

Gender-bending and skillful acting impress in 'Hamlet'

[Caelin Miltko](#) | Friday, November 11, 2016



Shakespeare is widely considered the most flexible and applicable writer in the English language. His plays have been reinvented for centuries to suit different time periods and struggles. Notre Dame's latest production of "Hamlet" works with that assumption, using the play as a framework to deal with modern collegiate struggles.

The directors of the Not-So-Royal Shakespeare Co.'s production, Abby Schnell and Caitlin Crosby, wanted to pursue two themes in their production of "Hamlet": the struggle of logic and passion, and the struggle between an older and a younger generation.

The performance of "Hamlet" features a host of impressive actors. In the course of the play, there is not one who does not manage to make a wonderful contribution in bringing to life Shakespeare's tragedy.

Delivering particularly noteworthy performances are seniors Nicholas Lindstrom and Victoria Babcock. Lindstrom plays a perfectly pompous Polonius — his facial expressions are continually dynamic and his boorishness is spot on, accented by the reactions of the actors around him.

Babcock is equally impressive. Playing Ophelia, she does not speak in the first two scenes in which she appears, but once she does, she is a force to be reckoned with. From her very first reply to Laertes, she is electric on the stage. She is sardonic, optimistic, loving, scorned and, finally, mad.

Babcock's final appearance is impactful. She is not haunting, but rather verges on the edge of a total loss of control — Babcock's Ophelia reaches the brink, beginning to shout, only to pull herself back by the use of a song. Her acting is augmented by her impressive costuming and makeup.

Of course, no production of "Hamlet" can succeed without a strong titular character, and Senior Cassidy Leyendecker does not disappoint. Together with the directors, she chose to portray Hamlet as a female protagonist.

Her portrayal of Hamlet as a woman is impressive — she moves between emotions with ease, bringing life to Hamlet’s many angst-ridden soliloquies and highlighting the clever wit that supports Hamlet’s friendships.

Leyendecker is persuasive in the role. Her entire portrayal calls into question whether Hamlet’s gender holds particular importance in the thrust of the play. Certainly, played as a woman, a number of critical theories regarding “Hamlet” do not apply in quite the same way. But as far as performance goes, Leyendecker’s Hamlet is perfectly convincing regardless of gender.

Gender is one of two major changes Schnell and Crosby made to the original script. Their casting was gender-blind (with the exception of Ophelia and Polonius) and they allowed cast members to choose the gender of the character they played. They said the only exceptions to this rule were Ophelia’s family, as they felt the contrast between Ophelia’s femininity and the toxic masculinity of Laertes and Polonius was an important aspect of the original play to preserve.

Only Leyendecker and Meredith Soward (Rosencrantz) chose to change the gender of the characters they played. As such, there are a number of females playing male characters (though no males playing female characters, despite the history of Shakespearean drama.)

The way the casting and the female Hamlet highlight gender is interesting. Lines about Hamlet’s “unmanly grief,” Hamlet’s indictment of her mother (“Frailty, thy name is woman!”) or even Hamlet’s use of syllogism to defend calling Claudius “mother” certainly sound different in a piece that already plays around with gender.

The second major change to the original is the time period, which is a fairly common change to make in Shakespeare productions. Schnell and Crosby set the play in the modern world to explore the tensions between millennials and baby boomers.

While the gender changes work within the play, the time period change is less successful. For one thing, during the first half of the play, the only ways to mark the time period change is first by the director’s note and second by the modern clothing the actors wear. Neither mechanism manages to make the play directly relatable to a modern college student, though that seems to be the goal.

The second half does slightly better in bringing the play forward in time — Claudius (graduate student Michael Vaclav) exchanges his dagger for a gun and Hamlet pulls out an iPhone. But these details are not quite enough to make the change convincing. Any deeper meaning the time change might have had is lost in the rest of the play.

Part of the trouble might be staging the production in the lab theatre — though the setting provides numerous opportunities for audience interaction, it limits what can be done with the set itself. As such, there are no visual stage cues that move the play forward.

Overall, the performance of “Hamlet” is impressive and enjoyable: The acting is skillful and the use of gender, intriguing.

“Hamlet” shows at 7:30 p.m. Friday and 7 p.m. Saturday in the Washington Hall Lab Theatre. Tickets are \$7, available at the LaFortune Box Office.

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