and Lillian reminisce about their long-ago affair. Barrymore knows that once Andrew has played the role, Barrymore will have to leave the earth, but Lillian assures him that Andrew is old enough to face life on his own. The lights fall on this scene as Lillian and Barrymore begin to rekindle the passion they once had.

Act 2, Scene 2

At seven o'clock the next morning, Barrymore is asleep in a chair in front of the television when Andrew's commercial for a breakfast cereal comes on. Andrew comes home and admits, after Barrymore's prodding, that his performance was terrible. Gary comes in with the morning newspapers, which confirm that Andrew's performance was bad, and then Gary offers him three million dollars to act in the television series. Andrew

turns the money down. Felicia enters and says goodbye, because she is leaving for Los Angeles with Gary. Deirdre, who has been asleep upstairs, comes down and relates a strange experience that she had the night before: after contemplating suicide, she stood on the roof of the apartment building and felt a breeze caress her neck like a hand. The next thing she knew, it was morning, and there was a rose on the pillow beside her, and her copy of *Romeo and Juliet* was open to a speech from Juliet. It is obvious that Barrymore's ghost has made love to her, but, unaware of that, she amorously invites Andrew upstairs with her. Instead of following her, Andrew turns to the ghost, angry that he has taken Deirdre's virginity, but is calmed. Andrew recalls for Barrymore the few lines in the performance when he felt that he had it right, and Barrymore tells him that one could expect no more.

Before leaving him, Barrymore asks Andrew to show how he bows. In preparing to do so, Andrew looks out and sees an audience, the theater audience, applauding. Barrymore takes center stage and makes a grand, overwrought show of bowing, then calling upon Andrew to do the same, as the curtain comes down.

Characters

John Barrymore

The character in this play is the ghost of John Barrymore, an actor who actually lived from 1882 to 1942. Starting in the early 1920s, Barrymore was a hit on the Broadway stage with his performances in Shakespearean dramas, starting with *Richard III* in 1920 and leading to his portrayal of Hamlet in 1921, which was hailed as one of the finest acting achievements of his generation. After *Hamlet*, Barrymore, who was as devoted to hard drinking and womanizing as he was to his craft, left the stage and moved to Hollywood to appear in a series of mediocre but well-paying movies.

In this play, the ghost of John Barrymore returns to the apartment that he once rented after he is called forth by a séance and lured with a bottle of champagne. He explains to Andrew Rally that his real reason for returning from the dead is to help Andrew prepare for his upcoming performance as Hamlet, because doing so is a tradition with former Hamlet players. When Andrew is hesitant about his ability to play the role, Barrymore does what he can to make Andrew perform, first comforting and reassuring him and then challenging him until, after they duel with swords, Andrew ends up feeling confident. Similarly, Barrymore gives confidence to Deirdre McDavey, Andrew's girlfriend, who has been hesitant to enter into a sexual relationship with him; when Barrymore makes love to her on the night of Andrew's Hamlet performance, Deirdre does not know what has happened, but she finds herself feeling ready to take her relationship with Andrew further.

When his performance as Hamlet is a failure, Andrew turns on Barrymore, pointing out the fact that, despite his brilliance as Hamlet, he wasted the rest of his life as a washed-up drunk who was willing to act in anything for money. Barrymore admits that is true, but says that it does not weaken his achievement in playing the most difficult role of all. The play ends with the ghost taking a grand bow to the audience, ostensibly to show Andrew how it is done, but obviously reveling in the attention.

Felicia Dantine

Felicia is the real estate agent described in the production notes as having "an almost carnal passion for Manhattan apartments." Although Andrew is hesitant about committing to life in a gloomy old apartment, Felicia is insistent, feeling that the apartment's historical connection to John Barrymore is relevant to Andrew's career as a television actor. While Andrew is ashamed of the television show and commercial that he has done, Felicia is an enthusiastic fan of his most crassly commercial work.

Near the end of the first act, Felicia plays a significant role in moving the plot along when she announces that she has studied spiritualism and has in fact made psychic contact with her dead mother. She is convinced by the other characters to use her

ability to contact the spirit of John Barrymore. During the ensuing séance, she chats breezily with her mother, but once the connection is broken she is disappointed to find that she has not reached Barrymore. Although she does not know it, the audience has seen Barrymore's shadow and is aware that Felicia's power as a spiritualist is stronger than she herself suspects. He later materializes after she is gone.

In the second act, Felicia is on stage only briefly, passing through to announce that she is leaving with Gary for Los Angeles. The shallow artistic sensibility that she showed by announcing her enjoyment of the breakfast cereal commercial Andrew once did makes her an ideal companion for the shallow and unartistic Gary, and Felicia's interest in making money is suitably matched to his.

Gary Peter Lefkowitz

Gary is a fast-talking, superficial Hollywood writer-producer-director. He is one of the few people who is able to see the ghost of Barrymore, which is explained as being because he is so self-centered that it would not make any difference anyway, a claim borne out by the fact that Gary's only comment on Barrymore's Shakespeare costume is that it is "retro." In contrast to the opportunity to play Hamlet, Gary offers Andrew the chance to star in a television series, which sounds like a serious role as a teacher in an inner-city school, until Gary adds that the teacher is to have super powers at night. Like many people who work around artists but do not have artistic sensibilities, Gary occasionally feels that he should quit the superficial. When he is enthused about going to the *Hamlet* performance, he states, naively, "Maybe I should just chuck everything, leave LA, just produce, direct and write Shakespeare." Gary's cheesy artistic sensibilities reflect the tastes of mainstream America; Andrew has a difficult time resisting the money and fame that Gary offers, especially when the Hamlet performance goes poorly.

In the end, when Andrew has turned down the television show Gary is producing, Gary leaves for Hollywood with Felicia, the real estate agent, who has a similar, financially-driven world view.

Deirdre McDavey

Deirdre is the long-time girlfriend of Andrew Rally, the play's star. She met him in college, when they were both studying acting. While Andrew is not interested in acting in a Shakespeare play at first, the opportunity is a dream come true for Deirdre. She is described in the stage notes as "irresistibly appealing, a Valley girl imagining herself a Brontë heroine." For Deirdre, the life described in old romantic novels and plays is real life, and the life that she leads in twentieth-century New York is just a distraction: in this way, the romantic, artistic ghost who shows up is more appropriate to Deirdre's view of the world than to Andrew's. She aspires to play Ophelia, the female lead, opposite Andrew's Hamlet, and ends up cast as one of Ophelia's handmaids.

One of the defining characteristics of Deirdre is that, at the age of twenty-nine, she is a virgin. This is played for comedy, as it is opposed to the other characters' modern sensibilities. She explains her old-fashioned stance, that she does not want to have sex with anyone until she is married, but at the same time she refuses to marry Andrew.

On the night of Andrew's debut as Hamlet, Deirdre becomes so sad at the fact that his performance is being ignored□mosquitoes buzz around the actors, and a plane callously flies overhead□that she decides to drown herself in Central Park Lake, like Ophelia did in Hamlet. But she loses her nerve and goes back to the apartment. There, standing on the roof and looking at the moon, she feels a slight breeze at the back of her neck, one which she later describes as feeling like a hand caressing her. The next morning, she wakes up with a rose on her pillow: it is obvious to Andrew, and to the audience, that the ghost of John Barrymore has made love to her. Feeling herself at last ready for sex, she seductively invites Andrew up to the roof with her.

Andrew Rally

Andrew is the play's central character. He is an actor who studied drama in New York, and then quickly reached financial success in Hollywood as young Dr. Jim Corman, rookie surgeon, on the television program "LA Medical." He is most famous, though, for his role in a commercial for a breakfast cereal, "Trailbuster Nuggets," which is memorable because the commercial has a catchy jingle.

When the play opens, "LA Medical" has been cancelled, and Andrew has moved back to New York, where he has arranged to play Hamlet in a "Shakespeare in the Park" production. He contacted a real estate agent, Felicia, before leaving Los Angeles, and she rented an apartment for Andrew that the great actor John Barrymore once lived in. While Felicia seems to think that, being an actor, Andrew would want to be associated with Barrymore, the proximity to a man widely considered to be one of history's greatest interpreters of Hamlet adds to Andrew's sense of insecurity. In addition, Andrew is sexually frustrated: his girlfriend, Deirdre, refuses to have sex before she is married, but she will not marry him.

When the ghost of John Barrymore manifests itself, Andrew initially feels overwhelmed, and for good reason: Barrymore's reputation as an actor and as a ladies' man seems to overshadow anything that Andrew could hope to accomplish. At the end of the first act, though, the two actors duel: in the course of this fight, when Barrymore draws blood, Andrew's aggression grows, and he begins to feel that they are on equal footing and that he is ready to perform Hamlet.

In the second act, Andrew has taken on Barrymore's artistic intensity and his sense of importance. Around humans, it seems as if his change of personality is due to over-preparation. With the ghost, though, there is a bond of camaraderie, with the common element being that they are both performers of the role. When his self-confidence crumbles, just before it is time to leave for the theater for his first performance, Andrew is assured by Barrymore, but then Andrew turns against Barrymore and points out the

ways in which the master actor's life was less than solid. Barrymore convinces Andrew that, despite his insecurity, playing Hamlet is something that he must do.

Andrew is harder on his performance than anyone else: his newspaper reviews are negative, but they do not call his performance terrible, as he does. Still, when offered a chance to leave the theater and make an impossibly huge sum of money on a frivolous television show, he turns it down, preferring to labor at his craft. In the end, Andrew and the ghost of John Barrymore have been drawn closer than ever.

Lillian Troy

Lillian is Andrew's agent. She is a very old woman and a chronic smoker. When she visits Andrew at the apartment that was once John Barrymore's, she explains that she has been there before, in the 1940s, when she and Barrymore had an affair. At the end of act I, scene 1, when everyone else has left, Barrymore's ghost is surprised to find that Lillian can see him: as she explains, "I am very old. I see everything." With a little prodding, she makes Barrymore remember their affair in detail. When the curtain falls, they are laughing and about to make love again.

Themes

Repression

Much of what is troubling Andrew Rally has to do with psychological repression of his desires. He feels sexually repressed because his long-time girlfriend, Deirdre, insists on retaining her virginity. Despite the fact that he feels it is ridiculous for people of their age to guard their chastity for old-fashioned, romantic notions, Andrew only slightly pressures Deirdre to change her mind. His respect for her does not change his desire. In addition to repressing his sexuality, Andrew also represses his urge to be a great actor because he is worried that he will not be up to the challenge of performing Hamlet. He spends the first act pretending that the life of a Hollywood star, performing in bad television programs and even worse commercials, is suitable for him.

Andrew's outlook changes under the tutelage of John Barrymore. In the sword fight that ends act 1, Andrew lets go of his inhibitions, and acts out of instinct. The blood that Barrymore draws from him symbolizes Andrew's true desires being set free. Barrymore proceeds, in act 2, to convince Andrew that he can become a great actor after all. Though his first attempt at playing Hamlet is a failure, Andrew does not abandon the theater, but instead devotes himself to his craft, turning away from the multi-million dollar television deal that Gary Peter Lefkowitz offers him. Barrymore also eases Andrew's sexual repression by romancing Deirdre without her knowing it: her flirtatious exit at the end of the play makes it clear that she will not turn away Andrew's sexual advances anymore.

Melancholy

Throughout the four centuries since the play was first performed, the character of Hamlet has been described as "the Melancholy Dane." Melancholia is the condition of being gloomy, pensive, heavy of heart, given to sudden outbreaks of anger. Andrew, in this play, displays the same kind of melancholy that afflicted Hamlet: he is frightened of the big changes in his life (in Hamlet's case, the presumed murder of his father, and in Andrew's case the daunting prospect of performing the most difficult acting role ever), and is frustrated in his love life. As a result, Andrew behaves increasingly like Hamlet did. He wanders around his apartment, which turns more and more dark and foreboding, talking to himself (or to the ghost that others cannot see), and, when with his girlfriend, recites the lines Hamlet spoke to Ophelia. To Andrew, feeling melancholy makes it easier to understand Hamlet and therefore easier to play the role. It also helps him take his own life seriously at a time that he has seen it become more and more ridiculous, with recent acting offers including consoling and kissing a puppet squirrel and playing a schoolteacher with super powers. If Hamlet's, and Andrew's, melancholy seems a bit too grim, it is just a reaction to the frivolousness of the lives that surround them.

Culture Clash

The opposing forces that pull at Andrew Rally in this play are represented by two influential main characters. First there is Deirdre, who worships things that represent the romantic ideal. Deirdre's identification with Shakespeare's romantic heroine Ophelia is so strong that she tends to forget that she is participating in a play: though she is only playing one of Ophelia's handmaids, the director has had to stop her from taking Hamlet's dagger and killing herself when Ophelia is feeling suicidal. Deirdre is so estranged from the real world that she feels she could never marry a living person. "I've always wanted to be Joan of Arc or Juliet or Guinevere," she tells Felicia. "And I want to love someone like Hamlet or King Arthur or Socrates"□in other words, someone ideal, not real. A turning point comes for Deirdre when she is unable to drown herself like Ophelia did in the play, and she realizes that she must live in the real world.

A completely unromantic view of reality is represented in the play by the character of Gary Peter Lefkowitz, a show business insider with no sense of artistry or spirituality. Gary talks disparagingly about Andrew's plan to play Hamlet, focusing only on the low salary that Andrew will earn, with no sense at all of the artistic merit of what Andrew is trying to accomplish. It is because Gary is so oblivious to anything outside of his own cultural frame that he is able to see Barrymore's ghost: Gary has no idea of what he is seeing, so the experience makes no difference to him. Still, Gary does become slightly enthusiastic about artistic culture, and imagines himself being part of it, if only in a superficial way, when he imagines himself leaving Los Angeles to "produce, direct, and write Shakespeare," clearly not understanding what "Shakespeare" is. Though Gary's understanding is flawed, his curiosity is piqued.

It is Barrymore's ghost that unites the two cultures for Andrew. Like Deirdre, Barrymore understands artistry and spirituality, but he also shows, in the way that he wasted his later years making bad movies, womanizing and drinking, that he understands the materialistic point of view that Gary represents. Through Barrymore, Andrew learns balance.

Style

Monologue

In act 2, scene 1 of *I Hate Hamlet*, the play comes to a climax when Andrew asks John Barrymore for some definitive help in tackling what is considered the most difficult role for the stage, the lead in *Hamlet*. Rather than write an original response for Barrymore, Rudnick has him repeat the advice that Hamlet gave to actors in the play, using Shakespeare's words from 1601: "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounce it to you," etc. Using this speech in this place works on several different levels. For one thing, it is a sampling from *Hamlet*, giving Barrymore a chance to show Andrew how to deliver a Shakespearean monologue. Also, this particular speech tells the listener to copy the speaker's inflections and mannerisms, which is exactly what Barrymore is asking Andrew to do. This speech is one of the most famous that has ever been written about the subject of acting: in reciting it, Barrymore affirms his faith in Shakespeare's relevance to modern actors like Andrew. Finally, in speaking to Andrew in Hamlet's words, Barrymore builds upon the bond that he and Andrew share: his purpose in coming back from the grave has been, from the very start, to pass the role down from one Hamlet actor to the next, and so it makes perfect sense that the most important interaction of their relationship should be in Hamlet's words.

Tone

Although there are serious issues of art and reality addressed in this play, it is essentially a comedy, built on clever situations and humorous characters and filled with witty dialog. Rudnick uses some big, obvious jokes, meant to gain big laughs from the whole audience, such as Andrew's telling Deirdre "you're a twenty-nine-year-old virgin. And you tell everyone. I think fear of silliness is not the issue." Another example is when Barrymore, told that he was married to an actress, responds, "To an actress? Is that legal?" But Rudnick also peppers every page of the script with humorous asides and small, quick, subtle lines that audience members who are not paying much attention might miss. An example of this is when, during the séance, Deirdre refuses to believe that Felicia would never summon anyone from hell, and Felicia, in a dig at lawyers, responds, "Well, if I have a legal problem. . ." The same sly comic style shows itself when Barrymore, hearing Deirdre say that he lost his virginity at age fourteen to his stepmother, says, to no one in particular, "I'm a Freudian bonus coupon." Lines like these go beyond the story and the characters, communicating humor directly from the author to the audience, but they do not break the reality of the situation because the play is consistent in its humorous tone throughout.

Historical Context

Shakespeare in Central Park

The theater that Andrew gives his Shakespeare performance in is New York City's prestigious Shakespeare Festival, performed in Central Park each summer. The festival has come to be a landmark of New York's cultural identity. The Shakespeare Festival was the idea of director and producer Joseph Papp, who, in the mid-1950s, conceived of a theater that would make classical drama accessible for all citizens. In 1956, he started the Public Theater as a mobile venture, traveling on a used truck to the five boroughs of New York with his company's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. The following summer, the truck was rendered inoperable: Papp parked it in Central Park, near the Belvedere Castle, and collected donations from corporate sponsors in order to put on plays for free. He fought for support from the city government, holding to the idea that the shows ought to be free to the public. In 1960, Papp solicited funds from George T. Delacorte, head of Delacorte Publishing. Instead of simply donating a token sum, Delacorte put up $150,000 to build an outdoor theater for staging free shows. The resulting Delacorte Theater was built a short distance away from the Shakespeare Garden, which the city had built in 1916 to commemorate the three hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death. With easy access to Broadway talent and a mission to make theater accessible, Shakespeare in the Park grew to be one of the world's great venues for performing Shakespeare's works.

Today, the Public Theater (renamed the Joe Papp Public Theater in 1992) still holds performances in the Delacorte Theater throughout the summer. Best known for the Shakespeare in Central Park series, it also showcases works by other writers, both established and unknown. True to Papp's original scheme, performances are free to the public, though, due to the theater's worldwide fame, the wait for each day's tickets can exceed several hours.

Method Acting

In act 1, when Andrew is preparing to show the ghost of Barrymore his interpretation of the role of Hamlet, the stage directions say that, "he is being ultra-naturalistic, very Method." This refers to a specific acting style that became popular in the last half of the twentieth century, overtaking the sort of traditional Shakespearian acting that Barrymore favors. While traditional acting style entails grand, artificial gestures that do not resemble the ways that people really move and talk, Method actors try to reach within themselves to find the emotional truth of the character they are portraying. To achieve the most reality, they try to find experiences in their own lives that will let them relate to that emotional truth.

The term "Method" derives from the principles of Konstantin Stanislavski (1863—1938), a Russian actor and director who explored principles that would allow actors to give

more realistic performances. Stanislavski's "System" became famous because of his influence as co-founder and principle director at the prestigious Moscow Art Theater, and for the school for young actors, "First Studio," which he founded in 1918. His theories spawned "The Method," which was the approach developed by the Group Theater in New York in the late 1930s.

Method acting was the principle technique taught at the Actors Studio, founded in 1947. Actors that came out of the Studio shocked the world with their powerful new style, which mimicked reality. While formal actors of previous generations spoke clearly and tried to project their voices, Method actors mumbled, sighed, and improvised lines; while traditional actors moved in grand, sweeping gestures, Method actors fumbled, scratched, and twitched. Sure of the reality that they are playing, Method actors direct their attention toward the character, not the audience, and are therefore often mocked by actors trained to perform with the audience in mind.

Critical Overview

Ever since its opening in April of 1991, theater critics have been uneasy about how to review Paul Rudnick's *I Hate Hamlet*. The division of critical opinion stems from the different expectations that different writers hold for a theatrical comedy. While most reviewers agree that the humor in this play works well, many question whether a play should not try to accomplish more than just providing jokes, a function that has been taken from Broadway comedies in recent decades by sitcoms on television.

Reviewing the play's original New York run, *Variety* critic Jeremy Gerard pegged it as "a spun-sugar confection yielding a moment's delight before disappearing into the ether." While recognizing that it "glitters with one-liners," Gerard expected it to close early, being the kind of "boulevard comedy" that had gone out of style in a theatrical world of escalating costs and ticket prices.

Gerald Weales, writing in *Commonweal* in June of 1991, a few months after the play's opening, began his review declaring surprise that the play was still running, dismissing it as "a foolishness." Sarcastically, Weales suggested that the play's ending, with Andrew Rally turning down a lucrative Hollywood contract to stay in New York and work in the theater, might have made for a funnier joke than most of the play's intended gag lines. "[G]iven the quality of much of the comedy in the play," he wrote, "it would have been a step ahead of dumb-Hollywood-director jokes, male-genitalia-in-tights jokes, cigarette-addicted agent jokes . . . twenty-nine-year-old virgin jokes." In the end, Weales asked rhetorically, "Is it knee-slappers like that that define a Broadway play?"

A more balanced critical view came after the play had survived for four years. When it opened in Chicago, Lewis Lazare, writing for *Variety*, acknowledged that *I Hate Hamlet* is "lightweight" but entertaining, questioning whether its humor would be able to satisfy audiences without any other traditional theatrical strengths. Calling it a "slick but very thin piece of writing," Lazare praised it by noting that "Rudnick is almost as adept at crafting laugh lines as the master himself, Neil Simon." But, he went on, the "play is done in by the unceasing barrage of clever quips that constantly draw attention to the fact that little else is happening onstage." It is quite possibly this very lightness that has made *I Hate Hamlet* a favorite of small community theaters, where audiences expect little more than an evening of entertainment.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, Kelly examines the ways in which I Hate Hamlet *weakens its dramatic impact by being unclear about how important the Shakespearean tradition really is.*

Some people like Paul Rudnick's play *I Hate Hamlet* because it tries so hard to please its audiences, while others resent it for just the same reason. The play, a favorite of community theater and college productions, addresses serious issues about art and integrity, but it does not address them with much depth. With topics that range from high culture to television commercials, it has something for everyone, and little to offend anyone.

Critics have faulted Rudnick for taking such a superficial approach to his material, but it could just as well be said that the play is successful as a work of art, because it achieves exactly what it sets out to do. *I Hate Hamlet* aims to please, and loading it up with too much moral or sociological complexity would detract from its ability to do so. But being light does not mean the same thing as being free of content. As it stands, the play contains some clear contradictions. The question that arises is whether taking contradictory positions is a weakness or a strength of the play. Purists argue against taking contradictory positions in the same work, but the fact remains that an inconsistence stance can allow a writer to, at least potentially, be all things to all people.

The main thing about *I Hate Hamlet* is that it is a comedy. This means two things. The first is that the play must end on a happy note, with all of the problems solved, so that audiences can walk away from the theater focused on the good time they had, not on issues of greater importance. This is the comic tradition, though it is seldom enforced as powerfully and obviously as it is here. One would be hard put to find another play that practically forces audiences to applaud as a part of the script, as Rudnick does by having his two leads come out, face the audience, and bow, slowly and grandly.

The other ramification of being a comedy is that this is a play that wants laughs, and lots of them. It is a work where jokes, zingers, one-liners, witticisms and wise-cracks dominate over any other element. Rudnick is not afraid, or possibly not even unable, to have a character say something that would not be consistent with what they should be feeling if it means a chance to say something funny. Would the ghost of a Shakespearean actor, returned to earth to teach another actor to play Hamlet well, quip about how he would take the ridiculous television role that he has just seen the other actor turn down? Would the spirit of a dead mother respond to her daughter's psychic call only when she hears that "the rates have gone down?" Would any sexually frustrated lover complain that his girlfriend's desire to retain her virginity is like "show business for Mormons?" Unlikely as dialog like this would be in the real world, it is just the way people talk in the certain kind of light comedy that Rudnick has presented here. He can only be faulted for his jokes if they are inconsistent; as it is, however, the humor, far from intruding on the play, *is* the play. The rest□characters, situation, setting, action, and the other aspects□just serve to create a vehicle for delivering the jokes.

Some critics charge the play with a failure to be all that it should be, pointing out that its simple concept (ghost of Barrymore returns to help a struggling actor) and the action (modern actor learns to appreciate stagecraft) offer weak reasons for audiences to stay in their seats for two hours. Audiences, however, do not seem to mind. The jokes are frequent and clever enough to justify the night at the theater. To those seeking nothing more than amusement, the events and characterizations are only useful in that they make a play out of *I Hate Hamlet*; almost as good would be four or five comics, standing around on stage, trying to one-up one another. From an entertainment perspective, the trouble is not that the laughs get in the way of the play, but that the play gets in the way of the laughs.

But *I Hate Hamlet is* a play, after all. Regardless of how little audience members expect beyond mere entertainment, there are still dramatic elements that can heighten or flatten the experience. The first of these, of course, is a compelling lead character. In raising the ghost of John Barrymore, Rudnick has brought together elements that all□audiences, actors and writers□can appreciate. Rudnick's Barrymore is a charming rogue□a lover, a drunk, an artist. True to the actual career of John Barrymore, he is both a superb actor and a miserable failure. He has been through poverty and riches, critical success and the jeers that haunt a sellout. With all of these contradictions driving him, there is one fact that makes Barrymore such a prize role for any actor: he is noble.

That is, he is noble when the script calls on him to be. When the ghost of Barrymore focuses on what he has to offer to the living, following a tradition of Hamlet actors returning from the dead to pass the craft on to other actors, he has a sense of grandeur that one associates with the Shakespearean stage. He can duel with Andrew or seduce Deirdre, and audiences look up to him. He is otherworldly. The problem is that Rudnick is consistently on the lookout for ways in which the play can subvert expectations. For the sake of comic reversal, Barrymore is not always grand or even particularly supernatural. For example, having established him as one of the great artists of the stage, Rudnick seems unable to stop himself from showing Barrymore eating junk food and watching television, like any ill-bred slob, after having seduced the girlfriend of his protégé, which may or may not be a part of the lesson he brings to Andrew. It is not the witty dialog that causes this character's inconsistency: John Barrymore was a man of many aspects, but the play does not present him as a complex character, just as one who might be one thing or another at any given time.

Which is exactly the problem with the play's protagonist, Andrew Rally. Viewed simply, Andrew's problems are not at all difficult to understand. Professionally, he wants the wealth and fame that his television career offers him, but he also wants the self-esteem of playing Hamlet in Shakespeare in the Park. Personally, he wants to respect Deirdre's wishes, but his own wish is that she would not insist on saving herself for marriage. By the end of the play, both problems seem to be settled, but they really are not. Audiences leave the play feeling that Deirdre will give in to Andrew, but only because she has been sexually invigorated by the ghost of the great lover, Barrymore: Andrew can look forward to a love life with her, but not because they trust or understand each other any better. Also, in the end Andrew turns down a successful television career in favor of a struggling career on the stage. If this were clearly good for him, then this would indeed

be a happy ending, but as it stands it is only an ending that *seems as if* it ought to be happy.

The play's seeming happy ending stems from the idea that Andrew will be a better man for devoting his life to understanding Hamlet. Rudnick makes this the preferred fate for Andrew by playing up the weakness of the alternative, acting in the ridiculous television series proposed to him by writer/director/producer Gary Peter Lefkowitz. Earlier, Andrew expressed his humiliation about acting in a television commercial that required him to converse with a puppet squirrel, then kiss it to make it feel better; presumably, the television series about a high school teacher with super powers would be at least humiliating to Andrew's professionalism. The moral of the play is that it is better to be poor with dignity than to be wealthy and self-loathing. This much is fine, assuming that a lifetime of playing Hamlet is a lifetime of dignity.

Obviously, there are people who feel that this is exactly the case. Some people live for art, and for some of those, there is no art greater than Shakespeare's. The distinction between people who appreciate Shakespeare and people who appreciate television is one of this play's central points. Where the play does audiences a real disservice is by assuming, without proving, that the Shakespeareans have it right.

This is a play constructed around wall-to-wall one-liners: in spite of the swords and tights, it has more in common with any situation comedy on television than it does with Shakespeare's comedies. It uses the over-earnest Elizabethan values for laughs, as Deirdre, in her gown and tennis shoes, dreams of a more spiritual existence than her own. Even John Barrymore, the great interpreter of Shakespeare's greatest role, rises to interest in the role only infrequently, focusing most of the time on women, champagne, and even television. As he explains when Andrew questions him about the years of his life that he spent away from the stage, "I faced the dragon." Audiences might take comfort at the end by believing that Andrew is sacrificing himself for art, but in fact what the play truly values is not the process of playing Hamlet. The real point of *I Hate Hamlet* is that it is best to get one's artistic notions over and done with, so that one can go on with a real, Shakespeare-free life.

Of course, audiences seldom notice this contradiction. They leave the theater knowing that Andrew is going to walk away from the foolishness of television and is going to continue to perform Hamlet, which the characters in the play (and, no doubt, the English teachers they remember) have consistently said is a good thing. Audiences leave feeling that Andrew is triumphant in the end because of the grand bow that he takes; they know that he really deserves to take this bow because the ghost of the great thespian told him he deserves it. The play ends on an upbeat note, and few people except the most jaded critics notice that, despite all that is said about the redemptive powers of performing Shakespeare, the play itself does not seem to have much use for Hamlet, other than as a comic situation.

I Hate Hamlet is an effective comedy precisely because its values are held so loosely: Rudnick is free to set up situations and support positions that he can later knock apart, humoring audiences with the unexpected. The play gives free reign to the playwright's

wit and does not let plot constraints hinder that wit. In the end, though, the play resolves the tension between the modern worldview and the view of the Shakespearean dramatist by conceding that classic drama is more artistically legitimate: this is a safe position to take, but it is not consistent with the rest of the play.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on *I Hate Hamlet*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Carter is a freelance writer. In this essay, Carter focuses on Rudnick's lighthearted contemporary comedy and it's ability to speak to the magic of Shakespeare's Hamlet*.*

In keeping with one of the major themes of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Paul Rudnick's *I Hate Hamlet* is a contrast between both old and new, the value of Shakespearean theater versus the instant gratification of television fame. Rudnick draws on historical figure John Barrymore for his inspiration, an actor captivated by the role of Shakespeare's prince. A sentimental, lighthearted social commentary, Rudnick's Hamlet is not a tragedy, does not seek to redeem or preach a heavy handed message. But it does illuminate the value of the genre to which it speaks. Says the playwright: "*I Hate Hamlet* celebrates the theater, in all its artifice and happy dementia. May the Barrymore panache rule all productions."

Rudnick's play introduces Andrew Rally, an unemployed actor who has previously enjoyed great celebrity status in his role as a physician on television. When Andrew is offered the lead in *Hamlet*, his girlfriend swoons, his broker cheers and his agent campaigns for Andrew to take the part. But Andrew does not share the same enthusiasm. When girlfriend Dierdre tells him he must accept the honorable challenge, he responds: "But why? Just because it's supposed to be this ultimate challenge? Because everyone's supposed to dream of playing *Hamlet*?" Dierdre, however, continues to push through Andrew's protests, ignoring his objections based on his short lived studies in acting school and his ultimate decision to leave to become a hack actor on a primetime series.

Dierdre's insistence on his participation in "the most beautiful play ever written" becomes part of a clever banter exposing the potential flaw in Dierdre's thinking. Her description of the play is one of heavy despair, of tragedy, "It's about how awful life is, and how everything gets betrayed," declares Dierdre. "But then Hamlet tries to make things better. And he dies!" Andrew responds humorously, "Which tells us . . .," questioning the play's redeeming value. To Andrew, playing what is historically identified as Shakespeare's most challenging character is not necessarily the boost his career needs, it's potentially career suicide. Modern television did not demand any real talent, claims Andrew, "I had the right twinkle, the demographic appeal."

With Andrew, and with Gary, Rudnick's work offers an illuminating contemporary perspective on Shakespearean theater. Gary can only respond to *Hamlet*, commenting, "Whoa, God, other centuries. Like, people who weren't me." He is Rudnick's pop culture icon. Obnoxious, at times calculating, he is not remiss in playfully admitting it. He is completely self-absorbed, and primarily motivated by his own self interest rather than by Andrew's happiness. Playing devil's advocate, Gary reduces the production of Shakespeare in Central Park to "algebra on stage," calling it "snack theater" or "Shakespeare for squirrels." He continues to plead with Andrew to come to his senses, to realize that purchasing fine art is intrinsically more valuable than trying to emulate it,

painting a portrait of his young protégé as one doomed to basement productions of Chekov scheduled between AA meetings.

In this clever juxtaposition of ideas of what is really art versus contemporary entertainment, Gary dismantles or tears apart tradition by challenging the idea that *Hamlet*, by virtue of its sophistication, is a higher, more noble art form. For as tactless, and as tacky as he is, Gary is plugged in, turned on, and tuned in to the entertainment demands of pop culture and what it means to be successful. He identifies happiness with materialism, and truly believes he is not only acting in his best interests, but in Andrew's as well. And he exposes the follies of dreamers, like Dierdre, who, spurred on by sentimentality, live in a world of high-flying ideals, completely out of touch with reality.

Barrymore is Gary's alter ego and an advocate for the arts. After hearing Andrew declare his dislike for *Hamlet*, Barrymore appears, his mission to reform his understudy, to convince him to embrace the role he so covets. Unlike Gary, Barrymore detests modern theater. In a conversation with Andrew, Barrymore likens the "introduction of truth" into modern theater to such artifice as "synthetic fibers" and the "GE Kitchen of Tomorrow." He sees Andrew at a crossroads, having to make the choice between a timeless role as Hamlet or television's slick marketing hype, asking "What will you be□artist, or lunchbox?" And Barrymore sees, as Andrew begins to eventually believe, that implicit in such a choice is a challenge, to truly follow one's passion, to accept more difficult acting parts and truly master one's craft, or to succumb to the materialistic, easy money that to Barrymore equates to a career on television. Gary, however, is more impressed with the enormous television contract, hoping that Andrew's interest in Hamlet is short lived.

Gary and Barrymore are archetypes, examples Rudnick employs to drive a discussion about the value of *Hamlet*, and by extension, of art. And both characters make somewhat reasonable, if not believable arguments for both sides, expressing their views or understood notions of what authentic art is, and further, what is politically correct in the art world. Barrymore fervently condemns modernity in any form. Gary celebrates it. While Barrymore looks to the past for his inspiration, Gary embraces the future, claiming that theater "doesn't make sense," that television is "progress," or "art perfected." The idea that in addition to commanding less of his attention, he can eat, talk and view commercials makes television all the more appealing. "It's distilled" entertainment, Gary claims, never demanding an unnecessary amount of his time and energy.

For all of Barrymore's protestations and endless pontification or preaching on the subject of television, the audience discovers the dead actor is not as virtuous as his views suggest. In Act 2, Scene 1, in the midst of Andrew's struggle with stage fright, Barrymore calls Andrew a "sniveling brat." Andrew responds, claiming, "After you played Hamlet, you left the theater!" Barrymore attempts to absolve himself, putting Andrew even more on the offensive. It is during this scene the audience learns that Barrymore left for Hollywood, purchased a mansion in Beverly Hills, and made movie after movie, "most of them garbage," according to Andrew.

Barrymore admits that movies ruined him, made him a hopeless, unemployable drunk and eventually left him unable to perform. Admittedly, before his departure for Hollywood fame and fortune, his face "five stories high and six zeroes wide," Barrymore found more personal satisfaction in playing the role of Hamlet. In his estimation, during his acting stint as Hamlet, he was in his prime professionally, having "faced the dragon." Says Barrymore, "I accepted a role so insanely complex, so fantastic and impossible, that any attempt is only that□an attempt!"

What gives Barrymore great credibility is that he stood at the crossroads of Andrew's life, was given a chance at fame and fortune, or the opportunity to remain a Shakespearean actor playing what is considered to be the noblest of roles, and chose to forsake his talents for the instant gratification Hollywood has to offer. When it comes to Andrew, however, his motive is seemingly as self-serving as Gary's, the audience discovers in a conversation with Lillian. He admits that getting Andrew to accept the role of Hamlet was the sole purpose of his return. Barrymore claims he wanted Andrew to learn from his "sorry excuse for a life." And, he admits that although he was offered every conceivable opportunity, "Andrew is my last vain hope. My cosmic lunge at redemption."

Rudnick's play is in part about Barrymore's legacy. By most historical accounts, one would be hard-pressed to label him a Shakespearean actor. According to Gene Fowler, in *Good Night Sweet Prince*, Barrymore was enthralled with the role of Hamlet, "possessed. . . . A voice clearly had challenged him from across three centuries. . . . He would climb the highest of the magic mountains, the last great peak he was to scale in the fabulous domain of the theatre." (*bard.org*) Critics have been apt to point out that Barrymore, as any actor finding himself in any great role, identified with the Prince of Denmark in an intensely personal way. According to Fowler, the actor himself "declared the Prince to be 'the easiest role he ever played.'" (*bard.org*)

The play is also driven by strong Shakespearean undercurrents, leading one critic from Utah's Shakespearean Festival to comment that Rudnick's work "is a comedy and a very funny one," yet "under the surface laughter there is a strong *Hamlet* current that carries us along in the same way it carries Andrew Rally and in the same way it carried John Barrymore." (*bard.org*) The play resonates with the audience as the Prince of Denmark's character has been historically throughout the world, leading critics like Harold Bloom to conclude, "No other single character in the plays, not even Falstaff or Cleopatra, matches Hamlet's infinite reverberations. The phenomenon of Hamlet, the prince without the play, is unsurpassed in the West's imaginative literature." (*bard.org*)

Fundamentally, Hamlet has fascinated the literary world for centuries as a Prince whose good intentions led to his ultimate failure. And throughout the centuries, the character, according to some, has come to personify humanity's most perplexing problems and dearest hopes. As did a long line of actors before him, Barrymore included, Andrew comes to identify with the character of Hamlet on many levels. Hamlet in the beginning is a challenge, a chance for Andrew to prove himself, but in the end, Andrew internalizes the role. Andrew took on the role with the intention of winning Dierdre's affections and

sending Barrymore back to the afterlife, yet by the play's end the character Hamlet manages to reach right down to the very core of his being, changing his life.

Sifting through Dierdre's, Barrymore's and Gary's arguments, one is hard pressed to make a decision concerning Andrew's future as an entertainer. If Andrew is a mediocre actor, should he dare consider passing up a three-million-dollar contract with a major television network to suffer the embarrassment of playing Hamlet? Or will he eventually conquer the role, as Barrymore once did, and finally conquer his own private demons?

What Paul Rudnick's *I Hate Hamlet* does so well is to illuminate the schism between classic and contemporary; old and new; art and progress to provide a humorous glimpse into the life, the drama and the glory of the theater. It leaves the audience to ponder age old questions and unresolved arguments about the legitimacy of art in contemporary life. Ultimately, though, Rudnick's work is sentimental. It resonates with a desire all beings feel, that is, to reach for a dream and connect with it on the deepest level possible. For Andrew that dream is the stage, to meet and conquer the role of Hamlet, the greatest acting challenge of his career. Andrew is not alone. For many actors, the role of Hamlet goes beyond art for art's sake, it is the final vista, the ultimate challenge, the apex of their careers. It captures that one moment, that glimmer of hope, of supreme accomplishment that most of us continue to strive for, whether or not we have "8,000 lines to go."

Source: Laura Carter, Critical Essay on *I Hate Hamlet*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Remy is a freelance writer in Warrington, Florida. In the following essay, Remy examines the ways in which Rudnick's play comments upon popular culture.

As a play, *I Hate Hamlet* is a comedy, a melodrama, a send-up of tradition and grandeur, a contrast between high and low culture, yet as a commentary on many of the ideas that pervade contemporary popular culture, it remains a biting satire. From the opening scene, there exists a juxtaposition between the characters' expectations and their methods for realizing them, a dichotomy that makes for amusing, playful entertainment. Often, it seems that willpower alone is enough to communicate with the dead or transform the career of a TV actor into that of a theatrical star, but, alas, this is not so. To be fair, Rudnick satirizes not only the aspirations of his protagonist but those of the other characters as well. By exposing his characters' ideas about education, fame, and art, Rudnick creates a picture of a contemporary society that is influenced more by popular culture than it is by tradition and the eternal verities it represents.

In *I Hate Hamlet*, education is viewed as a means to an end rather than something worth pursuing to enrich one's life. Because society advances at an ever accelerating pace, an education now develops over the short-term, and any information that falls beyond the focus of an individual's immediate goals is discarded as useless or antiquated. In other words, an education should help one solve a particular problem, and it should do nothing more or nothing less than that. Solutions should be found easily so that one is able to devote one's time to more leisurely pursuits. For example, when Felicia, the real estate broker, fails to reconcile her feelings for her departed mother through counseling, she takes a course entitled "Spiritual Transcommunication: Beyond The Physical Sphere." Felicia becomes a medium practically overnight, avoiding a long apprenticeship that might interfere with her more urgent need of contacting her mother. As a result of having taken the course, Felicia enjoys a better relationship with her mother, whom she talks to regularly in the hereafter as though they were chatting over the telephone. Furthermore, even though Andrew expresses doubt about contacting the dead, he is willing to go along with the séance if contacting the famous actor John Barrymore will help him perform the role of Hamlet. Andrew would rather take a shortcut than study the performances of those who have played the venerable role before him.

Although his formal dramatic training (a mere two years) has left him ill-prepared for playing the role of Hamlet, Andrew believes, quite naïvely, that he can prepare for this role in much the same manner that he did for the episodes of *LA Medical* and the cereal commercial that made him famous. When the TV show is canceled, Andrew, acting on "a whim," decides to try his luck in New York City, the home of the American theatre. He assumes that all he needs to do to match his previous success is "[t]ake some classes, maybe do a new play, ease back in," as though such a challenge as performing *Hamlet* could be done in a paint-by-numbers fashion. In a popular culture where willpower ("attitude") and a penchant for self-promotion can carry one far, Andrew, in an ironic commentary upon both his profession and the times in which he lives, mistakenly

believes that every acting assignment demands the same amount of preparation, whether it requires him to perform as a pitchman for a breakfast cereal or to assume the mantle worn by Barrymore and the august line of actors that preceded him in performing the role of Hamlet. However, by the time Andrew leaves for his opening-night performance, he understands that common sense favors a more traditional approach toward learning the part. "Instant actor! Just add Shakespeare! . . . I don't think it works that way!" he says, filled with a sense of horror worse than any case of opening-night jitters could ever produce.

Fame is yet another aspect of popular culture that Rudnick satirizes at length within the play. Fame is a commonplace occurrence, something that is sought after and achieved by many through different means, though the context for one's fame may not always be flattering. Andrew feels the exhilaration fame brings when he sees his face on the cover of *TV Guide* at the supermarket checkout line, "right next to the gum." Nevertheless, he remains flushed with excitement, as though he celebrates his Bar Mitzvah whenever his associates and the adoring public smile back at him. "That's what California is," Andrew says, "it's one big hug□it's Aunt Sophie without the pinch." The medium of television broadcasts Andrew's image far and wide, making him recognizable and, therefore, famous. Within a context of popular culture, fame, Rudnick suggests, bestows notoriety at the same time it makes all achievements equal. For example, Andrew is known as much for a commercial in which he acts alongside a talking chipmunk as he is for playing the role of Jim Corman, "rookie surgeon," on *LA Medical*. When Felicia meets Andrew at the Barrymore apartment, one of the first things she does is remark upon how much she enjoys watching him act on television, his show and the Trailburst Nuggets commercial receiving equal merit even though she cannot quite seem to recall the product he advertises. With his show now canceled, Andrew's fame, such as it is, comes down to his singing a few bars of a jingle to remind her.

In this way, fame, which the playwright suggests is fleeting and achieved all too easily, distinguishes itself from glory, which, as embodied by the ghost of John Barrymore, is far more enduring. Fame can last for as long as one thirty-second commercial or for the length of an entire broadcast season, perhaps longer if the show goes into syndication. Fame is regarded as superficial because one does not necessarily have to possess talent in order to be famous□at one point Barrymore refers to Andrew as a "hack"□and yet popular culture considers fame to be something worthy of attaining. Although Andrew may claim that he is "not that superficial" for being motivated more by fame than by money when he is offered the series *Night School*, he unwittingly undermines his artistic integrity when he remarks upon how many people will see the show "even if it's a bomb." As Barrymore observes, fame may make Andrew "admired, lusted after," but at the same time he will acquire "all the attributes of a well-marketed detergent." Fame and its attendant celebrity cannot compare with glory, which endures above and beyond such trappings as better pay, "beachfront property," and "bodyguards," for glory is attained when an actor establishes a rapport with his or her audience and holds it spellbound, as Barrymore did many times throughout his long and illustrious career on stage and as Andrew does briefly when he recites his soliloquy. The moment becomes memorable because it is unique and cannot be reproduced *ad nauseum* as it can on

film. Glory, at least the kind that performing the role of Hamlet can bestow upon an actor, transcends the ages.

While Rudnick espouses glory as the actor's supreme reward, a legacy that is handed down from one generation of actors to the next, glory's essential component, art, does not fare nearly as well in a society that values commerce and forms of entertainment designed for mass consumption. Art, when it is appreciated at all, is regarded as a money-making venture, a business proposition guaranteed to secure lasting value. "You don't do art," Gary says when Andrew announces his decision to play Hamlet. "You buy it." Rudnick provides an ironic commentary on drama in contemporary society when Gary confuses a live performance of Shakespeare in the park with *Hallmark Hall of Fame*, sentimental made-for-TV dramas that are sponsored by a popular greeting-card company. The connection between the dramas and their sponsor is so indelible that commerce and entertainment have become synonymous with each other. Furthermore, Gary embodies the pervading belief among his colleagues in the entertainment industry that a conscious decision to create art, such as the decision Andrew has made to perform *Hamlet*, diminishes an actor's "star power," his value as a commodity on the market. Thus, Gary warns Andrew that the Hollywood bigwigs will think he's "washed up" if he plays the Danish prince. Andrew has a reputation to consider; he should think twice before donning tights. To choose art over commercial value (and the potential to increase that value many times over) is tantamount, in Gary's opinion, to committing professional suicide.

Perhaps as a result of the entertainment industry's view of art, Andrew, in trying to perform his role with a dependable degree of accuracy and confidence, approaches the role of Hamlet with something akin to scientific investigation. Indeed, his preoccupation with concepts like "preparation," "substitution," "internalizing the role," and "finding an emotional through-line"□all aspects of the modern acting technique known as The Method□strikes Barrymore as "utterly appalling," for he, like the actors and actresses of his era, honed his craft during countless performances of the classics. One developed a role over time, learning the nuances that revealed themselves with each reading and performance of the play. Moreover, Barrymore discounts Andrew's ideas about "communication," which the veteran actor refers to as "[t]hat absolute assassin of romance." In sharp contrast to popular opinion, Barrymore dismisses modern acting technique as nonsense, inferring that performing the role of Hamlet cannot be reduced to an elaborate series of formulae. Rather, the role gives the actor "an opportunity to shine," to express in language and in deed the eternal verities of the heart, for this is how the role of Hamlet must be played, with passion and a generosity of spirit that knows no bounds.

Rudnick's *I Hate Hamlet* satirizes the ideas and opinions that serve too often as intellectual guideposts in popular culture, particularly as they influence the entertainment industry's view on art. However, the ghostly figure of John Barrymore reminds both the audience and the reader that, though these ideas and opinions may come and go, there will always be a need for the enduring art of Shakespeare.

Source: David Remy, Critical Essay on *I Hate Hamlet*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

John Barrymore was never filmed in the role of Hamlet, but Films for the Humanities & Sciences has released a two-cassette package of *The Great Hamlets*. The first tape has famous actors□Derek Bailey, Joseph Wishy, Trevor Nunn, Laurence Olivier, Ben Kingsley, and Maximilian Schell□commenting on the difficulties of the role, while the second cassette includes critic Trevor Nunn exploring the underlying dynamics of the play. This program was released in 1996.

Topics for Further Study

Think of a famous dead person, from a field that interests you, whom you would not mind appearing to you as a ghost. Write a list of questions that you would ask. Also, write the responses that you believe this ghost would give.

Andrew is a television actor who has a background in theater and is invited to play the prestigious role of Hamlet in a New York theater production. Choose a young actor on a television show that you like and research that person's acting background. Then, choose a role from one of Shakespeare's plays, or from another classic play. Explain why you think this actor could play that role well.

John Barrymore's performance as Hamlet, though universally acclaimed, was never filmed, so modern audiences cannot see it. Research some other respected actor who worked in the theater before sound or film recording techniques. Report on why you think that reviewers of that person's time were so impressed with the actor.

Most of John Barrymore's movies are considered forgettable; only one, *Twentieth Century* (1934), is considered a classic. Watch that movie and review it. In what ways would you consider Barrymore a great actor who should give advice and criticism to a successful television performer like Andrew Rally? In what ways do you think Barrymore has been overly praised?

What Do I Read Next?

Audiences who watch *I Hate Hamlet* without being familiar with William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* will not be able to fully appreciate the humor, nor the depth of the characters' emotions about Shakespeare's tortured character. Written some time around 1600, *Hamlet* is considered by many to be the author's greatest work.

Paul Rudnick's first novel, *Social Disease*, was published in 1986 and has recently been reissued by St. Martin's Press. It is a humorous commentary on life in Manhattan in the 1980s.

After *I Hate Hamlet*, Rudnick's most famous work for the theater is his play *Jeffrey* (1993). Like the earlier play, Rudnick infuses a serious situation□in this case, a gay man coming to grips with the devastation that AIDS is causing around him□with humor.

Jason Miller, a Pulitzer Prize—winning playwright (for *That Championship Season*) and actor (he had one of the leads in the movie *The Exorcist*) wrote, late in his life, a short, one-person play called *Barrymore's Ghost* (1998), which gives a serious approach to the conceit that is treated lightly by Rudnick. The play is available from Dramatist's Play Service.

Of the many biographies written about Barrymore, the most important is Gene Fowler's *Good Night, Sweet Prince: The Life and Times of John Barrymore* (1981). Fowler knew Barrymore and covered his Broadway career for the *New York American*. The book, published soon after Barrymore's death in the forties, is currently available from Buccaneer Books.

Further Study

Hoffman, Carol Stein, *The Barrymores: Hollywood's First Family*, University Press of Kentucky, 2001.

John Barrymore was only slightly better known in his time than his sister Ethel and brother Lionel. Each generation of the family seems as much cursed as blessed. Hoffman worked closely with John Drew Barrymore (the son of John and father of Drew Barrymore) for almost a quarter of a decade in compiling this portrait that spans from Elizabethan England to the *Charlie's Angels* movie franchise.

Mills, John A., *Hamlet on Stage: The Great Tradition*, Greenwood Press, 1985.

Mills's analysis includes a fairly thorough retrospective of the ways in which the role of Hamlet has been interpreted over the past four centuries, giving details of how each actor has individualized the role.

Morrison, Michael A., *John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor*, Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama series, Vol. 10, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Morrison reconstructs those few years in the early 1920s when Barrymore redefined the art of interpreting Shakespeare for Broadway with his keen portrayals. His analysis goes beyond biography.

Scofield, Martin, *The Ghosts of Hamlet: The Play and Modern Writers*, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Scofield examines the meaning of ghosts, in particular the one in Shakespeare's play, and how the interpretations have changed over the years.

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Fowler, Gene, *Good Night, Sweet Prince,* Viking Press, 1944, p. 205, 209.

Gerard, Jeremy, Review of *I Hate Hamlet*, in *Variety*, April 15, 1991 pp. 209—10.

Lazare, Lewis, Review of *I Hate Hamlet*, in *Variety*, December 11—17, 1995, p. 97.

Rudnick, Paul, *I Hate Hamlet*, Dramatists Play Service, 1992.

Weales, Gerald, "To Hate or Not to Hate," in *Commonweal*, Vol. 118, Issue 11, June 1, 1991, pp. 373—74.