I Hate Hamlet
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

Insights is published by the Utah Shakespeare Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, communications director and editor; Phil Hermansen, art director.

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Cover photo: Joe Van Slyke (top) as John Barrymore and Elisabeth Adwin as Deirdre McDavey in I Hate Hamlet, 2002.
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Synopsis: *I Hate Hamlet*

Andrew Rally, the up-and-coming young star of a recently canceled television series, has just arrived with real estate agent Felicia Dantine at what is to be his new apartment in New York City. Rally, a native of Los Angeles, is more than a little put off by the Gothic trappings of the old brownstone. The fact that the apartment once belonged to the legendary actor, John Barrymore, does little to dissipate Rally’s reservations. He is doubly disturbed, as he is soon to perform the difficult part of Hamlet, the role made famous by Barrymore—and he is to do it onstage, away from the glitter of Hollywood.

Rally and Dantine are soon joined by Rally’s agent, Lillian Troy, and his girlfriend, Deirdre McDavey. Troy, many years ago, had a brief fling with Barrymore in this very apartment. Excited, Dantine claims she is able to communicate with departed spirits and suggests they summon Barrymore to verify Lillian’s claim. Encouraged by Deirdre, Dantine begins the séance.

Andrew is told to think of a question to ask Barrymore—perhaps some advice on playing the role of Hamlet. When Andrew shouts out, “I hate Hamlet!” the curtains blow, and lightning illuminates the room, briefly casting the shadow of the striking profile of a man upon the wall. Andrew alone sees the shadow.

After the séance, Andrew and Deirdre are alone in the old apartment. Their conversation turns, as it often does, to Deirdre’s unwillingness to have sex prior to marriage, much to Andrew’s disappointment. When Deirdre retires for the evening to the upstairs bedroom, Barrymore, resplendent in full Hamlet costume, appears to the stunned Andrew. Barrymore explains that he makes himself seen to every young actor who is facing the daunting role of Hamlet and is in desperate need of help. The remainder of Act One is taken up with Barrymore’s brash coaching of Andrew—both in acting, and in the ways of love, culminating with a mock, but swashbuckling, sword fight in the apartment.

By Act Two Andrew is deeply into the role of Hamlet, dressing the part and brooding darkly in the apartment which is now decorated like a medieval castle. He still has misgivings but receives a final encouraging speech from Barrymore on the opening night of the production.

Sadly, all does not go well. Andrew’s performance is, at best, weak. Furthering Andrew’s angst is the discovery that Deirdre has been seduced in the night by Barrymore. Deirdre agrees that Andrew’s performance was awful, but, because he did not give up, in her eyes he has become the bravest and most noble man she has ever met—which is what she has been seeking.

In the end, Andrew declines a new television offer and opts to pursue a life on the stage. Barrymore tells him, “There it is! The glory of Shakespeare. Hamlet has changed you. Altered your course.”

After teaching Andrew one last lesson—how to bow properly—Barrymore leaves. Andrew bows dramatically to the audience, and the curtain falls.
Characters: *I Hate Hamlet*

**Felicia Dantine:** Andrew Rally’s real estate broker, Felicia Dantine claims that she can speak to the dead; however, her séance arranged to speak with the ghost of Barry more appears on the surface to have been a failure.

**Andrew Rally:** Young and popular, Andrew Rally is a television actor and star of a recently canceled soap opera. He just moved to New York City from Los Angeles, where he will soon be playing Hamlet on stage. He is both overwhelmed and chagrined by the challenge, because it is the stage, not Hollywood, and because it is perhaps the most difficult role every written. However, he has unwittingly moved into the apartment of the deceased John Barrymore, perhaps the greatest Shakespearean actor who ever lived.

**Deirdre McDavey:** Attractive and emotional, Deirdre McDavey is Rally’s girlfriend. She is committed, much to his annoyance, to “saving herself” until they are married.

**Lillian Troy:** Rally’s agent, Lillian Troy is in her early twenties but remembers fondly an affair she had with John Barrymore many years ago, in the apartment Rally now lives in.

**John Barrymore:** A legendary actor, John Barrymore, or, rather, his ghost is still quite active (in many ways) and appears to help Rally in the nuances of both acting and love.

**Gary Peter Lefkowitz:** A cocky, pompous television producer, Gary Peter Lefkowitz gave Rally his first big break. He wants Rally to move back to Los Angeles to film a new television series and can’t understand why he isn’t jumping at the chance.
Paul Rudnick: “Is This Going To Be Funny?”

By Sarah Johnson

Paul Rudnick is a rare anomaly in the literary world, someone people might call a “triple threat,” for he is an accomplished screenwriter, playwright, and novelist. He has defined himself as an author who has a knack for observing real life situations, unafraid to tackle such weighty issues as politics, homosexuality, AIDS, and even women’s obsession with shopping—not too bad for a man who started his writing career covering the auctioning of Joan Crawford’s eyelashes.

Rudnick was born in Piscataway, New Jersey, in 1957. At the age of five he wrote an essay declaring himself a playwright, although he had yet to see a theatrical production. This creative venture would eventually be supplemented by an undergraduate theatre degree from Yale University. In an interview for American Repertory Theater, Rudnick spoke about the opportunities afforded to him at school: “My advantage and part of my success was being around the Yale School of Drama. I may have been writing badly, but it was a way to learn something. I would make these enormous mistakes, but I learned how not to make the same mistake twice. I was anxious to get out into the world because I believe that comedic technique can be learned; you just have to practice it” (Shawn Rene Graham, The Naked Interview, 9 Sept. 2001. http://www.fas.harvard.edu).

Immediately after graduation Rudnick fled to New York City to pursue his love of writing. He spread his style across what he termed “America’s giant entertainment sewer,” writing articles that nobody else would touch, such as beauty shows and women hawking Eva Gabor wigs (Lynn Hirschberg, “Sweet Talking Guy,” Rolling Stone, 22 May 1986: 41-42). Throughout the following years his journalistic career bourgeoned, encompassing not only better assignments, but also more high-profile names. He penned articles for Vanity Fair, Spy, The New York Times, Vogue, Time, and Esquire, as well as performing the role of columnist in Premiere magazine (under the pseudonym Libby Gelman-Waxner).

The success of his journalistic ventures allowed him focus on his original Yale intentions: play-writing. In 1982 Rudnick made his off-Broadway debut with Poor Little Lambs, his first work produced for the stage. The comedy recounts the antics of the Whiffenpoofs, an all-male singing group at Yale, and starred young Kevin Bacon. The New York Times review claimed the play’s plot “trite,” but that Rudnick “has a terrific ear for undergraduate locker-room chatter” and “a killer instinct for wisecracks” (Frank Rich, “Theatre: Rudnick’s ‘Poor Little Lambs’ of Yale,” 16 March 1982, C11). Despite this criticism the play was well received and subsequently optioned by Hollywood; unfortunately it remained in development limbo until the rights were returned to Rudnick.

Rudnick followed this initial critical encounter with Cosmetic Surgery, a one-act comedy; however he was still unsatisfied. Rudnick reported his feelings to Rolling Stone: “After Poor Little Lambs I wrote some more plays that I hated, and I just thought, ‘There’s something wrong here.’ Everything I wanted to write about was not coming out in play form, so I decided to try a novel, and I loved it” (Hirschberg, 41-42).

Rudnick published his first novel, Social Disease, in 1986. It satirized the downtown Manhattan club scene with much witty banter and juicy pseudo-gossip. The year 1989 saw the publication of his next novel, I’ll Take It, where Rudnick delved into an issue dear to his heart: shopping. Critical reaction was generally favorable; People magazine reported that “Rudnick sings a wonderful song of shopping and familial love and solidarity” (Joanne Kaufman, “Review of I’ll
In the 1990s Rudnick returned to writing plays, gaining more attention and acclaim for I Hate Hamlet and Jeffrey. The former was inspired by his own Greenwich Village apartment (once owned by the late John Barrymore) and made fun of the pretensions of "high art." It opened in 1991 to fairly acceptable reviews, with New Yorker claiming "Mr. Rudnick is a competent writer of comedies" (Oliver Edith, "Barrymore Returns," April 22, 1991: 89) The Boston Globe said it "is a funny little play, the kind of nicely entertaining comedy Broadway doesn't seem to have much patience with anymore" (Kevin Kelly, "I Hate Hamlet Is Mischievous Good Fun," 24 April 1991: 45). However, the run of the production was hampered due to tantrums thrown by star Nicol Williamson, and it closed after less than 100 performances.

The production of Jeffrey was a different story. It tackled two societal taboo subjects: homosexuality and AIDS. The story details the life of a young, gay man who is terrified of dying from AIDS and makes the ultimate safe choice: to abstain from sex. Rudnick, as a gay male himself, understood the fear that permeated society and the character of Jeffrey. He claimed "only money, rage, and science can conquer AIDS, but only laughter can make the nightmare bearable" ( Jeffrey, New York: Plume Publishing, 1994: xi). Jeffrey conquered audiences and critics alike, winning an Obie Award, an Outer Critics Circle Award, and the John Gassner Award for Outstanding New American Play. Rudnick's star was on the rise and Hollywood noticed.

Rudnick was not new to the screenwriting scene, providing uncredited script doctoring for the comedy hit The Addams Family, writing for Sister Act under the pseudonym Joseph Howard, and finally receiving screen credit for the sequel Addams Family Values. Now, however, he was invited back to adapt his own long-running hit play, Jeffrey, for the screen. The immense success of the adaptation cemented his status in Hollywood, and his delicate, down-to-earth touch with the homosexuality theme of Jeffrey placed him as the perfect candidate to script a new movie.

The film In & Out, loosely based on Tom Hanks's 1994 Oscar acceptance speech, was to be the first mainstream Hollywood comedy to tackle the subject of homosexuality. Through the story of a high school English teacher who is "outed" on national television by a former student, Rudnick carefully juggled the themes of acceptance and growth, interweaving comedy and serious issues into a single structure.

It is that style and grace that allows Rudnick to create characters and situations that are in one sense completely farcical and in another so transparently genuine. Rudnick continues his literary career in both Hollywood and New York, most recently scripting a screenplay, called Isn't She Great, based on the life of Jacqueline Susann. Throughout it all, though, his infusion of laughter is prevalent. He told SplicedOnline.com that "I am a big laugh whore. So when I write anything, I just always think, is this going to be funny?" His work attests to the fact that the answer is "yes."
World’s Greatest Tragedy Becomes Extraordinary Comedy
By Ace G. Pilkington

In 1987, Paul Rudnick rented an apartment “on the top floor of a brownstone in Greenwich village” (“Introduction,” I Hate Hamlet [Garden City, New York: The Fireside Theatre, 1991], vii). John Barrymore had lived in and transformed that apartment in 1904, turning it into what the real estate ad described as a “medieval duplex,” and what Rudnick called a “gothic aerie” (vii). A year later, “the apartment insisted” (viii) that Rudnick write a play about Barrymore’s legacy. The result was, of course, I Hate Hamlet.

Now, whatever powers of persuasion brownstones may possess and whatever vestiges of Barrymore’s flamboyant personality may have been left floating about in the apartment he named the “Alchemist’s Corner,” it is oddly significant and very nearly inevitable that the play Rudnick created was about Hamlet.

Paul Rudnick has Barrymore describe himself in I Hate Hamlet as “a light comedian” (81), and that’s certainly nearer the truth than labeling him a Shakespearean actor. And yet, Shakespeare’s most amazing and challenging character cast his spell over Barrymore as over so many others. He was “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” (Gene Fowler, Good Night Sweet Prince [New York: The Viking Press, 1944], 205). Barrymore found something of himself in the Prince and something of the Prince in himself, which is the power of any great role or indeed any great character in literature, but there has always been something intensely personal about such discoveries where Hamlet is concerned. John Barrymore declared the Prince to be “the easiest role he ever played,” and his brother Lionel agreed, “You must take into account that when the Bard wrote Hamlet he had Jack in mind” (Fowler 209).

I Hate Hamlet is a comedy and a very funny one, but 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 had carried John Barrymore. The Prince walked out of the play long ago and has been making himself felt in the world ever since. As Harold Bloom says, “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” (Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human [New York: Riverhead Books 1998], 384).

Hamlet has had enormous influence on the literatures, philosophies, and even the moods of most European countries. In Russia, for instance, the play has been extraordinarily popular from the nineteenth century on. “The principal reason for the sustained interest of the aristocracy lay in the romantic fascination with the character of Hamlet himself. Russian aristocrats felt a strange kinship with this privileged court figure torn between the mission he was called on to perform and his own private world. . . . By the early nineteenth century there seemed nothing surprising in a Russian aristocrat’s leaving his boat to make a special pilgrimage to ‘the Hamlet castle’ at Elsinore” (James H. Billington, The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture [New York: Vintage Books, 1970], 354).

Elsewhere in Europe, not only had the Prince escaped from the play, but the Prince’s name had to some extent been abstracted from the Prince. “Hamletism as a term had become established by the 1840s, and had come to have a range of meanings, all interconnected and developed from an image of Hamlet as well-intentioned but ineffectual” (R. A. Foakes,
“The Reception of Hamlet,” in Shakespeare Survey 45: Hamlet and its Afterlife [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 1). Hamlet and “Hamletism” came to have different meanings for the Romantics, the Symbolist poets, and a variety of others. He stands to one side, haunting the imaginations of such disparate writers as T. S. Eliot and Tom Stoppard.

Over and over, Hamlet, a character who is only an imaginary person, has personified people’s most perplexing problems and dearest hopes. In Russia, the “Hamlet question” led to aristocratic and artistic suicides, but it also became a “search for the meaning of life” and “inspired the turn to ‘the people’ by Belinsky (and the radical populists after him)” (Billington 355). Perhaps the most surprising re-imagining of the Prince (and one of the closest to Shakespeare’s original character) was Boris Pasternak’s in the poems he appended to Doctor Zhivago. In Pasternak’s words, “Hamlet is not the drama of a weak-willed character, but of duty and self abnegation. . . . Hamlet is chosen as the judge of his own time and the servant of a more distant time” (cited in Billington 562). In the hands of Pasternak, who was also a translator of Shakespeare’s plays, Hamlet had been transformed and, of course, personalized yet again, the Prince once more became the perfect symbol.

For Paul Rudnick too Hamlet and his play are symbols. He is the center piece of our culture, hated as “algebra on stage” (49) and adored as “the most beautiful play ever written” (21). Hamlet is the challenge that television actor Andrew Rally fears to face but can’t escape from. Rally is literally haunted by the part and by the ghost of John Barrymore, who insists that he must play the part. Hamlet is the ultimate acting challenge, the meaning of an actor’s life, proof that he is truly alive. When Rally tastes that glory for only a few seconds, he refuses to go back to Hollywood. He has been Hamlet—briefly—and he has become himself permanently. I Hate Hamlet is hilarious, but much of what is funny in it gets its energy from the serious issues that have swirled around the Prince ever since Shakespeare set him loose on a stage. Ironically, the happy ending here requires a successful encounter with a tragedy or at least a tragic figure. It is Paul Rudnick’s particular felicity that he can make such large issues lighthearted while still making them light the way for his characters; he can render the theatre ridiculous while simultaneously making it glorious. In the same way, Andrew Rally’s failure on stage becomes his success in life, and a play about the world’s greatest tragedy turns into an extraordinary comedy.