

Ophelia, by Douglas Huff

Mark Z. Muggli, Luther College

Theaterwork, Santa Fe, New Mexico, November 5-21, 2004.

Director/Set Designer, David Olson. *Lighting/Sound*, Jack

Sherman. *Costumes*, Feleicia Martin. *Properties*, Richard Gonzales.

Abstract

Douglas Huff's *Ophelia*, expertly staged by Theaterwork (Santa Fe, New Mexico) and its artistic director David Olson, is an effective new play that explores Reformation questions about free will, grace, and the education of women. *Ophelia* gains a great deal of resonance from *Hamlet*. But like most adaptations of Shakespeare, a large part of *Ophelia's* appeal lies in its attempt to clarify and improve on its Shakespearean original.

In the opening scene of Douglas Huff's *Ophelia*, the young Ophelia and Hamlet imagine the pan-European kingdom that they will someday rule: "Truth and justice shall reign everywhere. . . . Camelot will finally exist." Hamlet shall be its King Arthur, Ophelia its Guinevere, and because the play has a theme-shaping Reformation setting, this Camelot will be "greater than the Holy Roman Empire — but without a pope."

The author, Douglas Huff, is a college philosophy professor who has had nine of his plays performed, primarily in the Midwest. Huff believes that he has written a tragedy in the Greek mode — rather than the Senecan or Shakespearean — because he emphasizes the interplay among character, situation, and choice, although I find these themes in Seneca and Shakespeare as well. But *Ophelia* also incorporates specifically Reformation questions about free will, grace, and forgiveness. In addition, its mixed comic/tragic tone and scenic structure are remarkably Shakespearean.

Whatever its lineage, *Ophelia* gains resonance from and comments on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. But as the above quotations and comments suggest, *Ophelia* is also a new work with its own emphases. The play raises ethical questions about parent-child relations, the relative value of

honesty and expediency in politics, and the varied motivations embedded in individual choice. It also concentrates on women's social roles and education. Huff's *Ophelia* reads widely in political theorists such as Aristotle, tries to guide a despairing, violence-driven, and sometimes laconic Hamlet, and directs her befuddled, comic father Polonius on statecraft and war. (She has concluded that "Agriculture is the key." Polonius responds that no one is interested in agriculture: "Farmers aren't even interested.")

The first half of Huff's play imagines scenes only hinted at in *Hamlet*. Two lengthy Wittenberg scenes mix joking references to Erasmus, Lutheranism, and rosaries with collegiate horseplay (including some very funny bawdy focused on the "petard," which the characters allude to as a stiff, hoist-like device). King Hamlet and Yorick, a skilled soldier and political tactician known at court as a "jester," discuss political marriages and the invasion of Europe. The German-born Gertrude has an imaginary conversation with her dead father — thus adding one more father-child relationship to the *Hamlet* story — in which she discusses the arranged marriage that brought her to the Danish throne. Her father, threatened by Danish power, had consoled her by predicting that her warlord husband would soon be killed. Alas, this medieval King Hamlet has proven to be the best soldier in Europe, so this Renaissance Gertrude finds herself trapped inside a sexless, loveless marriage while she is still young and beautiful. Gertrude fills the idle hours attending to her rich wardrobe, receiving the attentions of a courtly, civilian Claudius, and teaching Ophelia the "womanly arts" of sewing and politics. In the second half of *Ophelia*, Huff depends more on scenes from *Hamlet*, although he radically cuts and rewrites them to highlight his chosen themes. Huff's play ends with Ophelia's death, but hints at a future, final carnage like that in *Hamlet*.

Beyond filling in gaps in *Hamlet's* plot and rewriting existing scenes, *Ophelia's* central concern is to explore the impact of small, morally wrong choices on the individual and community. Ophelia, who exhibits a deep, mystical commitment to Hamlet even as a young girl, compromises herself by agreeing to Claudius's and Polonius's spying. She recognizes that Polonius pressures her unfairly to betray Hamlet. But in Huff's view, her complicity with Polonius and Claudius represents a bad ethical choice that leads directly to her isolation, her moral self-recognition, and her death. As she says in a lengthy final soliloquy, "Our lives are ruined by pebbles in the road. Our virtue deserts us for a flimsy excuse. Our love becomes an apparition. And we die." In Huff's script, Ophelia's death is clearly a suicide. (His stage direction reads: "She spreads her arms wide and falls backwards into the well.") In Olson's production, Ophelia's end, a timeless entrapment in thin bars of light on a dark stage, is more ambiguous and even luminous.

Ophelia is unlikely to receive a better production anytime soon. Santa Fe, New Mexico — second in the U.S. only to New York in the dollar volume of its art sales — does not support

much theater. But over the last decade, Theaterwork has filled most of the seats for its sixty-plus productions of both classics and world premieres. (See <http://www.theaterwork.org> for a recent performance history and selected photos.) The Theaterwork *Ophelia* was performed in a strongly blocked, visually driven style on a simple, expressionistic stage that alluded to the sea and stone of a late medieval Denmark. The performance was grounded in nuanced, atmospheric lighting, sumptuous period costumes, and highly artful props (figure-encrusted mirrors and perfume bottles for Gertrude, and colorful Greek-lettered botanical charts and an operational small-scale water wheel that Ophelia presumably used for her agricultural studies). Especially prominent were the beautifully designed books that distinguish the intellectuals, such as Ophelia, Yorick, and Horatio, from non-readers like King Hamlet and Claudius. In sharp contrast to the Romantic view that Prince Hamlet's deep intellect causes his inaction, Huff's Prince is subject to impulsive action and despair precisely because he wants to be an intellectual, but cannot quite focus on the intricate pathways of complex ideas.

In a newspaper interview, Huff has insisted that he did not intend to "improve" on Shakespeare. But many of the responses that I heard in my role as *Ophelia* dramaturg suggested that a modern adaptation of Shakespeare is often perceived to be in competition with the original, and that in many cases the adaptation wins precisely because it is clearer. A sampling of comments:

- "*Ophelia* explains some things that Shakespeare leaves muddy."— an *Ophelia* actor;
- "*Ophelia* provides the back-story that Shakespeare's plays seldom include, especially for women characters." — a retired actress at a public discussion;
- "If ever a character was underdeveloped in a play and left to kill herself with little motivation, it's Ophelia in *Hamlet*." — a *Santa Fe New Mexican* reviewer;
- "Everyone thinks of *Hamlet* as one of Shakespeare's greatest plays, but construction-wise it has a lot of problems."— the same *Santa Fe New Mexican* reviewer, in an interview with the dramatist;
- "[Shakespeare's] Ophelia is an interesting character, but she is so dramatically underwritten in Shakespeare's play." — the author Douglas Huff, in an interview with the *Santa Fe New Mexican*;
- "I've never liked *Hamlet* because it is too long and too confusing. *Ophelia* made sense." — a participant in a College of Santa Fe mini-course for senior citizens.

In *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt argues that one of Shakespeare's distinctive achievements was "a new technique of radical excision. . . . The principle was not the making of a riddle to be solved, but the creation of a

strategic opacity" (Greenblatt 2004, 323-24). Tom Stoppard's brilliant move in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was intentionally to add opacity to one element of Shakespeare's play. Like all good art, *Ophelia* also creates its own new complexities.¹ But finally, the greatest pleasure that *Ophelia* offers is — to reverse Greenblatt's phrase — "strategic clarity," through its presentation of a consistent, fully realized dramatic portrait of what is, in Shakespeare's Danish house of strings, a secondary, sometimes shadowy figure.

Notes

1. I have not read the two-dozen published and unpublished plays centered on Ophelia, but it is a fair guess that most of them have similar aims. (For what is probably a partial listing of other "Ophelia" plays, see Thomas Larque's bibliography.)

Online Resources

Thomas Larque, Ophelia Bibliography [accessed 25 May, 2005]. Available online at <http://shakespearean.org.uk/ophib1.htm>

Theaterwork Web site [accessed 25 May, 2005]. Available online at <http://www.theaterwork.org>

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References

- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2004. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: Norton.
- Nott, Robert. 2004a. "And in other news, in Denmark . . ." Review of *Ophelia*, by Douglas Huff, performed by Theaterwork. *Pasatiempo: The [Santa Fe] New Mexican's Weekly Magazine of Arts, Entertainment & Culture*. November 12-18, 12.
- Nott, Robert. 2004b. "Woe is he, to write what he wrote." Interview with Douglas Huff. *Pasatiempo: The [Santa Fe] New Mexican's Weekly Magazine of Arts, Entertainment & Culture*. November 5-11, 44-46.