Glade scores tabletop triumph with "Dr. Faustus"

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Christopher Marlowe, writing at the same time as the very young Shakespeare, is often accused of poor characterization within superbly structured drama. "Dr. Faustus" is thematically effective, but the fall of its protagonist is not directed clearly enough for the taste of the critics.

It is, paradoxically, the development of the doctor's character which holds the play together. The confrontation scenes between Faustus and Mephistophilis provide the measure of the doctor's changing spiritual condition. For the play to succeed these scenes must work. For Roger Glade and the Wiess College Tabletop Theater, these scenes did work, and it was the way to success.

"Dr. Faustus" was an unusually good production. Rev. John Worrell, in the role of Faustus, was a man of pride, a man who could not deny the power of his own will. This pride was developed without lapse from his first speech, in which he rejects conventional fields of human knowledge, until his death speech. Worrell's performance was inspired and faultless.

Mephisto Superb

Counterpointing the doctor's pride are the fibes of Mephistophilis, the devil's earthly agent who defends that pride in intensely ironic speeches. He virtually tames Faustus; the doctor's fear of denying his own will increases steadily until he cannot deny it. At that point he is destroyed.

Even in a production as explosive and stageworthy as this one, Bennett Falk, who played Mephistophilis, stood out. The contrast of his dominating manner with the cowering character of his victim was the most striking element of this production, and its virtuosity alone would have made the production worthwhile.

The allegorical struggle between good and evil for the control of Faustus' soul is fought in the play between a Good Angel and an Evil Angel. They appeared frequently in the production but, correctly, did not distract from the natural leads—the doctor and his devil. Mark Gregory and Gary Henderson handled these roles adequately.

Standout Scenes

This was a show of stand-out scenes; the energy of these scenes carried the show. The most striking scene, and one of the most imaginative ones that has grace the Rice campus this year, was the presentation of the Seven Deadly Sins to the doctor. Crawling around the stage and making appropriate noises, each introduced himself and described his influence. The Sins exited carrying, appropriately, Sloth with them.

Some of the low comic scenes, which are generally attributed to a revising playwright because they are so genuinely bad, were attempted with some success in this production. In one of them, Wagner, Faustus' lackey, tries to impress a friend with his knowledge of black magic and manages to conjure Mephistophilis, who subsequently terrifies his conjurer.

These low characters spoke in an East Texas dialect that was annoying at first, but which became progressively funnier. The use of dialect is consistent with Marlowe. These actors, and all of the actors who played in bit parts, were more than accessory. It was, in some cases, their energy that pulled the show out of rough spots.

Religious Play

"Dr. Faustus" is an overtly religious play that is, nevertheless, broader in its context than Christian mythology. The internal destruction of the individual by pride is subordinated on one level to his Christian salvation, but this destruction stands adequately by itself as theme. The play is not just a morality play, though the Epilogue suggests this. Faustus is the hero, not a villain; he is man aspiring to direct knowledge of the eternal, and when he relies on will alone to acquire this knowledge, he makes his case universal.

The Wiess College production of the play abstracted it somewhat to achieve this effect of universality. Christian allusion was, for example, minimized. But the essentially Christian tone of the play was maintained; the friars enter at the end to mourn the loss of a soul.

If the show seemed modern more often than it did Renaissance, this testifies again to the energy of the acting and interpretation. Roger Glade and the Wiess Tabletop Theater produced a really stageworthy production from material that can be dry.

"Dr. Faustus" is one of four really venerable plays that will have been performed on campus this year. Brown College and Dr. Velz have already done "Everyman," which is late medieval, and Wiess is now planning a production of "The Alchemist," a Ben Jonson comedy — if Johnson's plays really are comic. The Players are now casting "Hamlet" for the spring. This emphasis on Renaissance drama, particularly by the individual college theaters, takes pressure off of the Players to perform older drama. The other colleges should take the cue.