

Students see 'Hamlet' as Shakespeare intended

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Last summer, Philly's theater scene suffered a significant hit when the Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre suspended its mainstage productions after its 20th season, citing spiraling costs and lack of donor support.

The company, which had mounted some of the best-received productions of Shakespeare in the region, didn't disappear:

It went to school.

This month, the company brought a streamlined, minimalist 90-minute production of *Hamlet* to 25 public, private, and parochial schools in the region. The tour will be followed May 10 with a public performance of the abridged production at the Free Library of Philadelphia.

"We offered a tour several years ago, and it was so popular schools have been asking for us to bring it back ever since," said Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre founder and artistic director Carmen Khan.

The tour, Khan said, is part of Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's renewed commitment to develop and expand its educational programs.

For schools aiming for more, the company offers a residency program in which Shakespearean actors work directly with high school English classes.

Khan feels she's found a great way for the company to stay sharp, relevant — and alive — as it continues to raise financing for a new venue for its mainstage productions.

Khan's take on *Hamlet* has been a big help for teachers faced with the sometimes daunting task of bringing Shakespeare alive and in full color for their students.

"When you try to bring Shakespeare to your students in 2017, you're initially going to be met with groans," said Emily Brady, who teaches English and Italian at Lansdale Catholic High School in Lansdale. "Students see Shakespeare as a chore, as something that has to be done rather as something they get to do."

That all changed when Khan and her players came to the school.

"Students get over that initial intimidation of the text when they're able to see the play take shape, live, in front of them," Brady said. "They realize it's actually very accessible. And that it's not completely out of the realm of what they deal with on a day-to-day basis in their lives."

Added Brady, "*Hamlet* especially is full of the kinds of things teenagers engage with every day."

Sheryl Forste-Grupp, who



Jenna Kuerzl plays Ophelia and Josh Kuchrycz is Hamlet in Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's "*Hamlet*." PHOTO: WENDY COLE

teaches at the Baldwin School in Bryn Mawr, said the performance is a valuable reminder that "Shakespeare wasn't meant to be read ... but performed."

Students, she said, have trouble with Shakespeare because

they are forced to read the plays "as if they are novels. And they are nothing like novels."

Forste-Grupp, who has taught high school English for 18 years, has also participated in Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's resi-

dency program: "The actors aren't teaching the plays as texts. They get the students out of their chairs ... and have them imagine what it would be like to play a particular character. What it would be like to make their facial gestures, to walk the way they walk."

Several teachers said they were worried the low-tech presentation of *Hamlet* might not go down so well with a teen audience whose idea of storytelling comes from megamillion-dollar Hollywood blockbusters. They were pleasantly surprised by their students' receptivity.

Their anxiety was shared by some of the actors, said William LaDent. He played two roles in *Hamlet*: the ghost of Hamlet's father, and Hamlet's uncle Claudius.

"There was a little sniggering," LaDent said, "when [the students] saw we were using colored scarves for blood."

By the end of the performance, however, the students were utterly absorbed.

"I was surprised in a good way by the questions they asked in the discussion period," he said. "It was clear they really understood the play and had been paying attention."