

SCENE FROM
WOMEN PLAYING HAMLET
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 (2W)

JESSICA - An actress, attractive, quirky, smart

GWEN - An acting coach)

LOCATION – A Stage

(GWEN enters.)

GWEN

The best-known thirty-three lines in the history of theatre - Take it again. This time without hyperbolics. As *Stella Adler* said, the play's not words, the play is you! Ready? I shall cue you. King Claudius says, "The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art is not more ugly to the thing that helps it than is my deed to my most painted word. O heavy burden!" And Polonius answers, "I hear *her* coming; let's withdraw, my lord." Go.

(GWEN takes a seat in the audience. JESSICA enters with a little black book. She slowly crosses center.)

JESSICA

"To be--!"

(JESSICA takes a dramatic pause.)

GWEN

"Or not to be." That's rather obvious isn't it?

JESSICA
(Quickly, pissed)

"Or not to be."

GWEN

Why such a long pause?

JESSICA

I'm being dramatic.

GWEN

Paraphrase the pause and begin again!

(JESSICA resets.)

JESSICA
 “To be (*she quickly adds*) Or-not-to-be. That is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows--.”

GWEN
 Stop! Hamlet is not a ham! Again!

(JESSICA resets.)

JESSICA
 To be (*quickly*) Or-not-to-be--.

GWEN
 I don't understand – what are you doing?

JESSICA
 I'm trying to play all the emotions.

GWEN
 All what emotions?

JESSICA
 I've analyzed the text. In these thirty-three lines there are fifty-two emotions. I've worked it all out.

GWEN
 Fifty-two?

JESSICA
 Watch...

(JESSICA pulls from her pocket a long checklist of emotions.)

JESSICA
 (*Quickly acting each emotion*)
Uncertainty - “To be, or not to be--that is the question.” *Indignation* - “Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” *Introspection* - “Or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them.” *Resignation* – “To die, to sleep no more.” *Realization mixed with resignation mixed with disappointment mixed with reflection* - “And by a sleep to say we end the heartache--.”

GWEN
 Stop!

JESSICA
 What?

(GWEN walks back up on stage.)

GWEN
 In all my years coaching I've never seen anyone who was...

JESSICA
(*Hopeful*)

Yes--?

GWEN
So completely and utterly unprepared to play Hamlet!

JESSICA
I--.

GWEN
Wait, I have more. Not only can you not play Hamlet, but it's entirely possible that your children will lack the emotional depth needed. You lack even the DNA to play the role!

JESSICA
This isn't easy I could use a little encouragement.

GWEN
Lesson over.

(GWEN gathers her things to leave.)

JESSICA
(*Dropping pretension*)
You know, maybe, just maybe, it's not me that's the problem - But the play.

GWEN
Excuse me?

JESSICA
It's just a simple revenge plot - Hardly original. Revenge was a popular theme that season and Shakespeare needed a script quick so he plagiarized another playwright's play.

GWEN
Creative adaptation is the seed of genius!

JESSICA
He even wrote so fast he made mistakes.

GWEN
Mistakes? In Hamlet?

JESSICA
Hamlet declares that death is an "undiscovered country"¹ from which no traveler returns - Yet just moments earlier he has a conversation with the ghost of his father.

GWEN
So?

¹ *Hamlet* – Act III, Scene i

JESSICA

Obviously someone returned!

GWEN

The ghost is in a parallel ethosphere between life and death--.

JESSICA

Early in the play Horatio states that Hamlet was *at* the battle where his father killed Fortinbras's father, the King of Norway – Yet, late in the play the gravedigger says that Hamlet was born at the castle that *very same day*.²

GWEN

Your point?

JESSICA

It's a mistake.

GWEN

It is an abstractual³ element--.

JESSICA

And what are all these Latinized names about? Claudius, Francisco, Marcellus? It's Denmark! You'd think he'd throw in a few Lindströms or Johannessens!

GWEN

This borders on sacrilege--.

JESSICA

And it's way-way-way too long - Twenty-nine thousand, five hundred, and fifty-one words!

GWEN

Shakespeare never blotted a line!⁴

JESSICA

No shit! What was he, paid by the word? My *sophomore* year in college I played Ophelia in an uncut version. Had to drop out of the play at the top of act five cause I had to go graduate.

GWEN

Repeat after me - Hamlet is the Mona Lisa of literature and Shakespeare the Leonardo of playwrights! Say it or I shall not return!

JESSICA

(Reluctantly)

Hamlet is the Mona Lisa of literature and Shakespeare... Blah blah blah.

GWEN

He was a genius! Say it!

² Compare statements made in *Hamlet* Act I Scene i and Act V, Scene i

³ This is not a word but that doesn't stop her. Shakespeare made up words so does Gwen

⁴ Quoting Ben Jonson

He was a genius.

JESSICA

Good.

GWEN

A genius who mixed dazzling verbal brilliance with idiotic puns and sophomoric fart jokes!

JESSICA

My God! Does your generation believe anything is holy?

GWEN

I agree with Tolstoy who felt that Hamlet was nothing more than a thin plotline that Shakespeare manipulated in order to pontificate.

JESSICA

And where did you read this? Wikipedia?

GWEN

...No. It was... It was...

JESSICA

It was Wikipedia wasn't it?

GWEN

...And other creditable sources.

JESSICA

Goodbye.

GWEN

Wait. I beat out dozens of other actors, through a process of four auditions, over a two-week period to make the final callback! And I got the role! I have the DNA!

JESSICA

I shall give you one last chance. But only one. Tell me, where is Hamlet emotionally at this moment in the play?

GWEN

She's... Alone.

JESSICA

Doesn't she know that King Claudius and Polonius are spying on her?

GWEN

She does, but she's still alone.

JESSICA

Not just alone. She's incommunicado with her soul. Have you ever been incommunicado with your soul?

GWEN

Like... lots.

JESSICA

When?

GWEN

I... I was stuck in an elevator at the Equity office once--.

JESSICA

Oh for God sakes--.

GWEN

For nearly fifteen minutes - There was this other actor there but he didn't say much.

JESSICA

I'm talking *alone* - Standing on the far edge of a virgin forest, in the middle of winter at three in the morning with no tracks in the snowflakes round you. Alone with your frozen breath. With only your passions and thoughts and stillness to keep you company.

GWEN

I've been alone.

JESSICA

In that case you can make it snow.

GWEN

...Excuse me?

JESSICA

Make snow!

GWEN

I don't understand... Like, inside?

JESSICA

Yes.

GWEN

Let me get this straight. You want my performance to change the atmospheric conditions with in this theatre so that it starts snowing.

JESSICA

At this moment in the play Hamlet finds her authentic, perishable "self." She, like all women, is trapped in a life-long masquerade where she is all things to all men, but never her "self" except when she's alone. When one reaches that rare moment of self-realization the only thing that can happen is snow.

GWEN

I don't know how to tell you this, but the chance of that happening is pretty small.

JESSICA

I will give you one last try. I shall cue you. Make snow!

GWEN

Make snow. Right.

JESSICA
(Exasperated, under her breath)

GWEN

“The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plastering art, blah-blah-blah, O heavy burden!” “I hear him coming. Let’s withdraw, my lord.”

JESSICA

To be...!

GWEN

Lesson over!

JESSICA

Gwen, you can’t--. You can’t leave!

GWEN

What do you want?

JESSICA

I want the key!

GWEN

Key?

JESSICA

To playing Hamlet! It’s as if Shakespeare leaves Hamlet still in the box, assembly required.

GWEN

Hamlet comes fully assembled from the very first line. Shakespeare doesn’t assemble Hamlet.

JESSICA

Who does?

GWEN

The actor playing Hamlet assembles Hamlet!

(Frustrated, JESSICA sits.)

JESSICA
(*To herself*)

Why am I doing this?

(GWEN sits beside her.)

GWEN
(*Tenderly*)

It’s not you Jessica, it’s your age. I mean no animosity, it’s just a simple statement of fact, you and your hyper-linked friends will be the first generation in four hundred years who will not get Hamlet. Because you travel light - light on philosophy, light on self. And thus you will forgo the great roles and the existential angst that comes with. Instead you will accept Prozac over Plato, Nicorette over Nietzsche, tranquilizers over tragedy. And thus you will never know snow.