

## STAGES

# What happened to Hamlet before 'Hamlet'?

By **Terry Byrne** Globe correspondent, Updated March 12, 2025, 10:55 a.m.



Doug Harvey as Hamlet and Austin Tichenor as The King. MEG MOORE/MEGPIX.COM

[The Reduced Shakespeare Company](#) built their reputation on going big. Since its founding in 1982, the company has tackled the complete works of William Shakespeare, the histories of America, comedy, the Bible, sports, and Hollywood, distilling each of these vast topics into remarkably and hilariously compact adventures.

Now, for the first time, RSC writers [Reed Martin](#) and Austin Tichenor have written an original story, "[The Comedy of Hamlet! \(a prequel\)](#)," which plays at [Merrimack Repertory Theatre](#) through March 30. Prior works condensed scenes and remixed classic lines of Shakespearan dialogue — or whatever their source material — to hilarious effect. The company's appearance in Lowell will be their seventh at the theater and their third premiere there.

"Our challenge was to write a play with less of the improvisational, vaudevillian aspect of our 'complete' works," says Tichenor, who spoke on a Zoom call from Chicago, with Martin calling in from California. The company is technically based in New York, but the creators make their homes across the country, gathering for their tours.

The result is a story that imagines what happened earlier in the Prince of Denmark's life, offering opportunities to get to know some characters who are only mentioned in passing in William Shakespeare's tragedy of "Hamlet."

"We meet Ophelia's mom," says Martin, "and Yorick [whose skull Hamlet memorably holds] is very much alive, so Hamlet gets to spend a lot of time with him."

Of course, the focus on the court jester offered Tichenor another opportunity to reference award-winning performer [Danny Kaye's](#) 1955 film "[The Court Jester](#)," a comedy Tichenor says is "a fundamental text in my work as a Shakespearean."

Martin and Tichenor say they've recontextualized their prequel to Shakespeare's story "to make it equally about Hamlet and Ophelia, as well as to make it funny."

The story hinges on Hamlet's friendship with Yorick and his decision to stage a play.

"We wondered where Hamlet got his extensive knowledge of the theater," Tichenor says. "So we used that, and the plot culminates in a production that serves as a fund-raiser for the nunnery."



Martin and Tichenor, who've been writing together and sometimes performing as part of the RSC since 1992, tweaked their collaboration for "The Comedy of Hamlet," although they know each other's styles so well they were already thinking along the same lines. Tichenor says he shared the idea with Martin and Martin took the first pass at a draft.

"The play is an original story," says Tichenor, "lovingly ripped off from 'Hamlet.'"

"The Comedy of Hamlet" opens with the appearance of a ghost, and includes lots of references to Shakespeare's "Hamlet," some of which are fleshed out while others are just tossed in, including Claudius saying he's off to take a nap in the orchard.

The choice of "Hamlet" was easy, both men agree.



From left: Doug Harvey as Hamlet, Geoff Barnes as Yorick, and Austin Tichenor as The King. MEG MOORE/MEGPIX.COM

"It's Shakespeare's most influential play, and everyone gets the references," Martin says. "But we follow in the tradition of the classic [Looney Tunes](#), which featured Bugs Bunny

in 'The Rabbit of Seville.' You don't have to know the opera 'The Barber of Seville' to laugh at all the jokes."

Adds Tichenor: "Kids especially get all the jokes. We like to rate it "PG-13: pretty good if you're 13."

At the same time, the choice of telling Hamlet's story just before he goes off to school reflects the writers' own experiences as parents of college-age children considering careers as artists. "Like every parent, we were anxious they choose more financially secure careers," Tichenor says.

In keeping with the RSC's condensed approach, three actors — Doug Harvey, Geoff Barnes, and Tichenor — play more than a dozen characters, and because it's an homage to Shakespeare, all of the lines are written in iambic pentameter, and the writers endeavored to preserve references and stylistic flourishes that will sound familiar to audiences.

While Harvey and Barnes are newer to RSC, Tichenor says they are both experienced Shakespearean actors.

"But honestly," says Martin, "when we hold auditions, we ask people to tell us a joke."

"We're really looking for actors who can play silly material straight and with urgency," says Tichenor.

"The Comedy of Hamlet," says Tichenor, guarantees a lot of laughter, "but also has a lot of poignancy and power that will take audiences by surprise."

### **From screen to stage: 'My Dinner with André'**

For the first time since achieving cult status with the film release in 1981, "[My Dinner with André](#)" has been adapted for the stage by [Harbor Stage](#). Originally presented last summer at their theater in Wellfleet, Harbor Stage cofounders Jonathan Fielding and

Robert Kropf will reprise their performances as actor and playwright Wallace Shawn and legendary director André Gregory at the BCA Plaza Black Box, March 13-30. The story follows a conversation between two old friends — both artists — examining the tension between being creative and making a living. Tickets \$23-\$40.

[www.bostontheatrescene.com](http://www.bostontheatrescene.com)

## **THE REDUCED SHAKESPEARE COMPANY: THE COMEDY OF HAMLET! (A PREQUEL)**

Written and directed by Reed Martin and Austin Tichenor. Presented by Merrimack Repertory Company in Liberty Hall, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell. March 12-30. Tickets \$15-\$80. 978-654-4678, [www.mrt.org](http://www.mrt.org).

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