

The play's the thing' ETSU Theatre closes season with modern adaptation of 'Hamlet'

"Classic" does not mean out-of-date or dull, and an energetic and passionate cast of ETSU students worked to prove that last weekend through a fresh representation of Shakespeare's "Hamlet."

"Whenever a Shakespeare play is done, you want to breathe new life to it, but not in the sense of 'dumbing it down,'" says director Herb Parker, an ETSU theatre professor and regional theatre professional. "You want to bring the material up through the intelligence of your performers and also bring the audience along with the story so that they can understand and follow the play."

Shakespeare's epic tragedy tells the story of Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, who wants to avenge the death of his father, the king. His uncle, Claudius, perpetrated the killing and married Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, to obtain the throne. The play portrays a wide range of strong feelings, from grief to passion and madness.



Hamlet (Maury Reed), with Queen Gertrude (Bethany Waddell), sees the ghost of his dead father.

Even though a piece as famous as "Hamlet" has been produced hundreds of ways, ETSU's Division of Theatre and Dance presented a unique interpretation of the play, Parker says, through modern dress, a conversational style and adjustments to some of the scenes and lines.

"You can always pretend you found a new play and look at it as if it is never been done before," he says. "I moved scenes around and cut some lines. You have the freedom to do that, as long as it is close to context."

Written around 1601, the text of the play is overflowing with heavy Elizabethan slang, which might represent a challenge for the actors and the audience. "Language was such an art form when the text was written," says junior Bethany Waddell, who portrays Gertrude. "There are definitely some lines that are difficult to pronounce, but it is still English, so the understanding will come."

To make it easier for the audience to understand the lines, Parker was strict with the actors about the pronunciation, emphasizing the importance of correct articulation, punctuation and endings of the words. There were no British accents or declamatory delivery of the speech, said Parker, who is a diction coach and oft-Shakespearean actor. "I wanted the actors to be as conversational as they could be with a Shakespearean text and try to make the words their own."

Hamlet says the words, "the play's the thing," and Parker is of a similar mind, so no ornate period clothing. "In Shakespeare's time, they wore contemporary clothing," he says. "The play took place in the language. . . . Modern dress fit what I wanted to say about the people in this modern world."

Another innovative aspect of ETSU's production was its stage. Three platforms with two levels were mobile and moved forward or backward depending on the act and scenes. It helped the play move more quickly from scene to scene, Parker said, and made for a shorter evening in the theater and a sense of movement and momentum. "Everyone knows at least a little about 'Hamlet' and we didn't want to bore people," he said.

The cast boasted 16 actors who gave life to 23 characters. For most of them, "Hamlet" represented a premiere – either their first main stage role or the first role in a classic piece. Siblings Ophelia and Laertes were portrayed by two freshman theatre majors, Savannah Arwood and Samuel Floyd. While Floyd performed in a student production last semester and Arwood appeared in fall's "Inherit the Wind" at ETSU, the Shakespearean standard presented new opportunities for both actors. "Ophelia was a neat role for me, and for the first time I felt really challenged," says Arwood, 19, who played Hamlet's sweet but ill-fated beloved.

The challenge of connecting a "traditional" play to modern ways was a priority for the actors, as well. Senior Maury Reed portrayed the main character, Hamlet.

"'Hamlet' is very difficult, especially because everybody knows it, has expectations about what its character should or should not be," says Reed, who

has performed in "Inherit the Wind," "Grease," "The Actor's Nightmare," "The Cherry Orchard" and "The Glass Menagerie" since coming to ETSU. "When it comes to it, you have to completely push that thought process outside and let whatever happens happen. I tried to make him as dynamic as possible, angry and philosophical."



Hamlet (Maury Reed, center) asks Horatio (Reece Wheeler, left) and Marcellus (Matt Miller) to swear they will never divulge what they have seen.



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For Waddell, Queen Gertrude was her first role in a play written by Shakespeare. Even though her character has been performed many times before, Waddell said she would rather investigate her character by herself and not be influenced by other actresses' interpretations. "I didn't want to mirror anybody else's character," she said. "I wanted mine to be unique."

Parker believed this different interpretation of Hamlet would be an experience for the people who already know "Hamlet," as well as for those who are not familiar with Shakespeare's plays. "As a beginner, it is a mistake to try to understand every word," he says. "Simply try to sense what is going on emotionally between the characters and you will find yourself in the story."