

Hamlet" is an exciting, riveting production

Paul Castenada, The Ledger, February 1, 2010

Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is one of his most often produced, most recognizable, most quoted and best loved works. Expectations can often exceed reality, which is often the case when the audience (and critics) comes in with pre-conceived ideas of what they're about to see and how it should be presented.

I've shied away from the tragedy of the young Prince after one too many disappointments at the theater – often due to cuts made to bring the four hour-plus epic down to a more manageable length for modern theater goers. But directorial choices and interpretations by actors have also led to letdowns, too.

Well, we can all breathe easier. "Hamlet," as produced by the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre, delivers an entertaining, moving and worthy production of this classic.

The storyline -- almost a part of our collective consciousness at this point -- follows the murder of a king, the ill-fated marriage of his widow to his brother and the revenge taken by the king's tormented son, young Prince Hamlet. In this adaptation, which comes in at about three hours (including the two intermissions), all of the crucial plot elements and character development is left in place, and one never feels a sense of loss at something left out in the editing process. Director Richard Width has chosen to set the play in the late 19th century in an attempt to mine the transitory nature of the age and forge a connection with the same sense of "ground moving under your feet" and things not being as they seem that the characters themselves are experiencing. That goal is achieved head on and seems to inform many of the finer performances in the piece.



As we follow the plot unfolding before us, you can't ignore questions of motivation, relationships and actions that seem to define the interrelationships between all the characters -- save Hamlet's with Horatio. Time and again, we are asked by the playwright, director and actors to



with Marni Penning

look beyond the surface value of what's occurring to see the possible machinations and impetus pushing the characters forward, both for ill and good. No central character presented seems capable of being cast as totally good or evil, black or white; some seem to live to dance in shades of grey.

Poor, tortured Prince Hamlet, having returned home to grieve a father, is forced to look on as the marriage of his mother to his uncle is celebrated and a new king presides over his late father's dominion. Already pushed emotionally beyond what he can take, he's visited by his father's ghost, who reveals a treacherous murder at his brother's hands and demands that revenge be extracted. Over the course of the remaining three acts, we watch as Hamlet struggles to deal with his emotional devastation, confirm what the spirit has informed him of, disengage with a budding romance with Ophelia and bring revenge to the fore.

The titular Hamlet has often been the cause of presentations of the tragedy that fall well short of the



with Avery Clark

mark. Too often, directorial and actor interpretations have left the character too controlled, too disconsolate, too cerebral or a jumbled (and many times incomprehensible) mixture of all of these -- and more. In addition, choices in presentation have in many instances created an unnecessary distance between audience and protagonist.

Happily, nothing could be farther from the case here. Avery Clark, in his debut season at the Shakes, delivers a rousing and exceptional take on the legendary character. Believably walking the tightrope between madness (real and feigned), shrewd scheming, sense of duty, contemplations of suicide and loss of love, Clark owns the role and the stage. Through choices made in line delivery, movement and a wonderfully expressive face and eyes, Clark reels the audience in and never lets us go until he breathes his last on stage. If the goal as an actor is to be believed, to transport us into another place/time and to make us feel and experience, then Clark delivers on every count. He creates the freshest take on the Danish prince that I can remember. He is truly Hamlet unbound and liberated to become the three dimensional, full character Shakespeare surely intended him to be. In particular, his rendition of the famed "to be or not to be" soliloquy is the most moving and wrenching I have experienced. I, for one, cannot wait to see what he brings to the stage next.

Also worthy of special note are Johnny Lee Davenport and Steve Hendrickson. Davenport, portraying several parts including the ghost of King Hamlet, is a force on the stage one can't look away from. Beautifully haunting on a personal and grander level as the ghost, Davenport opens the door to his broken heart and enraged soul in a way I'd not seen in previous interpretations. As the player king and the grave digger, he again delivers nuances lost to many thespians that I've seen precede him. Hendrickson, for his part, takes a role, Polonius, that is too often underplayed and handled as an adjunct and delivers a memorable performance shaded with subtlety.

Hendrickson's Polonius comes across as a caring father, loyal subject and contrite elder; one believes the conflicts within and the reasoning behind his choices, even as they are shown to be faulty.

Eric Zivot delivers a workmanlike performance as King Claudius. Never too high or too low, Zivot seems to aim for the middle way. Unfortunately, this leaves him at times to be a less than adequate foil for Clark's Hamlet. As Queen Gertrude, Anne Herring presents an adequate characterization that sees its zenith in the confrontation with Hamlet that precedes the accidental murder of Polonius. Marni Penning, here delivering Ophelia, shines in portraying the madness that results at her father's death, but leaves one wanting more in the intended emotional chess playing in scenes with Hamlet.

The set, sound and lighting created here ably assist in



with Stafford Clark-Price

drawing the audience in and transporting us to 1890s Denmark. In addition, a couple of "gee whiz" special effect flairs definitely enliven the production. Costuming is appropriate and adequate, although one longs to see Ophelia in something that would help demonstrate the physical aspect of Hamlet's attraction.

Directorially, Width does a good job of staging the action and evoking strong performances from some actors and nothing less than adequate from the group as a whole. Also, as previously mentioned his choice of time period helps the overall thematic arc of the plot and characterizations. On the flip side, I was left wondering what happened to latent oedipal themes of the closet scene so often connected with the work; perhaps this was a directorial choice and if so, one that left me lacking. In addition, the final swordplay between Hamlet and Laertes seemed poorly constructed and lacking the energy one assumes would be present, given the stakes.

Orlando Shakespeare Theatre's Hamlet delivers the classic tale of the tragic young prince in a rendition sure to be enjoyed, **particularly in the performances of Clark, Davenport and Hendrickson.** Do yourselves a favor and take in The Bard's classic again. You will not be disappointed.