

# Hamlet and the Thorsby Connection

## Hamlet

Theatre review by the Thorsby Collective  
Recorded by Irma Lizotte

"When there's any talk about how Art transforms society, the discussion has to extend outside of the limits of the text, to the society it makes reference to." Milfred Campbell quoted from *Solipsism, Obscurantism and the Twentieth Century Literary Critic*.

So, here we are at the opening night of *Hamlet* at the Citadel's Shocter stage, feeling like a pretty loose group as we shuffle about the dead fur, polyester and pipe smoke of the beautiful people. Thrumbo's made a beeline for the hors d'oeuvres, Stubs and Elmgrin for the wine, while Faust and Hilary try to track down some cocaine from some people they know in Alberta Culture. Which leaves just me to receive a rather distraught Milfred Campbell who shoves his complete edition of Shakespeare at me.

"It's up to you - do what you can," he sez nervously, "I think Ashwell's after me." Then he disappears into the opening night shuffle.

"No one's after him," sez Alice, Milfred's remedial English prof., "ever since he's been trying to refute Leavis and Wellek, he's been conjuring up literary assassins. *Somebody's* got to watch out for him," she sez and rushes off after Milt.

"That's funny," sez Ambrose who steps up out of time and space at just that second, "Everybody knows that Ashwell is a figment of Milfred Campbell's imagination."

So much for poor Milf, our mentor and leader who's tried so hard to bring criticism to the people. We however have bound together to continue his work. We begin, as we think he would, by applauding Director Coe for bringing Shakespeare alive in a new and original fashion, which in spite of minor flaws and deviations, still does homage to the original, unadulterated *Hamlet*.

*Thrumbo: In comparison to Coe's modern dress Richard III staged last year, his Hamlet is much more refined, and executed. I think Coe has created a mature version of Hamlet which doesn't suffer anywhere near the excesses of last year's production of Richard III.*

The general consensus is that Coe stuck to the script rather judiciously. Judicious to the point that we, unlike Thrumbo, feel that the opening scene's lines were pedestrian in their delivery. The dullness was emphasized even more because it was in direct contrast to the exotic staging of the opening scene. If we had paid more attention to the lines, perhaps Elmgrin wouldn't have fallen asleep.

*Elmgrin: The ghost woke me up though. He (Paul Craig) was done up pretty good; an apocalyptic figure dragged out from Coe's dark nightmare of war. Loved the ghost's theme which is kinda Devo.*

We all liked Keith Baxter's portrayal of Hamlet.

Besides playing sensitively, he brought a certain wordy, wit to the part which we think is subordinated to Hamlet's acute moral struggles in most renditions of this role. Underneath that huge, tragic hero's anguished exterior which we're all supposed to know, there is a Hamlet in love with the words he learned to use so well in his university days at Wittenberg. Baxter's a natural for the part; the lines are truly what he feels, evidenced by his natural but flawless delivery.

*Irma: It is essentially the set design which makes this play work. It's highly visual and jumps out of the stage to include the vast space of the Shocter within its imagination. The blinding white stage, besides being a metaphorical foil for a black clad Hamlet, is a nice*



Photo Russ Sampson

*surreal backdrop for a gorgeous parade of color: orange, green, blue, purple, red, yellow, black and grey costumes underline the lush, lusty and lofty sentiments of this particular work.*

*Faust: If those people from Alberta Culture had come up with the cocaine they'd promised, I don't think I would mind Irma's purple prose that much. But I do agree, the design's what made the play work for me. The technical end of it was handled superbly. The technical boys have the lighting, sound and special effects down to an art. Except next time if you're going to fire a gun on stage try to make it look a bit more realistic.*

We figure that the rest of the acting ranged from competent to mediocre. E. M. Margoese's Polonius is

sniveling and self-serving enough to give you the creeps. His additional role as a cynical, grizzled, gravedigger is vintage stuff too.

Hollis McLaren simply doesn't have a stage voice suitable for Ophelia's part, but her portrayal of Ophelia's break down after Polonius's death is incredible.

*Hilary: Brendan Barry's Claudius was overplayed. Claudius's up and downswings of passion got lost in the cranked up volume. He literally spit his lines out; this is a regression of sorts for a seasoned actor who showed us some excellent acting last year at the Citadel.*

*Irma: Mickey MacDonald's portrayal of Gertrude was overplayed to irritating lengths. She was continually upstaging Hamlet, and her Winnebago-cum-rumpus room, a la Ottwell wardrobe didn't soften her overbearing presence on stage.*

So what's the sum total of all this? Well we thought of joining Milfred and Alice at Lucifer's some time later. But by that time Milf was too far lost in Alice's eyes to be of any use to us, so we had to hack out the following conclusion ourselves.

We think Coe is genuinely trying to bring Shakespeare to this century's consciousness. Essentially, Coe has gently transplanted *Hamlet* to the modern day. The reverberations or implications which brings the political nature of this play into sharp focus, makes Coe's treatment all that more worthwhile. In a month that has seen such men as Bokassa, Macias and Takari plucked out from history, Coe's treatment shakes up some of the smugness which has rendered a lot of Shakespeare harmless. It cuts through what hundreds of boring English classes and tons of pedestrian, irrelevant criticism have done to this living drama.

*Stubs: I would like to interject with an example to illustrate the somewhat ambiguous nature of what's trying to be said here. The way Coe renders that all important play-within-a-play which Hamlet persuades the Wittenberg players into doing, says it all. I like the vaudeville sort of sleaziness that Coe gives it. This play within a play is supposed to shock Claudius and Gertrude's sensibilities; a crucial point that Shakespeare makes about the power of art to transform the real. That sums it all up.*

As Mildred would put it, Coe's got balls to use the awesome facilities of the Citadel Theatre to put on a production of this type. We just hope that what we saw was an example of artistic integrity which will continue to demand more exacting standards in the future.

"Sometimes there's nothing wrong with Art pissing off people," quotation from Milfred Campbell's *Eliitism and Fascism in Twentieth Century Criticism*.

1 Literary Fascists, according to the Thorsby school of Art criticism.

## Monty Python looks on the bright side of life

### The Life of Brian

Film review by Marni Stanley

Now for something completely irreverent we have *The Life of Brian*, the latest offering from the troop who brought you "Hell's Grannies" and the original attack rabbit. And this film is at least a little bit different.

Gone is the eclectic on-again off-again plot of the *Holy Grail* and the gross for the sake of gross of *Jabberwocky* and in their place we have a well-formed movie that relies, for its best moments at least, on intelligent comedy.

Graham Chapman as Brian wanders bemusedly through a parody of the life of Christ, pausing now and then to pick up the "Holy Gourd" or "gather in the shoes." He does stumble (literally) into a few questionable miracles, but his one attempt at a sermon emerges as a lesson in Self-Actualization straight off of the dust jacket of "How to be Your Own Best Friend."

The Python crew were given a much larger budget for this film than for their previous works so some of the shooting was actually done on location in Tunisia. For the most part, however, the set consists of an endless labyrinth, dark for indoors, garishly lit for the outdoors. There is no need to feel nostalgic for the old, low budget Python props either — an occasional stuffed beast still appears, looking like it was designed by Dr. Seuss.

This frantic film manages to balance clever word play with equally delightful visual humor. From the terrorist group that argues semantics and the Pontius Pilate who can't pronounce his 'R's', to the blind man sight gags, no laugh is left untried — and believe me, very little is beneath this crowd.

Some of the cleverest lines are throwaways so listen for them (some were also overwhelmed by over loud guffaws from audience members who should have taken their cue from the Roman Centurians). And if

you loathe puns you'd better chose another movie.

Although the Python troop of Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin are uniformly fine in all their various and sundry roles, Gilliam must be singled out for producing the year's best opening titles. Special mention should be made of Eric Idle for his wonderful closing song.

Because of all the publicity that preceded this film I went prepared to be outraged, or at the very least offended, but the *Life of Brian* is not an insult to Christianity. If it criticises the church at all it is only to question the Christian reliance on physical signs and symbols instead of personal faith. The film does not really belittle Christ, its mocking is fond and its affection for the humble man genuine.



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