Flaws fail to hinder notes of brilliance in ‘Hamlet’

BY GORDON BRADEN

The Rice Players’ 15th annual go at Shakespeare, under the direction of Roger Glade and Neil Havens, has produced a “Hamlet” very handsomely mounted and continuously engrossing, but curiously unarticulated.

To begin with the best, Glade’s cavernous set, reminiscent in its granitic solidity (occasionally disturbed by a too-quickly-passing character) of the marvelous chilly charac-
ter of the Russian film of the play, virtually steals the show.

Lack of Pacing

It is luckily given ample visual counterpoint by Michele Stojan’s costumes, which continue to amaze me with their epitomizing rightness and remarkable professional quality.

At the other end of the scale, Shakespeare’s dramaturgy is subjected to varying degrees of non-use. The type of sensibility that can make a line like “The bird of dawning singeth all night long” utterly autolectic is completely lacking.

Not quite so thorough is the obliteration of any continuing sense of pacing within a scene. This is most apparent in the almost total absence of pauses between speeches; the words tend to flow into one another at a continuous rate without much variation by the judicious use of speeding up, slowing down, and simple silence.

Halting Dialogue

Moreover, with a few exceptions, when a character is speaking, (and this is most of the time) everything else stops. The others stand stock still and carefully postpone any reaction until it is their turn again to speak.

Not insignificantly, the best scene of the production (and very well done in its own right) is the dumb show in Act III, which, wordless, is free to pace itself with remarkable tact and grace.

Mushroom Cloud

Glade obligingly tells us in his program notes that this is a production built on an Interpretation.

He explains, quoting from English director Peter Hall, “For our decade I think the play will be about the disillusionment which produces an apathy so deep that commitment to politics, to religion, or to life is impossible... There is a sense of what-the-hell anyway, over us looms the mushroom cloud.”

An interpretation is not simply a director’s decision, but an orienting device within the production, growing outward and manifesting itself in endless miniatuea.

Gertrude Bedded?

To pick an easy example, the director is faced with the problem: Does Gertrude obey Hamlet’s injunction against returning to Claudius’s bed?

Glade and Havens say no (Olivier, to give a counterexample, said yes), and the fact adds its bit to the play.

However, miniatuea more subtle than this one seem to have been ignored by the Players.

The innumerable questions concerning Who reacts to What, and How, lose all significance when almost everyone speaks in the same tone and stands (still) in the same pose, and almost all of the time.

Polished Spheroidea

And an interpretation is a synthesis of miniatuea. This production presents itself as a polished spheroid, possibly prolated in some general direction,

But without protuberance, entrance, or texture.

The actors, however, are not nearly so bad as I may make them sound to be. Their delivery has a fairly consistent norm—a resonating, unpunctuated monotonous aimed somewhere between rows M and Q, accompanied by a single facial expression.

But the single note thus struck is not frequently appropriate; Mike Diehl, as Laertes, comes off well in this regard, as does Chester Rosson, as the first player king.

Vital Polonius

Roberta Reed, as Ophelia, has perhaps too much of the giggling schoolgirl about her, but provides a note that is refreshingly—well, fresh. Fred Rolka does noticeably well as the Gravedigger, though he doesn’t seem to have come to grips with the accent required.

By far the liveliest and most adept performance is given by Roger Glade as Polonius, but he is (obviously) enjoying himself too much to notice that he misses his timing almost as often as he hits it.

Opaque Prince

Dennis Fontaine as Hamlet is forceful but emotionally opaque. He carries on fairly skillfully the general technique of treating each line, and, as much as possible, each paragraph, as a single tone, whose rhythm is exterior, in relation to its surroundings, rather than interior.

There is an accumulating of massive blocks of speech, shoved together and offered for our aural digestion.

The limitations of this sort of reading are obvious, since it admits no subtlety and is constantly gravitating down-wards monotonoy.

Flawed Fascination

But Fontaine links it with a strangely hypnotic inflection of voice that, though it could certainly be improved upon, sounds decided artificial, and, inter-
alia, causes “quietus” to come out eerily close to “coitus,” is his soldest virtue.

Despite the fact that the production is flawed in almost every particular, the cumulative effect is a very real sense of the fascinating movement of the play.

The very express-train movement of the individual scenes gives the whole a splendid thrust that consistently resists tedium.

Pageant Hamlet

It is an excellent pageant presentation of “Hamlet,” ideally suited for the bus-loads of high-school students who will no doubt be carted to see it.

This is in itself no mean accomplishment: last year’s progressively disintegrating “Julius Caesar” gives some idea of what the Players have managed to avoid here.

But the production of a good pageant should satisfy no one whose artistic ambitions extend beyond the producing of an enjoyable evening’s entertain-
ment; and the Players’ artistic ambitions are well known.

This “Hamlet” was intended as an agonized cry on modern life. That it isn’t says nothing about the desirability of the effort or the place for encour-
agement or the potential for growth.

But the potential remains a potential.