

Hamlet (solo) eclipses virtuosity

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Bhaneja's 17-role show seethes with meaning



Actor Raoul Bhaneja performs a one-man version of Hamlet at Neptune Studio Theatre. (ADRIEN VECZAN / Staff)

Raoul Bhaneja delivers a remarkably pure and plain production of Hamlet that is potent in meaning.

The program for Hamlet (solo), a show Bhaneja premiered at Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille in 2006, lists only the actor and the director, Robert Ross Parker. There is no design team.

Casually dressed in black, the Toronto actor walks through the audience at the Neptune Studio Theatre, calls for lights and then starts the most ancient form of storytelling.

"Well, he doesn't have to worry about getting Alzheimer's," a woman said in the washroom, indicating her admiration for Bhaneja's astounding memorization of 4,042 lines and portrayal of 17 characters.

This one-man version of Hamlet, running two hours, including an intermission, is not about virtuosity. Bhaneja is not showing off. He's letting the story move through him, and what a story.

This sparse, focused telling brings out all the majesty in the language and the complexity in the play.

Bhaneja plays Hamlet as an adolescent boy who can be childish and churlish, who totally founders when he learns from his father's ghost that his dad was murdered by Hamlet's uncle. Hamlet is already suffering from grief and is angry at his mother for so quickly remarrying and for marrying that uncle.

In the context of a tormented adolescent totally unprepared for adult betrayal, this Hamlet makes a lot of sense.

Bhaneja approaches Shakespeare's language as if it was everyday talk for the characters and also for us, making the meaning clear and contemporary.

His use of hand gestures and body postures is fluid and definitive. His Ophelia is a beautiful, tragic creature. To depict her madness and erosion of self-esteem, he puts his hands up to his face and has her peeking out from side to side when speaking, which is very effective and sad.

I sometimes got confused over who was who when it came to Horatio and Laertes, and who kills whom at the end.

Bhaneja frames the play within the raspy breathing of the ghost, a symbol for mortality and urgency in a short, harsh life. It's a cold world.

Hamlet (solo) is a thought-provoking production because its simplicity highlights Shakespeare's shrewd observations on the nature of life.

Like myself, many people will have forgotten how many everyday phrases come from Hamlet like, "To thine own self be true."

Hamlet (solo) runs at the Neptune Studio Theatre, now called the Scotiabank Studio Theatre, as part of Neptune's Studio Series to Sunday.

(ebarnard@herald.ca)

About the Author »

By ELISSA BARNARD Entertainment Reporter | Theatre Review

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