

Reaction to Masterpiece Theater production of Hamlet by Don Miller

I knew I'd turned into a Shakespearian production, though I did not identify it immediately. I had to see and hear more. Sure enough, it was Hamlet, slightly modernized, for some of the time actors wore street clothes of today. On the other hand, especially during the play within a play, they wore the costumers of the time. I'd expect modern English, but for the most part it was the authentic Elizabethan. In the accidental slaying of Ophelia's father, Hamlet used a pistol. It wasn't really necessary and if we thought about it, it would create a problem, for the king's attendants armor, which are no match for gunfire. Also they did not interfere, as would the secret service, what with the suspicious noises going on.

It is easy to bypass such considerations, however, as they contributed to the success of the presentation rather than distracted from it. The director threw in a mirror theme, which took some doing, for mirrors don't work well with cameras on stage. but again, it tied things together---even though it was barely suggested in the original.

At first I thought Hamlet was overdone by Tennent, but he wore well with me. He is an outstanding actor. Patrick Stewart played the notorious king well. Hamlet's apparent indecisiveness came though---but it didn't seem neurotic to me but a necessary function of the situation. Ophelia and her father were integral to the play, a fact which had escaped me previously, for they created motivation. Hamlet's rejection was based on his obsession with the sin of the reigning king and queen, the former his uncle (father's brother!) and the latter his mother. How they came into power was outrageous, though not uncommon. Triangles abound in this play, intergenerational included.

In previous productions I failed to notice Rosenkranz and Guildenstern. I was appalled at their duplicity. The motivation of the characters was brilliantly conceived, especially Ophelias brother, augmented by her suicide and his finally being convinced that it was not the king who killed their father. Hamlet implied that it was accidental, which it was, and at the final scene, Laertes believed him and forgave him just before he died. The queen taking the cup intended for Hamlet is a touch we've seen several times, as in a Perry Mason episode, but here it is not accidental, but deliberate. The mother is consumed with guilt. Rather than see them murder her son, she would go first. Hamlet's suspicions are confirmed by the king's reaction, while the king's behavior convinces everyone else at the king's behavior (and her's) in 'the play within the play.

Shakespeare's Hamlet demonstrates how evil compounds itself, destroying others innocent of its outset. Note how the cover up, though seemingly drawn in by necessity, makes the matter far worse, as if it were not bad enough at the beginning. I missed seeing the opening scene, the father's ghost on the parapet. What would they have done with that? Hallucination, dream, literal? I was very impressed by the way they handled the soliloquies. It was made easier by the possibilities RV cameras afford. As in psychodrama I do, they attached it to action, so that all the soliloquy's would not be the same. Tennant took his time, making use of pauses and silence, rise and fall of volume in accord with the words being said, which we never did in Bill Meuhl's class at YDS. I have enormous respect for this kind of acting---it seems so much more real and contemporary. And also renewed respect for the Bard of Avon.

How phrases have caught on. A PIECE OF WORK., CONSCIENCE DOES MAKE COWARDS OF US ALL, GOODNIGHT, SWEET PRINCE, TO A NUNNERY GO. They referred to the graveside, where Hamlet, handling the skull, says "Alas, poor Yourek I knew him well." Those particular words were omitted, but the sense of them remains, and ties it well with the developing plot---which I missed previously. The mirror image was worked into the confrontations, as I alluded to above. How very appropriate the staging to the plot, whether or not Shakespeare conceived it so.

Creative writers and psychodrama directors note the seamless flow (aided by camera closeups) through the famous soliloquies functioning as turning points for the plot, which answer the "why" as the basis for the "How, what, when, where and who" every story requires. Do literary critics concur?