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Loyal 'Hamlet' stays audience-friendly

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If you've never been able to "get" Shakespeare, you might want to make a point of visiting "Hamlet" tonight at Summerlin Park.

Director Deanna Duplechain's Nevada Theatre Company mounting (finishing up a three-day run) is the easiest to follow interpretation of the Bard's tragedy Vegas has seen in at least a dozen years. The director's overriding goal seems to be to communicate the author's text. That may not sound innovative, but in this day and age, with directors' egos so often upstaging the great scripts of yesteryear, Duplechain's respect for the playwright's intentions feels revolutionary.

The two-hour evening, with no intermission, has a second unusual element. Our hero, in the form of actor Zander Schaus, is more active, mentally and physically, than we usually see. Scholars have argued for centuries whether Hamlet's behavior when he first finds out his father may have been murdered is the action of a passive man or a man with a crafty plan up his sleeve. In Duplechain's hands, Hamlet is aggressively vengeful from the beginning. When his father's ghost (the authoritative Pavel Wonsowicz) fills him in on what's happened, Hamlet vows to get to the bottom of things, as if he were The Rock swearing vengeance in "Walking Tall." Schaus' Hamlet is no ineffectively cerebral college boy.

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The production overflows with acting talent. Rick Ginn is a memorable Polonius. Yes, he gets laughs playing a pompous, verbose twit, but what's exciting is how thoroughly human Ginn makes his character. Cameron Milzer is gracefully sensual as Hamlet's mother Gertrude. Stephanie Ervin makes for a hypnotically vulnerable Ophelia. Andrei Mignea's physicality as Laertes gives fireworks to his conflict with Hamlet. When the two go at each other, you feel as if their explosive tempers are evenly matched. (Their fight scene is greatly helped by Colleen Kelly's exciting fight choreography.)

In the title role, Schaus is forceful and effective, but his in-your-face aggression occasionally wears on the nerves. He doesn't have much vocal variety, and the microphones -- those awful "phone operator" things that make everyone look like chorus members in a Madonna concert -- make you cringe every time Schaus yells. And he yells a lot.

Steve Turner's four-level set is stately and atmospheric. Brad Spooner's lights achieve some startling effects with a seemingly minimum of fuss. William Howard III's costumes are elegant and yet curiously (and refreshingly) subdued.

Occasionally, the desire to make the show accessible clouds the story. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are played by Vaughn Pyne and Ben Stobber as vaudeville buffoons, and as a result, we lose the important moment when Hamlet suddenly feels betrayed by them. Thad Bell and Pyne are directed so broadly as the gravediggers that their important scene comes off as plain stupid. The sound system constantly threatens to sabotage the production. (If outdoor sound can't be corrected, shouldn't we all just stay indoors?)

But Duplechain gives the story a sane spin. Her expert pacing (aided considerably by background music that seems to pulsate more nervously as the story progresses) keeps the tension building at breakneck speed. This "Hamlet" is as audience-friendly as it is Shakespeare-loyal.

And that's a very unusual combination.

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