

Shakespeare and Everyman go to the Philly Fringe

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Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet, by David Dalton, Jeremy Beck, and Christopher Patrick Mullen. Walnut Street Theatre, in association with 1812 Productions, Philadelphia, August 26-September 25, 2005.

Shakesploitation, written by Andy Grigg, directed by John Doyle. The Journey Home Community Enrichment Center, September 2005.

Abstract

The offerings at this year's Philadelphia Fringe Festival are proof that Shakespeare is alive in contemporary American culture. But he is perhaps not as well as his non-academic fans might hope. The two Shakespearean adaptations staged during this three-week-long live arts festival could not have been more different: the one an abstract, heady meditation on *Hamlet* geared toward intellectuals and fans of conceptual theater, and the other a rollicking satire on Shakespearean tragedy pitched toward a rowdy, largely college-aged audience. Both manage to arrive at the same conclusion: that Shakespeare has nothing intelligible to say to those outside the cultural elite.

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet is a two-man show starring Jeremy Beck and Christopher Patrick Mullen, who, along with director David Dalton, form the theater company Quinnopolis, NY. In this cerebral study of Shakespeare's play, two characters, whom the program describes as "buffoons," emerge from a wooden crate to find themselves on stage, "with no back-story or purpose apart from the need to perform." Their task: *Hamlet*. After a rather lengthy rehearsal of the opening of the play — Beck as Bernardo and Mullen as Francisco — they find themselves confronted with the problem of playing the title character. Hamlet's black jacket imposes on the actor who wears it an eerie, catatonic silence that effectively stops the performance in its tracks. To solve

this problem — to avoid being infected by *Hamlet* — the buffoons drape the jacket over a tripod to signify the protagonist. His head is an old camera perched on top, its uncanny eye peering out at the audience. But the buffoons' resistance to playing Hamlet is gradually broken down as they become increasingly overtaken by the drama, which ceases to be the adversarial *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* and becomes, gradually, *Quinnopolis is Hamlet*. By the end of the show, *Hamlet* has absorbed them completely: the violence of Shakespeare's play spills out of the text and onto the buffoons themselves when the Mullen character strangles Beck to stop him, once and for all, from compulsively uttering snatches of soliloquy.

The play owes its moments of considerable power to the performances of Beck and Mullen, who meet the demands of physical comedy, Shakespearean verse, and subtle existential tragedy with energy and ease. Further, there's a sweetness to the intimacy between the two buffoons that particularizes these Everymen — an irony in itself — into something more than components of an argument about Shakespeare's work. The other principal source of the play's impact is its rendering of Shakespeare's texts. The death of Ophelia is the most compelling moment in the play, although no death is actually staged. Instead, Beck removes the pink dress that he had repeatedly donned to signify his playing of Ophelia and savagely throttles the prop in a bucket of water. When the violence stops, he slowly lifts the dress and holds it up for the audience. The drops of water, echoing through the quiet theater as they hit the bottom of the metal bucket, were startling in their poignancy, surpassing Gertrude's speech, Laertes' rage, and Hamlet's lament for pathos. Ophelia never had a darker, more lyrical drowning.

On the other side of town, *Shakesploitation* was staging a different version of Shakespearean tragedy. Written by Andy Grigg and designed and directed by John Doyle, *Shakesploitation* brings the Bard to the masses in its comic updating of *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*, each re-imagining Shakespeare according to a modern film genre. In "Grand Theft *Othello*," a parody of both the play and blaxploitation flicks, Othello is a virile urban hero trying to redeem the 'hood from poverty and oppression. Iago is a white police officer jealous of Othello's popularity and woman; Cassio is a gaudy pimp; and Bianca, renamed Cracked-Out Trina, is a slurring, lipstick-besmear hooker who drops to her knees at the drop of a hat. "*Romeo and Juliet* II: Apocalypse," imagines life (of a sort) beyond Shakespeare's play: Romeo and Juliet have come back from the dead as zombies. The plainspeaking Gravedigger (apparently an import from *Hamlet*) attempts to warn the high-minded clans of Capulet and Montague that their loved ones have not returned as themselves, but as blood-sucking killers, but Shakespeare's characters are too caught up in romantic reunion fantasies and iambic pentameter to listen. One by one, they're brutally murdered by the zombies for being so obtuse. In a tedious Kung-Fu inspired final bit, "Ninja *Hamlet*: Burning Fist of Denmark,"

Hamlet can't seem to manage revenge even though Claudius tells him in the first two minutes of the play that he killed the King. Hamlet is able to take care of business only after visiting Phat Ho, a crass version of Mr. Miyagi, who teaches Hamlet the "Burning Fist" fighting technique (the *Karate Kid* jokes seem inevitable).

The play's final flourish sums up its general attitude toward Shakespeare. A flamboyant and nearly naked Puck takes the stage with the closing speech from *Midsummer*. As he prances through "If we shadows have offended" in a high-pitched squeal, the ever pragmatic Gravedigger from the *Romeo and Juliet* sketch emerges with a shotgun to blow Robin Goodfellow to bits. The job done, he turns to the audience and sneers, "You're welcome," and the audience roars with laughter and applause. This is a fitting conclusion to the play's string of disdainful jokes about Shakespearean language and dramatic conventions. In the *Othello* skit, Desdemona's attempt at describing her romantic attachment quickly deteriorates into an absurd metaphor of frolicking forest animals. Poetic speeches break off into "Etc., etc." or "Blah, blah, blah." When Polonius attempts a dying soliloquy, the stage lights are abruptly turned off. The gooey sentiments of the Capulet-Montague set are rewarded with gruesome death. And the Elizabethan "Zounds" is replaced by copious use of "Fuck," which apparently gets funnier the more times that it's repeated. The audience seemed to enjoy the performance tremendously, identifying with the Gravedigger's disdain. Indeed, from the ashes of Shakespearean tragedy, the Gravedigger arose as the hero, the guy who sees through it all, takes care of business, and speaks in prose with an American accent. *Shakesploitation* thus stages an ambivalent relationship to Shakespeare, acknowledging his cultural ascendancy by performing popular modern genres *as Shakespeare* at the same time that it argues that everything Shakespeare touches is tainted with an element of the ridiculous.

The effect of both plays is to sap Shakespearean drama of popular relevance. While *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* is a smart, sensitive, and moving meditation on Shakespeare's play, there is something about it that's finally alienating, finally contradictory. Like *Shakesploitation*, *Quinnopolis* is centrally interested in the relationship between the Shakespearean text and Everyman. *Shakesploitation's* Gravedigger suggests that the text only has meaning as farce and that those elements that cannot be rendered intelligible to the likes of himself are best handled with firearms. Conversely, *Quinnopolis* argues that the buffoon not only has access to the subtleties of Shakespeare, but can't escape them. *Hamlet* encroaches. It forces itself on us, and we become it. But who are the buffoons, and who are we? Is *Hamlet* inevitable, or is it inevitable for only that small cross-section of Western culture who have read and understand the play (nay, not just the play but Stoppard's play too, and critical readings of both plays, and readings of those readings)? *Quinnopolis* doesn't trace the experience of buffoons stumbling into the imperatives of

Shakespeare's play; it traces a fundamentally elite experience — the experience of intellectuals, artists, and academics. It makes an argument for Shakespeare's inevitability just as its own abstract — even opaque — engagement with Shakespeare constructs the divide between those for whom it is inevitable and those for whom it is inaccessible. The message of buffoon and gravedigger is that Shakespeare is finally about us and them, and whether you're us or them depends on which play you went to and which jokes you got.

No more but so?

Online Resources

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet. Quinnopolis, NY theater company web site [cited 28 January, 2006]. <http://www.quinnopolis.org>.

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet. 1812 Productions web site [cited 28 January, 2006]. <http://1812productions.org/show.php?prod=30>.

Shakesploitation. Iron Age Theatre company web site [cited 28 January, 2006]. <http://www.ironagetheatre.org>.

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