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Hamlet



As he wonders "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take arms against a sea of troubles," speaking while sitting amongst the audience in the famous "To be or not to be" speech, Charles Pasternak rises from just next to us on the floor to continue delivering those immortal lines about "to sleep--perchance to dream," "the dread of something after death--the undiscovered country," and the "conscience does make cowards of us all," moving from within us to addressing us as he plays the role of the reflective and moody prince of Denmark we call "Hamlet."

The Porters of Hellsgate's production of Shakespeare's legendary play, directed by Thomas Bigley, features a simple set with a few innovative elements, but most importantly, it allows the talents of Pasternak and other members of the cast to give a performance full of the ebb and flow of quick and slow action, tragic and comic situation, culminating in the deadly climax.

"Hamlet's" story is almost universal. The prince sees his father's ghost when informed by his friend Horatio and the guards Marcellus and Barnardo. The ghost tells him that he was murdered by Hamlet's uncle the current King Claudius with the help of his mother Gertrude. Hamlet puts up a play called "The Murder of Gonzago" that reenacts how the killing took place, namely by Claudius injecting poison into the King's ear. Hamlet confronts his mother about the quick and incestuous marriage to his uncle, but stabs the lord chamberlain Polonius without unction because he was foolishly hiding behind a curtain to listen in. This causes Hamlet's exile to England and his love Ophelia's eventual suicide. When Hamlet escapes from his ship to return to Elsinore, he is challenged to a duel by Polonius's son Laertes bent on revenge. In the climax, Gertrude drinks the poison prepared by Claudius for Hamlet, but Hamlet and Laertes stab each other with the poisoned sword prepared by Claudius. Hamlet also stabs Claudius, and Horatio is left to explain the situation to the arriving Prince of Norway Fortinbras.

Jamey Hecht's Polonius is perhaps a bit more muddled than Polonius past, but a whole heck of a lot funnier. Hecht uses the words well, giving a rhythmic flow to the farewell speech to his son Laertes, moving quickly over "beware of entrance to a quarrel" but stopping over "being in, bear't that the opposed may beware of thee," speeding through "neither a borrower nor a lender be" before being humorously interrupted by Laertes noncanonically in the oft-heard "to thine own self be true." Hecht uses his instruments well, losing his necklace a couple of times to Hamlet, and wiping away some dirt from his eyepiece. In the scene where Polonius is unfortunately stabbed by Hamlet, he is behind a curtain that faces the audience with his back towards us. This way, we ourselves become the voyeur to Polonius's well-intentioned but ill-conceived act. When he dies, we feel not so much the pang of a loss but rather the silencing of a chatterbox. But still, we feel very much sorry for him, for Hecht has created a congenial character whose only fault was to insist on Prince Hamlet's malady as one of the loss of love.

The performances of King Claudius (Jack Leahy) and Queen Gertrude (Jessica Temple) are understated in this production. Leahy manages to cry out in desperation in a muted way in the contrition speech: "my offence is

rank, it smells to heaven." He doesn't have to cry out like Hamlet in this role; rather Leahy plays a villain like he's scampering, as in the climax when he tries to escape Hamlet's blade in vain. Temple has very few flashy moments, excepting perhaps the famous phrase uttered during "The Murder of Gonzago," "the lady protests too much."

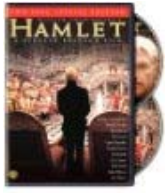
Horatio (Eddie Castuera) has a more formidable role. When asked by Hamlet to watch his uncle and mother from afar, Castuera makes the appropriate gesture of sitting along with us the audience as the murder of Gonzago (or as Hamlet calls it, "The Mousetrap) unfolds, immersing us in the play-within-a-play. At the end, Horatio is given the task of wrapping up a drama drenched by blood to the death of every major figure. Instead of marching quickly on, Castuera takes his time, vowing "let me speak to the yet unknowing world" as a sort of response to Hamlet's earlier telling him that "there are more things in heaven and earth... than are dreamt of in your philosophy" in regards to sighting the ghost of his father.

Laertes (Alex Parker) and Ophelia (Taylor Fisher) both have subdued supporting roles. The former's highlights include crying out against his father's death. Besides being at the supporting end of Hamlet's "get thee to a nunnery" speech, Fisher also plays a believably insane Ophelia as she sings a song about Valentine's day and bestows flowers on the King and the Queen. The change of personalities undertaken by Christina McKinnon (Cornelius, Osric, Sailor, Hecuba) and Kevin Kelley (Francisco, Fortinbras, Alfred) are done quite well. In particular, it's hard to imagine the effeminate member of the troop Alfred (who plays the queen in "The Murder of Gonzago") being transformed into the regal Fortinbras, the prince of Norway who comes to wrap up the play. Going from gravedigger to a noble who oversees the duel (Osric) is also remarkable. Jack Leahy, who plays Claudius as well as the ghost (his dead brother) makes a wondrous appearance with his deep voice that finally suggests he is extraterrestrial. A useful device was having the ghost jump into the contraption on the floor, while the light flickers from bright to dark beneath the floor, suggesting a disappearing ghost. Leahy certainly invokes fear in the audience as it does in Hamlet.

Charles Pasternak has a great role in Hamlet, and he delivers almost completely without blemish. One faculty he possessed was the ability to speak extremely quickly without making mistakes. This can be seen in his speech to Laertes before the duel: "what I have done that might your nature, honor, and exception roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness." Yet this quick flowing pace is balanced by the ebb of his most reflective moments, such as his musings about death upon looking at an old jester's skull ("alas poor Yorick... a fellow of infinite jest... not one now to mock your own grinning") and his exclamation against a "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" world upon learning of the treachery of his uncle and mother from the ghost ("frailty--thy name is woman!"). One of Pasternak's strongest speeches is made when Polonius takes leave of Hamlet. After calling Polonius a fishmonger, Hamlet raises a small joke into a contemplative and suicidal notion by exclaiming "you cannot take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal--except my life, except my life." Pasternak smiles mildly as he speaks the lines in a partly reclining posture, similar to his posture during the "to be or not to be" speech. Even his exclamation on the meaninglessness of life is given with a dash of humor that Pasternak reenacts as a crooked smile.

Another of Pasternak's strong performances is his scene with Gertrude, in which he tells the queen to avoid his uncle's bed that night. He takes his mother as if a lover and brandishes his sword as if it is naturally attached to him. After killing Polonius, Hamlet repents, but notes that "I must be cruel, only to be kind, thus bad begins, and worse remains behind," as if he is also teaching Gertrude how to behave. Pasternak's special touch of humor is found again in Hamlet's speech to Horatio in regard to whether he ought to duel with Laertes. "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow," he says, "if it be now, 'tis not to come, if it be not to come, it will be now." The loss of action in response to circumstances is so wrapped up in the character of Hamlet that we can feel, through Pasternak's punctuated actions coming and going with each climax in the play, the heights of a revenge taken as well as the depths of a prince dying. After all, "the rest is silence."

"Hamlet" is performed in repertoire with "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" at the Complex (<http://www.complexhollywood.com/index.htm>) in the Flight Theatre, Hollywood, California, until 14 of February, 2010.



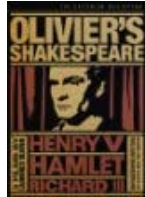
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