

Rarities of Nature's Truth

4-29-11: Hamlet (Philly Shakes)

29/04/2011

Okay, so obviously my intention to blog the Sonnets this year has kind of petered out. However, last night I attended the [Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's production of *Hamlet*](#), and my while my girlfriend and I were discussing it afterward, she suggested I write and post about it, and that I turn this blog towards more generalized Shakespeare coverage– not just the Sonnets but whatever kind of Shakespeare Shit comes my way. My girlfriend has good ideas.

So, *Hamlet*. Interestingly, it's been exactly five years– to the day– since I attended my first full *Hamlet*– a South African production visiting Stratford-upon-Avon. I've witnessed a lot of different interpretations: *Hamlet* in a Horror House with hard rock music accompaniment; *Hamlet* performed by a cast of international students, including an Australian Claudius, a French Gertrude, and a Russian Prince of Denmark; a two-man Zimbabwean *Hamlet* half in English, half in Shona; the Royal National Theatre's multi-award-winning *Hamlet*... and that's all in the last year–go further back and I can count the modern-dance, silent *Hamlet*, the tiny ninja action figure *Hamlet*... But back to Philly Shakes. This *Hamlet*'s Big Idea was to feature a female Dane. I knew that coming in, but I didn't know the actress, Mary Tuomanen, is also playing Rosalind in PST's other offering this season, *As You Like It*. Doubling these two roles–written at roughly the same time– makes for a neat exploration of the characters, and a nifty poster to boot!



Interestingly, director Carmen Khan seems uninterested in commenting heavily on her creative casting, at least in the *Hamlet* half of the repertoire. Tuomanen plays Hamlet as a man, with no attempt to emphasize or ironize any gender issues, even such potentially loaded lines as 'Frailty, thy name is woman!' I confess I'm kind of glad for the straight (pun intended) approach. If Khan had tried to invest the show with a lot of keen conceptual insight, either she would have failed, which would have been distracting, or she would have succeeded, which would probably still be distracting. As is, I'm able to ignore, even occasionally forget about Tuomanen's biologic identity and just enjoy a very fine delivery of arguably the best role written in dramatic history.



Tuomanen is lithe and light on her feet, her LeCoq training obvious in her energy and graceful gestures, and she is no less adept in her verse- and prose-speaking. The words do indeed trip off her tongue (even if Khan does cut that speech— one of a number of judicious textual trims keeping the evening to two-and-a-half hours), and she manages the delicate balance between relishing the poetry and keeping the communication real. Actually, my girlfriend said she was impressed by how fresh and earnest the lines felt, which she attributed at least partially to how young the Prince came across. I agree, and applaud Tuomanen's matching of genuineness with playfulness.




Kahn's casting boasts other strengths, including an impressive Claudius from Ames Adamson. Adamson occasionally errs on the side of chewing the scenery, but given the usurping King is a bit of a pompous ass, that's perfectly appropriate. Amanda Grove and John Little give solid readings of Gertrude and Polonius, respectively, and Victoria Rose Bonito brought tears to my eyes in her portrayal of Ophelia's madness. Probably the most memorable image in the production is poor Ophelia laying a headless doll, dressed (like herself) in a white wedding dress, into the pool occupying center-stage. Anyone familiar with the play (and who isn't?) will be struck by the fore-shadow of her imminent drowning. So beautifully sad.

This Hamlet's world is well-designed. David Gordon's stark, charcoal floor and walls evoke Elsinore nicely, with Vickie Esposito's contemporary clothing somehow complementing rather than clashing with the more medieval swordplay—tidily choreographed by Mike Cosenza.

All in all, I'm thoroughly engaged. I last visited Philly Shakes four years ago, for *Othello*. This time I won't wait as long to return— I want to catch Tuomanen's Rosalind before *As You Like It* closes!

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