

The Melancholy Dane & Co.

Terry Teachout, *The Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2010



The best way to savor the eggheaded delights of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the 1966 play in which Tom Stoppard takes two minor characters from *Hamlet*, puts them at center stage and spins an inky-black comedy of existential dread out of their rising befuddlement, is to see it



immediately after a performance of Shakespeare's play. No matter how well you think you know the familiar tale of the melancholy Dane and his murderously dysfunctional family, you'll enjoy Stoppard's subtler references all the more for having just revisited the most frequently performed play of all time. To this end, I suggest that snow-weary Northerners hop the next plane to Orlando, where two different companies are putting on productions of *Hamlet* and *R & G* that can be seen on consecutive days or in close succession. If you've had it up to here with the weather, I can't think of a better means of altering your mood.

The Orlando Shakespeare Theater's "Hamlet" looks on paper like a standard-issue high-concept production, transplanted from ancient Denmark to

Victorian England. But Richard Width and Bob Phillips, the director and set designer, respectively, have stirred in a cupful of spooky horror-show populism, pumping the stage full of mist and making eye-catching use of a strategically positioned trapdoor. One



might almost be watching an unusually literate vampire flick aimed at a youthful audience, an impression reinforced by Avery Clark's flamboyantly physical performance of the title role. Mr. Clark is supported by a finely spoken cast—I especially liked Marni Penning as Ophelia, **Steve Hendrickson as Polonius** and Eric Zivot as Claudius—and by the sound design of Matthew Given, who has mashed up

Brahms, Dvořák, Debussy and Arvo Pärt into a sumptuous sonic backdrop.

All this makes for one of the most theatrically potent "Hamlets" I've seen in a good many seasons, far fresher than last year's Jude Law-powered Broadway production and, I suspect, more accessible to boot. **I**



brought along two friends who'd never seen "Hamlet" and knew nothing about the play beyond the barest of basics. Both found it exciting, absorbing and—most important—intelligible.