

## Shakespeare Express' *Hamlet* does not meet expectations

The audience in Meredith College's Jones Auditorium Friday night, March 24 was first greeted by the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express with a commercial plug for the group's t-shirt and a funny plot-summarizing song. These were humorous jingles that set the tone of the evening to be light, but *Hamlet* is a dark tragedy which they were about to perform. But from the onset the audience was expecting it to be a more creative and possibly a humorous *Hamlet*, or at least I was expecting it to be. Last year, I saw the group perform *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and I was extremely impressed with their creativity and humor. The group is young and energetic and gives off that feel—one that does not coincide with a tragedy.

*Hamlet* is the story of a son who seeks to avenge his father's murder. It is a story of betrayal and death—a story

in which incorporation of humor would not be easy or appropriate, just perhaps expected because of the reputation of the group. However, the group gives the play its due respect by performing it in a serious and dramatic tone.

The group had its usual other characteristics. The lighting was done in a true Shakespearean way, along with the length, doubling, costuming, and music. The lights were left on throughout the play just as if you were watching the show outside in Globe theatre. The actors can see the audience just as the audience can see them. Actors played more than one role and did not

stick only to roles of their own sex. The music and sound effects were simple instruments played backstage. All these aspects typical of the Globe are explained on the programs, which were very informative. Also explained on the program is the length. Their production of *Hamlet* ran 2 hours and 15 minutes without an intermission. It was a lengthy sitting, but again typical of Shakespearean plays. The costuming was simple and modern and in symbolic color. Thadd McQuade, of course, primarily wore black to portray *Hamlet*. Philip Lortie, as *Claudius*, was adorned in the royal colors of purple and gold accents. Michelle Powers, not surprisingly, wore a barely pink, long and loose dress as *Ophelia*. The costume which I found to be the most effective was Hap Jamieson's attire as *Gertrude*. She wore a long, straight, black skirt and a maroon, fitted velour shirt with a cross necklace. The different coloring of the shirt, along with her tall, thin stature, seemed to give her power. She seemed vibrant and affectionate towards her new husband *Claudius*.

The group made effective use of time and space. Scene changes were simply done by actors walking on and off stage. Yet there seemed to be no breaks; the dialogue continued. The backdrop remained the same—a purplish cloth, so the play flowed well. Also, the group made effective use of space. Again as in the Globe, the audience continued around to the sides of the actors. Some audience members had seats on the sides of the stage, level with the actors. This seemed to make the actors more personal. They also came out into the audience and randomly shook hands. They did not always use traditional stage exits. They extended the stage from the actual stage to the floor below and even into the isles. This use of time and space was one of the more enjoyable aspects of the play.

As for the actors, they were all talented and did not perform any obvi-

ous or annoying theatre faux pas. The actors who doubled were good at stepping in and out of roles. For example, Tricia Kelly played *Bernardo* and *Rosencrantz*. As *Bernardo*, she came across as militaristic and serious. She even had a deeper voice. As *Rosencrantz*, she matched *Matthew McIver*, who portrayed *Guildenstern*, quite well in costume and humor. *Paul Riopelle*, who played *Polonius*, also struck me as very entertaining, especially in the scene where he is reading the letter to his daughter. He is short in stature, but not in talent. He made effective use of the audience on stage. He reads the letter directing to them, also. He is all over the stage and off. And, of course, I must mention *Thadd McQuade*, who played a touching and admirable *Hamlet*. He delivered the "To Be" speech beautifully sitting on the front of the stage with his legs hanging over the edge. *Michelle Powers* was a less dramatic, but feeling *Ophelia*. She used her hand and arm gestures very effectively.

It is also important to note how they did the scene with *Polonius* overhearing *Ophelia* and *Hamlet*. *Paul Riopelle* hides behind the backdrop and reveals himself after *Thadd McQuade* exits. *McQuade* delivered his lines as if *Hamlet* knew *Polonius* was in the room. *McQuade* walks around the stage as if he is looking for him. He asks *Michelle Powers*, *Ophelia*, where her father is, and she reacts and answers nervously. *McQuade* exits through the back door of the auditorium and then *Riopelle* comes out from behind the curtain.

Overall, the Shenandoah Express did an acceptable performance of *Hamlet*. The Shakespearean lighting, doubling, length, and music were appropriate but did not enhance the play. The quick scene changes made the play flow well, but it is still hard to sit through a 2 hours and 15 minutes production. I was most impressed with the use of space and the talented actors. The production was good, but perhaps did not meet the reputation of the group. In my opinion, the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express is incredible, but they are more appropriate for comedies.

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