

Shakespeare Power



courtesy of washingtontimes.com

The Bard's unending inspiration lights up two fine Vortex productions

By Jack Hughes
Staff Reporter

Unlike, say, fossil fuel, William Shakespeare is ever-plentiful and shows no sign of tapping out.

On stage, his plays have been performed time and again. In movies, Shakespeare is the most filmed author of all time, racking up over 420 feature films. His work can also be taken apart and put back together to fit any culture (Akira Kurosawa's classic "Throne of Blood," for instance, is a samurai "Macbeth"). Writers have used Shakespeare to wrap their own stories around, like playwright Tom Stoppard did with his existential comedy "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead."

So what does this obsession with Shakespeare mean? Two comedies at the Vortex Theatre think about this question in two very different but equally entertaining ways.

"Good Night Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)," written by Ann-Marie MacDonald and directed by Victoria Liberatori, looks at Shakespeare through the academic's eyes. Well, sort of. The play is an acid-trip "Alice in Wonderland" in Shakespeareville.

Assistant Professor Constance Ledbelly is an unappreciated, absent-minded academic. She slaves away for her object of unrequited love, the nerdy,

elbow-patched Professor Claude Knight (played by Benjamin Liberman, who also has a great time as Othello, Tybalt and... Juliet's nurse). Constance also has a side project: she is trying to decode what may be a source play for "Othello" and "Romeo and Juliet," a comedy by an earlier author. Constance almost gives up on the whole thing when Knight proposes to the obnoxious Romana (one of the wide variety of roles played by the talented Lori Stewart). But instead, Constance goes down her own rabbit hole, in the form of her office trashcan.

Like a sort of literary Marty McFly, Constance drops into "Othello" and "Romeo and Juliet" at key points and saves the characters from their tragic endings. Without their endings, the plays quickly turn into comedies. Desdemona (Stewart), Othello's previously doomed wife, is a sword-waving, war-infatuated loony. The teenage Romeo and Juliet, when saved from being "star-crossed lovers," are bored, impulsive and, well, horny. In fact they *both* develop a crush on Constance, much to her embarrassment.

Romeo (played with pitch-perfect silliness by Drew Groves, who also gives Iago a devilish glee), tries to seduce Constance while wearing a blue dress. Heather Yeo's impetuous (and, frankly, insane) Juliet, gives it a shot dressed like a man and equipped with a sword, dagger, and poison just in case they want to die together. And there's

more...

"Good Night Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)" is filled to the brim with fun, questions and a real love of language. In the Vortex production, the talented cast of five plays 16 different characters.

‡ § ‡

"I Hate Hamlet," which looks at Shakespeare, and specifically "Hamlet," from the actor's perspective, was written by Paul Rudnick and directed by Brian Hansen. Performing Hamlet is, to many actors, a sort of Everest. There's glory if you make it, of course, but a long way to fall if you don't.

The fall looks more likely for Andrew Rally, played with sincere angst by Ryan Jason Cook. Rally is a TV actor, made semi-famous (and well-off) by his role as a doctor on a prime-time hospital drama. With his show canceled, Rally has moved to New York in the hopes of starting over. Taking the role of Hamlet in a Shakespeare in the Park production might be just what he needs. But it certainly isn't what he wants.

As his real estate agent, the boisterous Felicia Dantine, (played by Linda Williams), excitedly informs him, Rally's new apartment was once inhabited by the great actor John Barrymore. Barrymore, who is probably best known today as Drew's grandfather, was a

Shakespearean actor and matinee idol in the 1920s and '30s whose pastimes included alcoholism and womanizing. When Andrew's girlfriend, a starry-eyed romantic called Deirdre (played by Leigh-Ann Santillanes) arrives and hears about the Barrymore connection and Andrew's next role, it's almost too much for her to handle.

Together with Andrew's sarcastic agent, Lillian Troy (played by Leslee Richards), the group performs a séance in order to talk to Barrymore. During the séance, Andrew, hating every minute of this, exclaims, "I hate 'Hamlet!'" In a cloud of smoke and a clap of thunder John Barrymore, played with charm and gusto by Dean Eldon Squibb, arrives. Like the ghost of Hamlet's father, Barrymore is there to spur the main character to action.

Unlike Hamlet's father, Barrymore is a lovable scamp who spends a great deal of time laughing, groping, and thrusting his codpiece around. Producer Gary Peter Lefkowitz (played by Robert Johnson), wants Andrew to come back to TV. But Barrymore isn't going to let Andrew sell out so easily.

"Good Night Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)" will have its last performances at the Vortex on the weekend of August 1-3. "I Hate Hamlet" finished this past weekend.

‡ § ‡