

## **RSC Podcast #900. “Stick-Figure Hamlet” with Mya Gosling & Kate Pitt**

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AUSTIN: Welcome to the Reduced Shakespeare Company Podcast, now on YouTube! Be sure to turn on the captions below, and thanks for watching.

AUSTIN: Mya, this is a work of love and a passion project that has taken you many months but it is such a glorious achievement – both funnier and far more intelligent and wise and learned and helpful than it needs to be. Thank you for talking with me about it and bringing along your pocket dramaturg Kate Pitt.

MYA GOSLING: Well, obviously I never go anywhere without her. [Music]

AUSTIN: Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, whatever it is wherever you are. I'm Austin Tichenor, co-artistic director of the Reduced Shakespeare Company, and you're listening to this week's Reduced Shakespeare Company Podcast, now in its 18th year, episode 900, Stick Figure Hamlet. [Music]

For this Landmark 900th episode of the Reduced Shakespeare Company Podcast, I'm thrilled to talk to good friend Mya Gosling, the creator of the GoodTickleBrain Shakespeare web comic about her new book “A Stick-Figure Hamlet,” which tells the story of Shakespeare's play in Mya's trademark hand-drawn style but with so many insights and insights and paraphrases and footnotes, it is an epic achievement and already being used by teachers. But is also just a marvelously fun read that made me laugh out loud and I picked up a few things I didn't know. Mya and her pocket dramaturg Kate Pitt chatted with me about how her unreduced magnum opus came to be [Music]

MYA: I was planning for it to be just another sort of collection of the Hamlet Comics I'd already posted to my website but when I sat down with Kate and we started sort of working through all the little extra fun tidbits we wanted to include it became very clear that it was going to be rather more pages than allowed for a folded and half stapled book so we had to shell out the big bucks to get it perfect bound.

AUSTIN: It's it's glorious and what what is can you describe the the madness I'm sorry the passion that drives you to create these stick figure versions of Shakespeare's plays?

MYA: Uh I mean for me it's mostly just wanting other people to see the fun that I see in a particular play because I view Shakespeare as a source of fun I don't really view it as a great source of you know Universal Humanity or something dire like that I I see it as entertainment and fun and light-hearted and I like to share that with people um and so I brought that same sensibility to Hamlet and just told it in a way that I thought was entertaining and clear and brought out all the things I find hilarious about Hamlet. And then when we put the together uh we decided to do that times 10 with all the fun tidbits about Hamlet and about past productions of Hamlet uh and about the history of um behind Hamlet and just kind of crammed it all in there as much as possible.

AUSTIN: Well and I think I know Hamlet pretty well and yet I learned many things about not only the text of Hamlet but various Productions of Hamlet. Um, I didn't know that much about the various versions of Hamlet; it always felt to me like the folio is not the definitive version of the play it's just ALL the versions of the play. How how old is Hamlet? He's ALL the ages because that's how he's been done in all the Productions. How how heavy is he? He's ALL the weight because that's how it's been done. Um Mya did you know all this stuff ahead of time or did you pull Kate Pitt out of your pocket and she told you?

MYA: Uh a mixture for sure. Like, I I was aware of a lot of these things ahead of time for example we have a whole page and ongoing commentary on the fact that there are multiple texts of Hamlet. Uh but working with a pocket dramaturg, which is a luxury that I highly recommend people, um I was able to sort of like dive deeper into that and and get into the weeds and uh really work with Kate on figuring out okay, so what choices are the most prevalent in production? What are the uh implications of making one choice over another? And it was really fun to sort of explore that in more depth.

AUSTIN: Well and to bring Kate, or to DRAG Kate into this conversation, um you are a bit of an expert on on on Hamlet for sure because you have been the dramaturg for not only “Stick-Figure Hamlet,” but for “The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)” formerly titled “Hamlet's Big Adventure (a prequel).” What do you feel about these various impertinences being committed against this play by both myself and Mya?

KATE PITT: They're they're wonderful it's an it's an honor to swim about in the caves that are your brains. Um yeah I mean I I love the way that both of you as artists and creators sort of transform um the subject. I love that in both we ended up having very intense Ophelia conversation. It's an interesting similarity that I can see uh having done both of them, um and yeah it was great to be able to... I think all of us have just so much Shakespeare fun facts and trivia floating around our brains at all times that having a place to put them was very satisfying. And I could trust that I could give Mya 30 pages of fun facts about Hamlet and she would pull out what was interesting and useful and that was really a joy to be able to just sort of data dump and then collaboratively sort of pick through and find out what was useful.

AUSTIN: Well useful, and I also love the word “fun” because Mya that absolutely comes off the page: your sense of fun about the play. Because I can imagine I can...well I'm reading it with a certain sense of familiarity with the play and I'm delighting in all the jokes...but I can imagine... and and the fun facts I didn't know...but I can imagine a high school kid or a middle school kid being forced to read Hamlet or a college kid being forced to read Hamlet for the first time finding this extremely useful as not only a paraphrase of each scene but with some actual quotes, but as a way of demystifying the conversation around this play and taking not only the play but the CONVERSATIONS about the play off their hifalutin pedestals.

MYA: Yeah and I'd say that's definitely something that uh is in the back of my mind when I'm putting together uh these books because the the core of it is my own retelling of the play and that's usually done in my language but I try and include as many direct quotes as possible to tie it back into the original text so you can see, okay this is a line that's important or it's a line that's famous and stands out sort of like an anchor. Um but all the extra material that I've put in there — and it's about almost 50% extra material at this point — um I really like the idea of someone who's maybe not as familiar with Hamlet as uh I am sitting down with this and and getting this kind of cool behind the scenes look at the play. Like it's not exactly what you see when you see it performed, it's not necessarily all the stuff that you will learn if you study in high school or college, uh it's just like some extra nitty-gritty nerdiness behind the scenes stuff which has always appealed to me. Because I'll see a play and and then I'll find out a cool fact about um you know what maybe influenced it or what's often been done with it and I just I think those are the the really cool things that help me feel more connected to the material somehow. And also I think with a play like Hamlet, which is you know so up on a pedestal, um, one of the themes that Kate and I kept returning to is like there's no correct answer. And I feel like that's a really important point to hammer home with anybody who's studying Hamlet or engaging with Hamlet for the first time. It's like there is no definitive Hamlet, there is no correct answer to choices that you make in the play itself, there's no correct answer to what text you use, and I I love this idea of really pushing the fact that in Shakespeare in general there is no

correct answer and the idea of there being a definitive Shakespeare ANYTHING is just um anathema to me and and what I believe in.

AUSTIN: I love that because it it it reminds us all that these plays are PLAYS and they need to be seen up on their feet, ideally more than read. Um I remember saying, I remember reading that some people didn't like Denzel Washington's Macbeth because it wasn't Shakespeare's Macbeth and I am in agreement with you. There is no such thing as Shakespeare's Macbeth or Shakespeare's Hamlet UNTIL an actor gets on his feet and starts to play it. THAT'S Shakespeare's Macbeth, however it comes out.

MYA: Yeah and I think that's where sort of working with Kate was really helpful because I have the experience of the productions of Hamlet I've seen over my life, you know — some dozen or 16 — uh but Kate uh really has the knowledge and the resource to dig deep and look at you know you know Victorian era Productions, uh you know restoration era Productions and like combing through all the material we have on production history of Hamlet and sort of synthesize. Like, okay, this choice was made during this time period, this was the popular way to stage this scene, and just pull together all this cool production history stuff that I was able to draw on and really sort of make my case of, like, these are all choices but nothing is definitive.

AUSTIN: Well Mya, you come to Shakespeare I believe as a fan. Um and and but Kate, do you, did you first come as a fan or do you come to Shakespeare as a as a an scholar a scholar and academic?

KATE: Absolutely as a fan. Yeah, um uh yes, I'm not a scholar or an academic. I'm someone who really loves Shakespeare. Um and to Mya's point about uh sort of the Theater history, I was delighted by the number of truly bonkers 19th Century Theater anecdotes she let me sneak into this version of Hamlet. Because it's my favorite period, the period I studied in school and it's completely insane! Like, someone threw half a sheep on stage in the middle of Hamlet! That's in the book. Uh someone couldn't find a skull and used a turnip instead and then it fell from their hands and fell into the foot lights and caught on fire. Crazy things happened during the productions of this play um and they make me so happy. So I'm delighted that Austin you learned something new in [unintelligible] and I'm grateful to Mya that she let me include so many wonderful tidbits of truly insane Theater history into this.

MYA: I was I was never going to leave out leave out the burning turnip.

[Music]

Hi, I'm Lawrence O'Donnell and you're listening to the Reduced Shakespeare Company Podcast.

[Music]

AUSTIN: Where can you RS-see the RSC? We'll be performing "The Complete History of Comedy (abridged)" this month at Hillsdale College and the Dogwood Center for the Performing Arts in Michigan on March 21st and 23rd, and the American Theater in Hampton Virginia on April 12th and the Hylton Performing Art Center in Fairfax Virginia on April 13th 2024. Check out the touring page at our website [reducedshakespeare.com](http://reducedshakespeare.com) or our social media Pages for venue and ticket information. And now back to my conversation with Mya Gosling and her pocket dramaturg Kate Pitt talking about Mya's new epic, "A Stick Figure Hamlet."

[Music]

AUSTIN: Is Hamlet a great play or just an influential play?

KATE: A great play.

AUSTIN: Great in the sense of large or great in the sense of really wonderful?

KATE: Both.

MYA: I mean the the the Trap I think you fall in with Hamlet and with other like Shakespeare the ones that everybody knows like Romeo and Juliet, is they're done so often and they're you know referred to so often and they're just everywhere and at some point um certainly with me and Romeo and Juliet I got to a point where I was just like this is not I don't really like this play anymore. And then I sat down and I I I did a adaptation of it myself I was like you know what actually this is kind of a good play. It's got a lot of good stuff in it. And I feel like definitely with Hamlet, it was not actually a play that really interested me very much. It was you know I was like, a guy whining for 4 hours or something. Um but when I sat down and and worked through it and adapted it in Stick Figure form, I really I did gain an appreciation for it and I think it's an appreciation that you lose with over familiarity sometimes. And just being able to go back to the text and like look at it and read it and think okay what's what's saying here like what what is the language like and I I I feel like that kind of Engagement with it sort of freshens my perspective and it makes me less jaded uh about it. Because I think you can't do an adaptation like this about a play um until you really stop and try and see it with fresh eyes and that definitely helps.

AUSTIN: I struggle with the question because it is one of those play, Hamlet is one of those plays that that is so hard to successfully realize because there are so so many different aspects to it. I've seen more completely successful Productions of Pericles than I have of Hamlet and I'm not sure what that says about the greatness of either of those two plays but nobody's arguing that Pericles is a great play.

KATE: I think Pericles is a wonderful play.

AUSTIN: Great.

MYA: It's it's bonkers but it has some fantastically beautiful stuff in it.

AUSTIN: I came out of the production in 1989 with Nigel Terry playing the title role of Pericles at the Swan in Stratford upon Avon, came walking out going, "Why do we not all understand that Pericles is the greatest of Shakespeare's plays?" It was such a great production!

MYA: And I mean I think that's the really fun thing about any Shakespeare, and Hamlet particularly, is just the range that you can have with the characters. So I saw a Hamlet a year ago, two years ago now, um which had like one of the most sympathetic Poloniuses I've ever seen, where you got the sense that he was this caring but hassled father and he was just trying to do the right thing and he was kind of overwhelmed by the situation in which he found himself in. And he was making the bad choices but for the right reasons. And it was you know one of the first times I was like, oh Polonius he's just he's just a dad trying to do what he thinks is best for people. Um and yeah usually I I'm annoyed by Polonius, he's played this kind of like a blustering comic relief and I never kind of connect with him but in this production I did. And I think that's the fun thing is you can really push all the characters into shapes where you don't connect or shapes where you do and and and every single production you see is going to have a different take on that. So even plays that I've written off that I'm not interested in really seeing again — like Timon of Athens — I will go and see it again because there's always this chance that this is gonna be the production that blows the whole play open for me.

KATE: Yeah. And that feels that gets to your point, Austin, about Pericles almost has the opportunity to be surprising and excellent because as an audience member I go in with very few expectations.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KATE: I don't know if that character is supposed to be a bad guy or supposed to be a doddering old fool, there's the option that they can be anything. Whereas every time I go into Hamlet, I have in my head, oh Polonius IS a doddering old fool so every director has to make a choice to play into the audience's expectations.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KATE: Or like, make him a Machiavel. That would be a really interesting choice but because the audience comes in with so much baggage...

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KATE: ...every production consciously has to lean in or lean away or stand in the middle of what the audience comes into in a way that with Pericles they don't. And that's that's part of what's great about Hamlet and what's great about the comic form and that in the outtakes we could say okay we've made this choice in the text we've chosen "sullied," or "sallied," or something else, but here's the way to show to show the working, to show what it could be in a way that you can't necessarily do in theater where you have to set, you have to make one choice in the staging and then you commit to it it'll be different every night but there's one choice in the staging — you see the ghost or you don't — but the comic allows all the options to be presented which is exciting.

AUSTIN: All right, so final question. Um what was your what who's your favorite Hamlet that you've ever seen? And I'm not asking for, I'm not asking to for you to pick me. Who is your favorite Hamlet you've ever seen in production and why?

MYA: So I managed to see Paul Gross's Hamlet at the Stratford Festival back in I think 2000 and that was before I'd seen Slings and Arrows or knew who Paul gross was. So I I knew he was like oh he like this TV star and whatever. Um but I I I enjoyed his Hamlet in a way that I hadn't really connected with other Hamlets before. I think it was, there was the sort of like confused vulnerability uh about his portrayal um which was very appealing and and it was a more appealing Hamlet I think than a lot of them that I'd seen. Because a lot of times I do get very very annoyed with Hamlet um and I just I I don't really care. But but his his one managed to be particularly vulnerable in a way that I responded well to. So that that off the top of my head that might be one of my top Hamlets.

KATE: I don't have a favorite Hamlet that I've seen live. Um I do love the film if you can find it of the Andrew Scott Hamlet. I think he sort of manages to be transparent with the text in a really really beautiful way. Um, I think I've talked about before on this podcast, I've seen Jude Law when I was in high school, it was like a formative experience but also because he was hot and Jude Law and looked like a blonde God. So when he said "no more like my father than I to Hercules," I was like that doesn't make any sense! Um so I've seen interesting Hamlets but I haven't I haven't seen one one live that I absolutely adored. But I look forward to doing so.

MYA: The interesting thing about Andrew Scott is is this very sort of un-Shakespearean delivery but you do get the sense that he is completely trying to figure out what to do next in his own head. And like I think he takes it to extremes, like trying to like catch the words out of the air and put things together, so he really pushes that boundary. But from the bits that I've seen, it

really does feel like oh he is just putting this together in his head right now and and saying it in a way that a lot of...I think that's a hard thing to achieve with Shakespeare, and I he does that the best. And you know you can argue and that that's not always the most effective way to do it, and it does mess up the language a bit uh in ways that I don't necessarily like, but as far as like someone who's completely confused and overwhelmed with the situation trying to figure out what's going on and articulate it I think it's a really good performance that way.

[Music]

AUSTIN: That's it for this week's Reduced Shakespeare Company Podcast except for one more thing which I'll share with you in about 60 seconds so stick around. Mya Gosling's "A Stick Figure Hamlet," is both a must-read and a great gift, and is on sale online now. Go to GoodTickleBrain.com for more information. Then send us your comic reinterpretations via email to [feedback@reducedshakespeare.com](mailto:feedback@reducedshakespeare.com) or throw a comment to us over on the socials or on our own actual website [reducedshakespeare.com](http://reducedshakespeare.com), or visit my website [theshakespeareance.com](http://theshakespeareance.com). You can also follow Mya Gosling on all the socials @GoodTickleBrain.

Thanks as always to befuddled old Machiavel Matthew Croke. Web services by GingerPower Ltd. Music by John Weber and Garageband.

Our random fan shout-out this week goes to Pam O'Shea Wing...no reason, it's just random.

Special thanks to MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell.

And, as always, thanks very much to you for listening. I'm Austin Tichenor, 900/2700ths of the Reduced Shakespeare Company.

[Music]

AUSTIN: The the thing that also struck me about it is is is — Forget about the drawing and the and the writing and the — the FORMATTING, the making it fit, that's a HUGE amount of work!

MYA: Yeah I'm glad you recognize that! That's like the most amount of work, yes.

KATE: The the back matter is so dense!

AUSTIN: Baby got back matter?

KATE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: This podcast is a production of the Reduced Shakespeare Company. Reducing expectations since 1981. Go to [reducedshakespeare.com](http://reducedshakespeare.com) for performance dates, actor bios, email newsletters, and so much less. ["so much less" echoes four or five times and fades away]