



Patchy ice fog; partly cloudy and bitterly cold. High -27, Low -36

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The voice of Interior Alaska since 1903

Fairbanks, Alaska

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2001

75 cents

Vol. XCIX, No. 334

www.newsminer.com

24 pages

UAF's 'Hamlet' tests boundaries

By ROBERT HANNON
For the News-Miner

REVIEW

Few figures stalk through our collective imagination with anything like Hamlet's stature. As Anatoly Antohin observes in his notes to "Hamlet Dreams," the Danish prince "is the first paradigm of the modern man."

Shakespeare's character challenges the justice of revenge, ponders the nature of existence and revels in humanity's wonder and folly—all 20th-century concerns that will track us into the new millennium.

But although Antohin acknowledges the importance of Shakespeare's creation, his new production at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Salisbury Theatre eschews the Bard's dramatic structure in favor of a more contemporary model of conflict and resolution. He places the action in a courtroom with the audience as jury and Shakespeare as chief inquisitor. Through a series of selected scenes from the Elizabethan play, Antohin asks us to evaluate, among other things, the trustworthiness of Hamlet's ghost and Hamlet's culpability for Ophelia's death.

The conceit is promising because much of our national drama really gets enacted in the docks and not on the boards. Whether it's O.J. Simpson or our last presidential election, a lot of our national angst gets played out in legal venues. So Antohin's device has a campy, contemporary feel about it, like Judge Judy passing judgment on Kierkegaard.

And Antohin's production has other things going for it as well. The costumes are effective if eclectic. Polonius seems to be from a 19th-century ambassadorial post while Hamlet's ghost, who haunts the entire production, looks like he's the Frost King from some Grimm fairy tale. The lighting imparts a suitably moody and mysterious atmosphere. And the set is lean and imaginative with an arch that seems like the portal dividing life from death, and a towering conical canopy through which the spirits emerge or retreat.

The play is also marked by some strong performances, most notably Mike Karoly as the Ghost and the Ophelia and Hamlet twins: Christine Burgess, Heather Maas and John Lagoutaris and Charlie Pierce. If you're reaching for your Shakespeare because you don't remember Hamlet and Ophelia having twins, don't. They are yet another device Antohin introduces in order to underscore these characters' conflicted natures. But here is where the new production's conceits confuse rather than clarify Shakespeare's themes.

There seem to be active and passive, moral and instinctive divisions at work in the doubling of Hamlet, but as with anything in life it's the active that dominates. The passive Hamlet seems more like a polite courtier, rather than a psychologically revealing portrait.

Like every fledgling work, "Hamlet Dreams" has plenty of rough edges and questionable choices that can only be worked out through the long process of performance and rewrite. If Antohin wants to place Hamlet in a judicial proceeding, OK. But why then pull the teeth of that naturally adversarial setting by removing the prosecuting and defending attorneys? Extracting scenes from Shakespeare's dramatic context robs them of a great deal of power. One way to restore some of that might have been with competing counselors arguing for and against the characters' behavior.

Introducing two performers for one character can bring out emotional complexity, but at the risk of collapsing it into simple dichotomy. The wonder of great drama, especially Shakespeare's

best work, is that nothing is cut and dry, black or white, good or evil, innocent or guilty.

Fairbanks enjoys an embarrassment of riches when it comes to live performing arts, especially theater. Each of the organizations seems to have staked out a niche and directed its energies toward bringing that dramatic genre to life. UAF appears to be driving toward the experimental, with more challenging new works that question the preconceived notions of theatergoers. That makes sense for a department that educates students, whose

heads are already being filled with new ideas.

"Hamlet Dreams" is worth taking in for no other reason than to have your complacency shaken and maybe your assumptions about Shakespeare's classic undermined. But then go to your nearest video store and check out a good version of the play and test your new hunches out.

"Hamlet Dreams" continues this weekend with performances Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m.

Robert Hannon is a reporter and producer at KUAC.

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