

Reinvented Hamlet introduces teens to classic

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By Kevin Prokosh

IT'S only fair that a theatre troupe from Denmark re-appropriates Hamlet from William Shakespeare, who borrowed the story about a pre-Viking prince from a 13th-century Danish monk.

Det Lille Turnéteater has refreshingly reinvented the tale of the melancholy Great Dane for teens for a cast of two actors and two double bass players.

Shakespeare might not have appreciated having his longest play -- a full production can run five hours -- slashed to 90 minutes on a stage with as many actors as double basses.

But the Bard, ever the showman, would have bowed in admiration at the company's impressive economy, clear-eyed understanding and inventive style points.

Other than a few opening lines in Danish, the trimmed down Hamlet is easily understood for young people previously scared off by the play's impenetrable language and its reputation as man's literary pinnacle. Its starting point is the end of the Shakespeare script where Horatio promises to fulfill his pal's dying request to tell the world Hamlet's murderous tale of scandal, duplicity, lost innocence, misguided ambition and vengeance.

The memory play begins with the two buddies on the ramparts of Elsinore engaged in a play swordfight, which concludes with Hamlet's pretend death and their schoolboy laughter. He is briefly portrayed as a happy prince, giddy at even the sight of the fair Ophelia. Only when his father, the king, dies suddenly and his mother hastily remarries, to his uncle Claudius, does Hamlet don his famous brooding demeanour.

Actors Christian Hetland and Sune Kofoed -- both outfitted in black T-shirts and jackets, dark jeans and white runners -- are both skilful at playing all the characters with the minimum of physical alteration. To become Gertrude, one slips his jacket off his shoulder as if wearing an evening gown. Claudius wears flashy sunglasses to hide his lying eyes while the doomed Ophelia is represented by an elegant orange scarf.

Musicians Andreas Bennetzen and Claus Kaarsgaard are more than supporting performers. Their appropriately-coloured grey and black instruments not only set a rich sombre mood but provide live sound effects while doubling as such props as a casket and the body of a ghost.

The Bard's memorable verse has been cut back judiciously. The iconic "To be or Not to Be" survives not as a monologue but as a line. Un-Shakespearean words such as wimp have been added for the modern audience. Director Marc van der Velden always has young viewers in mind. He had the actors leading the teens, who were attending a school performance at Manitoba Theatre for Young People this week, through stretching exercises between acts.

Although not a substitute for a full production of Hamlet, this Danish reduction succeeds in introducing young people to a cultural totem while building the foundation for a more Shakespeare-friendly generation.

Hamlet

Manitoba Theatre for Young People

Opens tonight at 7:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$13

Four stars out of 5



L-R: Bennetzen, Hetland, Kofoed, Kaarsgaard