

“TALKBACK”

A SHORT COMEDY IN UNDER 10 MINUTES

BY SAM GRABER

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SYNOPSIS – TALKBACK

Having finished reading aloud the first draft of Hamlet, actors deliver feedback to the playwright.

CHARACTERS (5M)

JOHN, director

RICHARD, Hamlet

MARCUS, Ophelia

GEORGE, Laertes

THOMAS, stage directions

WILL is on stage but not embodied by a human actor. WILL is a cut-out, or puppet, or sad clown, inanimate.

TIME / PLACE

1599, England.

RUN TIME

The estimated run time is 7 minutes.

TALKBACK.

As lights come up we see the cast in a sort of formation amongst themselves, reading off sheets of papers in their hands to JOHN and WILL, who are across and opposite them, watching the read.

THOMAS

A dead march. Exeunt. Bearing off the dead bodies. After which a peal of ordnance is shot off.

...curtain.

...the end.

There is a very long pause. At least five seconds of silence, after which actors might shuffle their scripts, clear their throats, squirm in their seats, look at the time.

They do not make eye contact with JOHN or WILL. It should appear to be highly uncomfortable for everyone.

Finally.

JOHN

Well. Um. Let's...take a break. Just to clear our heads. Collect our thoughts sort of thing. And then come back.

GEORGE

We've been here four hours already.

JOHN

I know, I appreciate it, *we* appreciate it, because it's new, and we needed to hear the words. All those words. From our esteemed playwright. We know it can be different to hear read aloud what we thought would be, you know, in our head. So let's quick break and then chat about...all those words.

Pause. Nobody moves.

GEORGE

I don't get it.

JOHN

Just take a quick break and then come back.

GEORGE

No. The play. I don't get it.

JOHN

Oh, um...maybe during the break we consider ways to ask our playwright questions in the form of...a question—

GEORGE

Like I don't mean to be rude and all. And I get it's new draft. But I just don't get it.

JOHN

Right, well that's why we're here, to have this read and talkback.

GEORGE

Like I get what was happening and all, you know, the whole plot thing but I guess...

JOHN

You don't get it.

GEORGE

Take the main character.

JOHN

Yeah.

GEORGE

His name's Hamlet.

JOHN

Yeah.

GEORGE

And the dead father's name's also Hamlet.

JOHN

Yes.

GEORGE

They both have the same name.

JOHN

Yes.

GEORGE

I think you need a monologue to explain that.

Groans from the other actors.

GEORGE

Seriously, cuz otherwise the audience thinks ‘Hamlet’ is going to be about the dead King father Hamlet.

THOMAS

Has a point.

GEORGE

You have a play with two different characters sharing the same name and everyone expects comedy. Took me until the play-within-a-play—

THOMAS

—very not comedy—

GEORGE

—to go OHHhhhhh, it’s about THIS Hamlet.

THOMAS

Did you not have a title?

JOHN

If we can just take a break—

RICHARD

May I say something.

JOHN

Christ, Richard, please. By the way, wonderful job.

RICHARD

Obviously. Except I’ll need a very long break to restore my voice. My voice is my prized instrument, you know.

JOHN

Of course, Richard.

RICHARD

An instrument now frayed from overuse. I’m sorry but how many words does the lead character need to say I’m a whiny brat and no one cares about me.

Assents from the other actors.

RICHARD

It’s not a sympathetic character. Privileged upper crust roams about the family castle yapping everyone’s ear off about his problems? I don’t want to bag on the words, mind you, it’s poetic and all, but there’s a damn lot of them.

Assents from the other actors.

THOMAS

Man needs to piss.

GEORGE

I’m pissing out my ears by the time these blokes are done smacking their lips.

RICHARD

Look, what you’ve tried to do here is...

THOMAS

Ambitious.

RICHARD

And I’m sure you crushed plenty quill and blotter to scratch this all out, but you have too much speaking and not enough doing.

Assents from the other actors.

JOHN

Everyone, please, Will is a seasoned writer. He has the Queen’s ear and the King’s men. He knows how to take feedback. We’re all on the same side here.

RICHARD

Fine: you need to show it instead of speak it.

Assents from the other actors.

GEORGE

The other stuff we’ve done: shipwrecks!, teenage sex! This is all talking.

THOMAS

Out of order, too.

Assents from the other actors.

GEORGE

If it was me, I’d take Act V and make that your new Act I. Then we get the whole swordfight first, grabs the audience right away.

JOHN

But that wouldn’t make sense.

GEORGE

Just make it all flashback, action up front, rest of it flashback.

RICHARD

But without all those words.

MARCUS

And my part. Ophelia.

JOHN

...yes?

MARCUS

Should be much bigger.

Groans from the other actors.

JOHN

Alright, everyone, let’s take a break. I’ll write down some leading questions to guide the conversation around areas which need attention.

MARCUS

Listen, Will, you know I don’t like to talk about myself, but this Ophelia, I feel like my internal motivation is in conflict with what you’ve written here.

RICHARD

Just tell him what we’re all thinking.

MARCUS

...I don't think you know how to write female characters.

Assents from the other actors.

MARCUS

Just because Richard here shows up in my room half-naked and crazed I'm going to drown myself? I get the style is absurdist, but trying to seed the consciousness of women through drowning?

THOMAS

She should kill Hamlet.

MARCUS

There we go.

RICHARD

Which Hamlet we talking about? Already-Dead-King-Father Hamlet or listen-to-me-whine-about-it-for-four-hours Hamlet?

MARCUS

What if *I* kill him in the new Act I?

Muttered interest from the other actors.

JOHN

Look, let's respect that our friend and colleague here has been working on this piece for some time. Maybe we talk back to him on things in the play that really stood out to us. That made a positive impact.

GEORGE is scratching out lines in his script.

JOHN

George? What are you doing?

GEORGE

Crossing out stage directions.

JOHN

That's Will's first edition.

GEORGE

‘After which a peal of ordnance is shot off.’ I don’t need to know that do I?

MARCUS

Not if *I’m* the one now pealing ordnance.

GEORGE

‘Exeunt?’ I mean: do I *really* exit?

JOHN

No, you’ve just been stabbed with poison.

GEORGE

Oh, *that’s* convenient. Look, fresh deaders, let’s carry their bloody carcasses *off*...instead of burning them atop a pyre *on*!

RICHARD

Up the stakes, man!

GEORGE

Go like this: curtain rises, bunch of half-naked madmen tossing dead bodies atop a pyre and lighting it up!

THOMAS

‘Dead Hamlets.’

GEORGE

There’s your title.

RICHARD

And we stomp around while Marcus as a sopping wet Ophelia swordfights me as one of the dead Hamlets.

THOMAS

Queen don’t like ghosts, tho.

RICHARD

But they’re Danish ghosts, they don’t count.

GEORGE

My religion prevents me being in a play with ghosts.

MARCUS

Look, I hate talking about myself but I’ve always thought of my inner being as this constant reenactment of the silent power struggle in a society where certain people aren’t allowed to contribute in meaningful ways.

JOHN

Okay?

MARCUS

I think Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are gay.

Surprise from the other actors.

GEORGE

My religion *really* likes being in a play with gay.

RICHARD

The bottom line is this needs a nontraditional venue.

THOMAS

Site-specific.

GEORGE

Maybe out by those ring of stones in Wiltshire.

MARCUS

Maybe devised, Ophelia prompting words to guide the whole fire and swordfight thing.

GEORGE

But these words: friending?...palmy?

RICHARD

You can’t just make up words and expect *the instrument* to make them sing.

MARCUS

‘Ophelia and the Dead Hamlets.’

GEORGE

I mean is this even really a play?

JOHN

ENOUGH!...now look!...you’ve all been very kind to provide your time and talent to reading this. And I get this is raw reaction, but really! Let’s focus on being *con*-structive and not *de*-structive. Alright? I mean, it’s not like we’re sitting here criticizing *you*.

Long pause.

Then the actors stand and begin to hand in their script.

After they hand in their sides they each go to off.

GEORGE

Just trying to help.

RICHARD

It’s not that bad.

MARCUS

We’ll do a workshop.

THOMAS

Ten minute break then?

THOMAS exits, leaving JOHN and WILL.

JOHN

[To WILL] That went rather well, don’t you think?

Blackout.

END OF PLAY.