

## **The Soul of Wit (Hamlet:remix)**

This piece grew out of years of mulling over my experiences and those of my friends, in mental hospitals during the nineteen-sixties and seventies – the banner years for drug induced psychosis. I included bits of these scenes in a few screenplays that were never produced, but the ideas stuck with me over the years.

When I started experimenting with computers in the early eighties, I discovered Prof. Hugh Kenner's ingenious program called Travesty, which produced nonsense from an input text, but retained the sound patterns and letter grouping frequency of the original, in effect preserving the style without the substance. After running my own writing through Travesty, I naturally tried it on Shakespeare, who wouldn't? The result was hilarious – random words and phrases that only occasionally resolved into coherence, but still sounded like the flowing lines of the Bard. This too stuck in my head for years.

When I moved to Ottawa in 2005 and got a video production grant on the basis of a very sketchy proposal about "Shakespeare and Mental Hospitals" I suddenly had to figure out what I was really going to do. This added a third item to the mix: the City of Ottawa. What actors? What location? What crew? What was available here? I had no idea. Thanks to the assistance of the wonderful people at the SAW Video Artist-Run Centre, and others, I was able to answer all these questions and produce the video, whatever it has turned out to be.

Once I had a cast (mostly from the local improv group, The Black Sheep Theatre), a crew (mostly from the SAW Video Youth Training Program ... and my family), and a location, St. Paul University, we began rehearsals. The actors were all familiar with "Hamlet" some having played it. I showed them documentaries about schizophrenia, particularly a film called "Asylum" which depicts a community of patients in the 70s under the supervision of Dr. R.D. Laing.

As I rehearsed and even after shooting began, I felt more and more that the piece should be an interpretation of Shakespeare's characters rather than a collection of mental patients spouting iambic gibberish. I correlated the acting styles of my cast with the most appropriate type of schizophrenia and then with what seemed to me the likely character from the play. Thus: catatonic Ophelia, paranoid Hamlet, and hebephrenic Polonius. I added the ghost of Hamlet's father as an auditory hallucination, resurrected Yorick from the grave for some derogatory jesting (after I discovered the acting talents of my soundman, Hussein), and I simulated the experience of madness by editing everything in what I call nested points-of-view, starting inside Ophelia's mind, but shifting from one madman to another over synesthetic links. And so... it's Hamlet: remixed. Oh yeah, and don't take the character names in the credits too literally – they're mostly private jokes.