

PLAY DEAD

INT - DARK SPACE - NIGHT

A single light illuminates two men in medieval dress.

HAMLET (20), a skinny and stubble-faced prince, lies dying in the arms of his weeping friend, HORATIO (20).

HAMLET

O, I die, Horatio;  
The potent poison quite o'er-crows  
my spirit: I cannot live to hear  
the news from England;  
But I do prophesy the election  
lights on Fortinbras: he has my  
dying voice.  
So tell him, with the occurrents,  
more and less, which have  
solicited. The rest is silence.

Hamlet's head rolls back, limp. His eyes stare fixedly, his mouth hangs open. Horatio looks to the heavens.

HORATIO

Now cracks a noble heart.  
Good night, sweet prince, and  
flights of angels sing thee to thy  
rest!

Hamlet's eyes flutter. He swallows, and his nostrils flare as he draws a quick breath.

DIRECTOR (O.S)

Stop!

Lights. The room is a bare black box theater, littered with college-aged actors - CLAUDIUS, LAERTES, OSRIC - in deathly repose. They begin to sit up, annoyed.

The goatee-sporting Director (20) sighs. The STAGE MANAGER (19), marks a note in her script.

DIRECTOR (CONT'D)

Troy. I need you to die.

HAMLET

What? How can I be more dead?

Hamlet shoots a pleading look at Horatio for support. Horatio shrugs and smiles: *what do you want from me?*

DIRECTOR

Close your eyes! You're blinking,  
and breathing, and moving around.

HAMLET

I've just been swinging a sword for ten minutes, it's hard!

DIRECTOR

There's four other people on stage who are staying perfectly still. Look, Kelly hasn't moved yet.

GERTRUDE, 21 but aged with makeup into an old woman, lies sprawled across a platform. At the sound of her name, she pops up and waves spunkily.

STAGE MANAGER

This space is tiny. If you move, the illusion is destroyed.

DIRECTOR

The whole play is about death. Just die.

INT. DINER - NIGHT

The actors kibitz over chicken wings. Horatio sits next to Hamlet. They laugh and speak rapidly over each other:

HAMLET

- and I wasn't the one who decided to do *Hamlet* in the black box!

HORATIO

Poor, poor you. Snookered into the lead role -

LAERTES

- I'll play Hamlet -

HAMLET

Kelly should play Hamlet. She's a great dead body.

CLAUDIUS

- just hold your breath.

OSRIC

Kelly, remember that party where you just slumped in the chair for two hours? People thought she was passed out drunk, but she was just eavesdropping for fun.

LAERTES

That's messed up.

GERTRUDE

Troy's a good Hamlet because his brain is always working. When you play dead, you just have to commit.

INT. COMMON ROOM - NIGHT

The actors sit in a dorm lounge, drunkenly cheering at a low-rent 70s-era horror movie. The weeping heroine stabs the killer and leaves him, unmoving, on the floor.

CLAUDIUS

Don't turn your back-

Everyone screams and laughs as the killer rises up from behind her with a knife.

LAERTES

See, Troy? That guy's a pro.

INT. DORM ROOM - NIGHT

Hamlet and Horatio stumble into the room, drunk, smiling.

HAMLET

Show me how to play dead.

HORATIO

That's disturbing. All right. Hold your breath.

Horatio kisses Hamlet, long and slow. Hamlet giggles.

HORATIO (CONT'D)

You're hopeless.

INT. BLACK BOX - DAY

The actors watch as Hamlet and Laertes pace slowly through their stage fight, fencing foils clacking.

DIRECTOR

All right. Five two. Let's do it. Troy? You got this?

HAMLET

I practiced all night.

Horatio raises his eyebrows and contains a smile, but says nothing.

DIRECTOR

All right, let's-

HAMLET

What is all that noise out there?

Everyone quiets down. Through the single closed door, but they can hear the roar of a distant, muffled crowd.

LAERTES

Pledge week. Everyone's out in force.

HORATIO

Are they shooting off fireworks?

He's right: there's a low popping sound from outside.

CLAUDIUS

It doesn't sounds like cheering.

STAGE MANAGER

I'm gonna check it out.

She opens the door and walks down the hallway, out of sight. The others listen, unnerved. The crowd voices grow louder still, more strident. It's not cheering. It's screaming.

GERTRUDE

Something's wrong. Get out. Go.

She grabs Laertes and Horatio and moves towards the door. As she does, the stage manager races around the corner, crying.

STAGE MANAGER

Run! Run-

CRACK. A bullet catches her in the arm. She screams.

Hamlet freezes. Horatio and Gertrude rush for the door, trying to grab the stage manager.

A red-haired SHOOTER (19) steps into the room, wielding an automatic rifle.

Gertrude tries to grab the shooter. He shoves her to the floor and fires. Blood sprays; she jerks and stops moving.

BANG BANG BANG. Each actor falls in a bloody heap. A bullet catches Horatio in the chest.

Hamlet screams and throws himself at Horatio, slipping and sprawling. BANG. He collapses on Horatio, eyes open. He lays perfectly still. Silence.

The shooter drops the rifle and pulls a pistol from his belt. He hauls the screaming stage manager into the room and slams the door. A voice on a bullhorn shouts outside.

SHOOTER

I've got a hostage! Don't fucking  
come in here!

(to the stage manager)

Tell them not to come in.

STAGE MANAGER

Don't come in! He'll kill me!

Hamlet sucks in a tiny, quick breath.

The shooter's head jerks up at the sound. All he sees are dead bodies. He trains the gun on the stage manager.

He begins to pace the room. He kicks Gertrude in the ribs; no reaction. He fires once into the ceiling.

The shooter approaches Hamlet. He steps on Hamlet's hand, grinding his boot.

Hamlet doesn't move. The shooter gets down and stares in Hamlet's face. Not an eyeblink. Not a facial twitch.

The shooter stands and belts the crying stage manager across the chops. He puts the gun to her temple. She sobs.

SHOOTER

Stop it. Stop it. Stop crying.

Right now. Three. Two. One.

Hamlet rises up and grabs the gun.

The shooter twists and throws Hamlet off. The stage manager bursts out of the room.

Hamlet scrambles backwards. The shooter aims for his face.

Gertrude, bleeding from the shoulder, rises up behind the shooter, grabs the pistol, and puts a bullet in his side. The shooter collapses face down on the ground.

Hamlet weeps. He reaches out to Gertrude, in gratitude.

Gertrude puts four bullets in the back of the shooter's head.

Hamlet backs off, horrified. Gertrude looks at him quietly, eyes dangerously distant, wavering, searching.

GERTRUDE

You always have to make sure.