



Free's Hamlet forsakes vision for sake of surface visuals

By REBECCA CANN

Intellect and intrigue do more than kill Hamlet and Co. in Toronto Free Theatre's current production of Shakespeare's masterpiece. They go a long way to killing off the production as well.

In the hands of director Guy Sprung, *Hamlet*, playing till April 13, has become an exercise in intellect as opposed to an exploration of the play itself. Worse, however, is the production's emphasis on the manipulation of the play's atmosphere at the expense of an intelligent comprehension of the play's dynamics. Intrigue lives as Sprung, with the help of designers, contrives to manipulate the audience with nifty visual effects, creating a production that is both glitzy and meaningless.

Sprung has chosen to stage *Hamlet* in Victorian dress, a decision more academic than theatrical. The parallels between *Hamlet* and the Victorian era are obvious but unlightening for a modern audience. While no dimension is added to the play, *Hamlet*, of course, can now tout a pistol.

This is in keeping with the visual orientation of the production which

is self-evident right from the start. By eradicating the first scene of the play in which the ghost of Hamlet's father first appears, Sprung is able to open the performance in the court of Claudius. The arched, mirrored windows of Adam Kolodziej's set stretch to the ceiling with height and grandeur—later the mirrors become glass, the windows doors and several scenarios take place behind. The costumes of Debra Hanson are also showcased in the first scene. Bright and colorful, the women's dresses are elegant and graceful while the



"And what's wrong with my tie?" R.H. Thomson plays Hamlet in Toronto Free Theatre's production of the play. It sogs.

men stand round in military costume. Hamlet and Horatio alone appear in scholarly attire.

The cutting of the first scene works intellectually—it emphasizes the superficial ornamentation of Hamlet's world before revealing the corruption. But Sprung's decision results in the play starting off on a flat and tedious note. After the initial oohs and ahs for set and costumes the audience is confronted with some rather long and uninteresting speeches by Claudius, played with uninspiring kingliness by Dan MacDonald. At this point (only 5 minutes into the play?) it is obvious that Sprung should have spent as much

time with the text as he seems to have done dreaming up visual goodies with his designers. Rather than a portrayal of Claudius' manipulation and power-playing Sprung has provided a cosy courtroom canter, the king looking after a little business.

Most of the performances suffer in this production from a lack of context. No one is *bad*, but few of the actors really stand out. The significance of characters' actions and relationships are virtually ignored and the result is a choppy in understanding what is going on and why. Even Thomson's Hamlet starts off rather ignominiously—his soliloquy of the first scene floats into space, as he speaks the words without seeming to know why. Thomson makes up for this initial vagueness as the play develops. His scenes with Polonius (Maurice Evans) are delightful as he mimics the old man with a monocle, feigning madness with humour, intent and an exquisite sense of the absurd that articulates strength and force in the character of Hamlet.

The crowning glory of Thomson's performance—and that of the entire production—comes in the scene between Hamlet and Ophelia. Here and only here do the seeds of interpretation blossom into brilliance. The "Get thee to a nunn'ry" speech becomes not words of anger but words of love. The intensity of the scene is phenomenal as Thomson speaks harsh words for hidden listeners while gently caressing the cheek of Ophelia (Sheila McCarthy).

The mixed messages Ophelia is confronted with in this scene lend themselves exquisitely to her mind's deterioration. McCarthy confronts the mad scene with a vivid understanding of Ophelia's state. Stumbling and giggling, singing with a soft, raspy voice, she kneels the doorman on her way out. Then she giggles. The juxtaposition of personalities in McCarthy's portrayal stands out as one of the few moments of clarity in the play.

While scenes between Hamlet and Ophelia remain vivid and refreshing in their intelligence the rest of the play sogs on in high but heavy-handed fashion. *Hamlet* is recognized as Shakespeare's most problematic of plays, providing many questions and few solutions to its difficulties. Unfortunately Sprung has chosen to ignore most of these difficulties, and instead maintains plot and atmosphere at the expense of a unifying concept. This lack of vision survives only by clinging to visual effects, and it is a minor miracle that the few moments of brilliance in the production maintain their light while wallowing in this sea of mud.

Films continue to foster misfits and bores



Hi! We're two carefully disguised misfits in the film *Escalier C*. Can you tell?!

Benvenuta doesn't even deliver at the prurient level; what is promised to be a *9 1/2 Weeks* for the art-house crowd turns out to be *Barbara Cartland Has a Religious Experience*. The relationship is not sadomasochistic except in the broadest definition of the term. In fact, most of the masochism is undergone not by Ms. Ardant, but by the audience. The

endless Biblical references and discussions of theology become as much of an ordeal as any whipping, and the trysts in a fin-de-siècle passion pit are simply embarrassing.

Adding insult to injury is the obvious lack of care with which director Andre Delvaux has executed the film. When the flashbacks transport us to several decades prior

to the present, Fanny Ardant's wardrobe changes accordingly, but nobody else's seems to follow suit. Why are there passersby sporting current fashions in a train station in what is presumably the late 1950s? Why does the couple take a trip in what is obviously a 1980s Mercedes? The muted colors of the flashbacks (which the Union Of Unimaginative Cinematographers seems to have agreed automatically conjures up the Past) does what it can to create the appropriate ambience, but it's a losing battle when the props department can't be bothered to keep its eras straight. You can look at the past through gauze-covered lenses, but you won't fool your audience with such sloppiness.

About the only consolation in sitting through this grindingly dull exercise in respectable pornography comes from learning that the formidable French are capable of doing this sort of thing just as ineptly as Americans. *Benvenuta* may not be quite so degrading to women as *9 1/2 Weeks* and the Roman ruins lend a certain Olde Worlde charm, but the core of the movie is just as unsatisfying and inadequate. *Benvenuta* is one to rush out and stay away from.

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