

A RESPONSE TO THE TRIAL OF HAMLET

American College Theater Festival Adjudication
Adjudicator / Jeff Wax — October 31, 2002

If we accept the assertion that the Theatre is not so much a place or a building, but rather an act that occurs between artist and audience, then we must accept an equal share of responsibility for the integrity of that act when we enter the space that we call a theatre.

When one first arrives at the theater to attend Steven Breese's play *The Trial Of Hamlet* they are immediately scrutinized by "Men In Black" who are strategically placed throughout the lobby asking patrons if they are members of the press, and whether they have any guns, keys or knives in their pockets. Then they are subjected to being electronically scanned for contraband. Their presence is emblematic of what takes place at a court before people are allowed to enter the courtroom itself. This is a device that Mr. Breese has inserted into the pre-show to facilitate our ability to think of ourselves as members of a gallery about the witness a historical event that is about to take place in Ellsinore; a frightening exposé of the environment that exists around trials of high profile today within the realm of our legal and criminal justice systems.

Breese's production was superbly directed and the acting first-rate. Breese effectively stylized the play juxtaposing scenes taken from Shakespeare's text with the unfolding courtroom drama and realism seen today on television shows like Law & Order and Court TV. Breese succeeded in enabling us to voyeuristically examine the "what-ifs" of Hamlet's psyche and what might happen if his inner thoughts and perceptions were debated publicly. A fascinating approach with its focus to examine contemplation and motivation as the press exerts its full force and impact upon a crime with more at stake than Hamlet's own destiny. I found the script innovative, fast-paced, and unpredictable. It offered a fresh approach to the scholarly reexamination of Hamlet, which I found ghoulishly reminiscent of the William Holden film "Network" in which the abuse of power is patently discernable.

Breese staged a superior production effectively making use of every inch of the thrust. His scene changes occurred with precision and actor movement was crisp and involving. Scenes were staged with simplicity and our journey transcending time was skillfully executed. Fight scenes were marvelously choreographed and timing was exemplary. Much credit is given to Tanya Sweet for her strong technical direction because the demands of this play are such that they require meticulous implementation and the ability to integrate multi-media, which would seemingly challenge the abilities of any production team to successfully achieve. In this regard, the production was flawless and rivaled many outstanding professional theater productions that I have seen. George Hillow's lighting and scenic designs were captivating. Hillow had full command of an evocative lighting plot and successfully coordinated the use of modern technology to bring the drama of the courtroom to a 20th Century sensibility. The device of using a television anchor to narrate the production was effective although there were moments when technical limitations were evident as a result of the limitation of resources and in these instances the production lost some of its impact because of its inability to achieve a higher level of production values we have come to know and expect as an audience living in the era of high technology. While singularly notable it is also fair to say that these elements of the production are excusable and presumably could be achieved more substantially with the availability of more significant technical resources.

While the majority of the production was faculty designed, credit must be given to the original sound design of student Nathaniel Swanson who is recognized for his composition of innovative music, which set the tone and pace of the production and brought an urgent sense of energy to the stage that this play demanded.

I thoroughly enjoyed the crisp lines and style of Laurel Tsirimokos Goncalves' costume design. Her design conveyed a strong sense of power and eloquence using black to set tone and adding color to effectively distinguish character in a black and white world of evil and deception. The concurrency of period and contemporary attire was effective allowing us to observe the parallel of two ostensibly implausible worlds simultaneously allowing us to imagine what it might have been like if the 20th Century media were to have actually covered an event occurring centuries beforehand.

The cast of *The Trial of Hamlet* conveyed a clear sense of strong ensemble acting. Freshman Justin Sease shined as the tormented Hamlet and clearly understood his character and succeeded in bringing his role to life in a manner, which I found highly laudable for a student in his first year in a college theater program. Emily Glass portrayed the strength, courage and conviction of Gertrude who found herself in the unenviable position of having to choose between testifying on behalf of the state and in a manner favorable to King Claudius or taking the position that would give preferentiality to Hamlet. Glass was compelling showing the many layers of the Queen and her ability to withstand the ultimate trial. Gregg Lloyd's consummate performance as Claudius was flawless. Lloyd was a guest artist and he is an extremely capable actor whose presence as a professional gave the ensemble an opportunity to "work off" a performer that is oftentimes absent in a college theater production. Amanda Gagnon radiated as Ophelia and her performance was delightful. Similarly, Chad Wagner brought the truth of the character to the stage as Laertes displaying the perfection that his role demanded in this production. Justin Hand as Guildenstern and Allen Carrington Brooks as Rosencrantz were both delightful additions to the ensemble. Brooks' cross-examination of Ophelia was bold and aggressive and one of the highlights of the trial.

Overall, the acting was superb but the highest praise goes to Bryan Wakefield for his work as Horatio and to Angela Hamilton for her performance as the defrocked defense attorney Shayla. Wakefield's Horatio was poised, brave and loyal. Living truthfully from moment to

moment and the essence of deliberative acting was the foundation of the work, which Wakefield brought to the stage. Correspondingly, Hamilton was able to convey the passion and relentlessness of an ideal her character possessed in such a manner as to facilitate our desire to root for the underdog. Shayla proved to be the preeminent challenge that King Claudius was to face during the trial and Hamilton never faltered for a moment as she sought to vindicate Hamlet despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles, which she ultimately overcame.

The Trial of Hamlet presents a myriad of challenges to the production team and to the actors and demands a strong acting ensemble and the ability to orchestrate artistic collaboration to sustain a text that specifies exigent production values. A director must have profound vision to illuminate the play in a manner in which an audience can participate more actively than is traditionally the case in conventional productions which oftentimes do nothing more than entertain. Steven Breese appears motivated to use this play as a vehicle, which asks and answers weighty questions. Inner thought is neither assumed nor is it addressed through its subtext. Instead, Breese's script triumphs in the age of the sound bite by provoking us to think and to feel and lets us inside to see a world that in 2002 is all too familiar to many of us through the media coverage of the sensational trials that have taken place in recent years which we have all witnessed. The psychodrama of the tragedy of Hamlet is a quest for exoneration and allows us to examine whether any defendant is actually able to get a fair trial in an age when many crimes are quickly decided in the court of public opinion. The power of the media is raw and ruthless and as a society, we are quick to judge. Rarely are we provided with all of the facts. Lawyers use tactics and defendants are summarily convicted of crimes, which they did not commit, and we are relieved when the defendant is delivered into the hands of justice. If there is a cost, we should and must answer the question of "at what cost"? *The Trial of Hamlet* is a social commentary that provokes us to think about the concept of justice within a system in which inequity is frequently manifested.

The Trial of Hamlet is a play that offers the director the challenge of staging and meeting the production values demanded by the script. Likewise the actor is challenged with the responsibility of telling a story truthfully from the point of view of their character and not myopically. The emphasis of the role of the media takes Hamlet to a new dimension and in doing so gives us the chance to think and to reflect upon what we have witnessed wondering if their power erodes the ability for anyone to be fairly judged in a system where the potential for

abuse is so prevalent. As a playwright, Steven Breese's voice is unique; as a director he has used the power of the spoken word to bring an experience to life in the belief that artist and audience will involve themselves in an act rather than a spectacle. He has vigilantly brought to life a play, which appeals to the mind, and spirit of an audience and in doing so has addressed the unlimited scope of possibilities that can only be found on the stage. He and his cast are to be commended for their consistent realization of these objectives.

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