

VIDEO: Review: Lab Theater serves up superb trimmed-down 'Hamlet'

Minimalist production lifts heart of Shakespeare's story - and finds humor in unexpected places

By CHRIS SILK

Friday, April 8, 2011

FORT MYERS — "To be, or not to be." The Lab Theater answers that question from "Hamlet" with a resounding "right here" during their vigorous, action-packed adaptation of William Shakespeare's masterpiece, playing through April 16 in Fort Myers.

The sprawling plot revolves around a prince of Denmark who takes revenge after his uncle Claudius gains the throne by murdering his brother (Hamlet's father) and marrying Hamlet's mother. Scholars date the show to about 1600.

"Hamlet," the longest of Shakespeare's works, can clock in at more than four hours. Director Annette Trossbach trims this show to about two and change. She also dresses her cast in modern clothing, gives the moody Ophelia a cell phone and sets the action on a bare stage with minimal props and rippling, blood-red fabric waving in the wings.

Trossbach's interpretation casts off the mustiness sometimes associated with Shakespeare, invites listeners to appreciate the energy - and most of all, makes the work accessible. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (dressed in ski togs!) come and go - and the essential plot remains, but great swathes of dense verbiage (and the Norwegians) go flying out the window.

One of her trademark touches - staging conversations as verbal battles - surfaces here. Trossbach gives the show a physical feel that adds layers of meaning. Likewise, modernizing offers moments of levity, such as when a young Laertes (an electric Connor Zerilla, clad in skinny jeans and a preppy pullover) leaves for France - and Ophelia (a magnificent Goth-inspired Stella Ruiz) opens his backpack to find condoms - which she then flings across the stage to hoots of laughter.

Doug Landin's Hamlet - barefoot in denim and half-unbuttoned black shirt - casts off the "melancholy Dane" moniker for an active, quirky portrait of the titular prince.

Landin's singular presence drives the show forward with the speed of a freight train. His Hamlet feels so vital, so alive that you almost never grasp the fact that the unhinged Hamlet goes around seeing ghosts and killing people.

By slicing away Shakespeare's tendency to deal with things in multiples of three, what's left resembles a spicy revenge tale. Likewise, with the weighty exposition lifted, insights on characters heretofore pushed into the background bloom like arboreal flowers in the aftermath of a forest giant's felling.

High atop that list lie Polonius (Dale Hoover) and Horatio (Timothy Clark). Clark's Horatio - Hamlet's only loyal friend - emerges from the shadows in a brooding performance that underscores the value of his honest presence. Hoover creates the very definition of "dithering" as he (intentionally) stumbles over words as the bumbling Lord Chamberlain. Neither a fool nor a fop, Hoover opens up an interpretation on Polonius as something of a clever, underhanded schemer.

If there is a fault to the approach, the argument could be made that there's nothing left but sizzle, with some of the depth and complexity lost. The production as it stands is eminently watchable, exciting and quite funny - but it might feel like the non-fat, no-whip, half-caff skinny vanilla latte version to Shakespeare purists (not that I'm one). On the whole though - I'd rather understand what's going on and enjoy myself than stifle yawns and adhere to tradition for the sake of a numb backside.

This is like no "Hamlet" you've ever seen before. From gravediggers to Guildenstern, the play has been taken apart, made accessible (and interesting) to audiences and put back together again. There are some still some speeches - but they're over quickly. In addition to Landin, look for Elliott Ashton and Abraham de la Rosa as a Tweedledee/Tweedledum take on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Joann Haley's brittle Gertrude, the gravedigger sequence and the astonishingly funny play-within-a-play sequence. Two words: Coconut bra.

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