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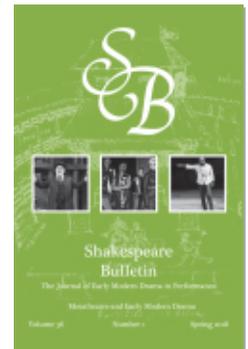
Hamlet (review)

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Hamlet

Presented by **Silicon Valley Shakespeare** at **Sanborn Skyline County Park**, Saratoga, CA. July 28—September 1, 2017. Directed by Angie Higgins. Scenic design by Jim Culley and Ting Na Wang. Choreography by Sonya Duffin. Costumes by Lisa Claybaugh. Sound by Phil Surtees. Lighting by John Bernard. Dramaturgy by Doll Piccotto. With Anne Yumi Kobori (Hamlet), Doll Piccotto (Claudius, Ghost), Regina Kohl (Polonius), Sarah Thurmond (Horatio), Melissa Weinstein (Gertrude), Sara Renée Morris (Ophelia), Jenafer Thompson (Laertes, Player), and others.

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What does single-gender casting do for plays and their audiences? In a *Shakespeare Unlimited* podcast published by the Folger Shakespeare Library on June 27, 2017, Barbara Bogaev asked Phyllida Lloyd, the director of a trilogy of all-female Shakespeare productions in London, what the effect and power of such casting is for Shakespeare audiences today. Lloyd answered that “what’s thrilling about it, whether it’s all men, or all women, is that you start seeing the shapes, [...] hearing new parts of the text.” Such casting also offers a “disruption” of expectations about gender, she added. Her own decision to do Shakespeare with an all-female cast was inspired by a generative anger at how few theater jobs were available to women in her part of the world in the early twenty-first century. Her project began as “jobs for the girls, unashamedly. I didn’t want my niece going to see any more classical plays thinking [...] ‘I’m the one in the corner, sort of mooning over the leading man.’ I wanted to feel that she could go to the theatre and think, ‘My God, I could be in charge.’”

In Angie Higgins’s energetic *Hamlet*, part of Silicon Valley Shakespeare’s 2017 season, women were confidently in charge. The actors were all women, and there was a sense of their playing for something bigger than their audience’s engagement with just this play. To this reviewer, their dynamism spoke to their stewardship for independent and community theater, and their assertion of the significance of women in theater and the world today. Women also dominated in the crew; their use of lights and colors to successfully evoke a cold Denmark in the lush woods of the Santa Cruz mountains of California attested to a fine understanding of the venue of the performance, the devices of theater, and the play itself. Staged under an evening sky in a mountain park of redwoods and tan bark oaks, the theme that this presentation underscored was that of haunting. Actual trees that started life before the common era stood at the edge of the audience’s attention as a group of present-day women-players

performed centuries-old characters who all seemed capable of imagining better versions of themselves but could not ultimately become them. That the production's predominantly young cast succeeded in evoking such a sense of intangible but real possibility for the characters of the play—and for the world in which the play is performed—may be testimony to the discoveries fostered by a collective exploration of a seminal text, or the vision of the director, or the reciprocal relationship of this troupe with its audience, or just the plain hard work of a multiethnic and dedicated team. The effect was distinctly rewarding.

In the first scene, the manifoldness of haunting(s) was underlined by not one, but three ghostly figures emerging from the woods, almost as though each of the watchers, Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio, had a ghost of their own. One of the most evocative effects of the production was the doubling of the dead king and his living brother by the same actor, thus underscoring the potential continuities and conflicted affiliations between these individuals. (When in the closet scene later Hamlet urged his mother to look at the “counterfeit presentment of two brothers” (3.4.64), it was clear that the difference Hamlet asserted between them rested on what he knew of the *persons* they stood for.) Doll Piccotto, the actor in this double role of the Ghost and Claudius, was magnificent in her ruthlessness as Claudius on the one hand, and her tenderness as the once-parent to Hamlet and once-husband to Gertrude on the other. Indeed, the two most poignant moments of the production involved the Ghost's fraught relationships with his erstwhile dearest relations. At the end of the Ghost's exchange with Hamlet in act one (and before the re-entrance of Horatio and Marcellus), the Ghost silently bent to stroke Hamlet on the head. The female actor's body helped visualize, with startling clarity, the maternal affection to which Hamlet no longer had access. It was suddenly clear that Hamlet's grief was not just for a lost father, but for something of both father and mother, a composite figure of care. In act three, when the Ghost visited Hamlet in Gertrude's closet, Piccotto again played the moment with surpassing gentleness. The Ghost fixed his eyes on Gertrude (played by Melissa Weinstein) between addressing Hamlet: “But look, amazement on thy mother sits. / O, step between her and her fighting soul” (3.4.128–9). Again, the female actor's body recalled ghosts of female same-sex desire and fondness, and brought into relief the grief of love betrayed from profound homosexual or homosocial intimacy. It was all unmanly grief, and the more powerful for being so.

In Hamlet, played by a nervously active Anne Yumi Kobori, the audience was presented with a compelling performance of the haunted



Fig. 5. Anne Yumi Kobori as Hamlet in *Hamlet*. Silicon Valley Shakespeare, dir. Angie Higgins. Photo by Evelyn Huynh, courtesy of Silicon Valley Shakespeare.

state of being that could ever persuade anyone that the way to catch a wrongdoer—who also happened to be the kingdom’s most powerful person—was to stage a play for them. Words burst from Hamlet like uncontainable units of thought, convincing viewers of his impulsiveness in the taunting (and later, killing) of Polonius, his colluding with the Players for *The Mousetrap*, and his plunge into Ophelia’s grave. Unfortunately, Kobori’s speed of verbal delivery sometimes interfered with the thought-by-thought introspectiveness of some of the best-known poetry of the play, including the monologue “To be or not to be” (3.1.64–98) and the intimations of mortality addressed to Horatio: “There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all” (5.2.233–7). Also, Hamlet was a less convincing fencer than Laertes.

A skillfully edited playtext assured Ophelia of her best lines. The unfairness of her situation—from the injunctions of Polonius, to the emotional violence visited on her by Hamlet in the nunnery scene, to her final irrevocable loneliness in the absence of father, brother, and lover—was emphasized by the single-gender casting. Her increasing marginalization in the presence of female actors playing characters like Polonius, Claudius, and Hamlet offered a sinister reminder of the effects of internalized

patriarchy among both men and women. In the bodies of the female actors playing men of power and consequence, the audience was invited to see not only the oppression of a woman by the men in the play, but also the oppression still enacted on women by women who are themselves so caught within patriarchy as to not register its imbalance or injustice. But before she was mad, Ophelia was wry and smart. During Hamlet's insufferable orchestration of everything leading to *The Mousetrap*, her delivery of "You are as good as a chorus, my lord" (3.2.269) was witheringly dry.

Ophelia was also pivotal for the two most effective dance sequences of the production. In the nunnery scene, the dialogue paused as Hamlet and Ophelia danced together in agonized attraction and ultimate irreconcilability. In the wake of this speechless articulation of their ability to love yet hurt one another, Ophelia's lie to Hamlet's question "Where's your father?" (3.1.141) became inevitable. Ophelia answered, knowing its untruth: "At home, my lord" (3.1.142.) The second instance was a gorgeous arrangement of light, sound, and movement. After Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death by water, Ophelia re-entered a blue-lit stage with six loosely-robed actors as "waves"/ghostly presences. This sequence enacting Ophelia's death would have been gimmicky but for its stunning follow-through: the "waves" that had just drowned her now converted into her coffin, thus setting the stage for the gravedigger scene. Movement and mortality were brought together with deft control.

To match the claustrophobia of those who can never effectively leave Elsinore, the costumes of everyone other than the Players were in variations of black or dull colors. The one exception was Gertrude, regal in purple. This, alongside her queenly comportment, accentuated her breakdown in the closet. Several of the smaller parts merit mention for attention to detail. Guildenstern was a canny and pragmatic counterpart to the ingratiating but clueless Rosencrantz. Horatio was pragmatic and kind, perhaps more aware than anyone of the doom toward which this world was hurtling, but trying to believe in its recuperation. In the complete absence of Fortinbras, Horatio spoke the final lines, asking angels to sing an ambiguously "sweet prince" (5.2.397) to his rest. No angels appeared, no song followed, but the ghostly presences—who had accompanied the Ghost, who had helped "drown" Ophelia, and who had formed her grave—now knelt to enshroud the dead.

