

# The Barnstable Patriot

## ELEMENTS ACTORS PUT AUDIENCE IN THE JURY BOX

The play's the thing all right, but Elements Theatre Company wants the audience to do more than just take in the dialog, scenery and costumes.

Elements is performing its latest theatrical enterprise, Shakespeare's Own: Vicious or Virtuous? ...You Decide, and the cast and crew have mounted another fine production at Paraclete House on Rock Harbor in Orleans. Selected scenes from the tragedies Hamlet and King Lear are performed by ETC, while the audience is asked to listen with a new ear and decide whether five key characters fall on the side of virtuous ("one who sacrifices himself for the good of others") or vicious ("one who sacrifices others for the good of himself"), according to a working definition given in the program. Ballots are handed out and tallied, and the audience's judgment is rendered at the end of the play, to a bow from each of the characters being judged.

Hold on – deciding may not be as easy as it sounds! Conversing with audience members during the intermission, director Sr. Danielle Dwyer (who also plays Queen Gertrude in the Hamlet portion) explained that she tried to choose scenes that stressed the more ambiguous aspects of the characters, as they wrestle with the moral and emotional crises that beset them. She emphasized that the performers play their roles "straight up" from the playbook – "We don't want the actors to manipulate the audience."

Throughout, the audience is confronted with the double-sided nature of a character's disposition, where there's a contrast between the power of spoken words and the actual deeds that are done (or not). Witness Claudius, who declaims in his cry to the gods: "Forgive me my foul murder!" – but quickly realizes, "That cannot be; since I am still possess'd/Of those effects for which I did the murder,/My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen."

Throughout these scenes, the cast demonstrates a grasp of the fine and fragile line that separates the venal act from one more praiseworthy, and enables us to savor Shakespeare's great gift.... his ability to convey his complex and sometimes archaic speech so that we clearly understand what's going on, and – most amazingly – see the "modern" embodied in that sixteenth-century language. Hearing expertly trained Shakespearean performers speaking these centuries-old lines and recognizing some aspects of Goneril, Hamlet, Cordelia or Claudius in ourselves can give us a turn. Whether whiny, spoiled, forgiving, selfless or treacherous, these characters can remind us of ... us.

To enhance their command of the Bard's turns of phrase, ETC players received extensive language-based training with teachers trained in Shakespearean theater from such places as London and Lenox, Mass., including well-known voice and speech coach Louis Colaianni in New York City. Down to the smallest spoken part, the actors' performances admirably reflect this rigorous training.

This show is a superlative example of Elements' ability to mount a fine production. The costume designers have emphasized the overall theme of presenting a neutral "face" so as not to distract the audience from the personal dramas enacted onstage, and players are beautifully attired in muted grays with a few mauve digressions, while the sets are plain horizontal platforms and cubes of varying heights. Periodically an actor takes the spotlight to fill in the narrative gaps, so the drama retains its continuity with the scenes not shown. The action moves seamlessly, and the timing is pitch-perfect.

One dramatic turn has eight white-masked, white-clad actors portraying the ghost of Hamlet's father, to enormous dramatic effect. Appearing from an enveloping mist, they eventually surround a kneeling Hamlet, speaking singly and in unison, and creating a sort of undulating wave of sound.

In a question-and-answer session following the performance, cast members were asked how they felt about their own characters and the judgments passed on them. All expressed their goal of presenting the characters "well enough" so that the audience could take a closer look at various facets of their personalities and thus make a less biased judgment. Lear (Brad Lussier) suggested that Lear himself "talks more than he does," and thus his sins are perhaps more "pardonable." While Claudius (Chris Kanaga) admitted praying for forgiveness, in the end he's done so many treacherous deeds he "can't go back." Of her role as Gertrude, Dwyer felt that despite the queen's vulnerability and weak nature, "In the end, Gertrude wants to be queen." Hamlet (Kyle Norman) really "wanted to be virtuous."

In the end, it's a complicated decision for audience members to make. We're asked to take a tantalizing tightrope walk and weigh the discrepancies between words and what may lie behind them – as Claudius well knew, when he ended his soliloquy with, "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: Words without thoughts never to heaven go." This fine play draws us closer to the magic of Shakespeare and the great gift of his language, traveling to us over a space of more than 400 years. And it's a tribute to Elements' stated purpose of believing "in the vitality of the word, and the community born between playwright, actor and audience."



# CAPE COD TIMES

## SHAKESPEARE: MUCH TO ADMIRE, BUT SOMETHING'S MISSING

By David Allen, *Cape Cod Times*

There certainly have been a lot of things done to, and with, the works of William Shakespeare through the years. Drag productions, productions set in the Old West and in outer space. Even attempts, particularly in the 19th century, to rewrite the endings of the tragedies for a more pleasant conclusion. (Look! Romeo and Juliet do live happily ever after!)

The appeal is obvious. The playwright has been dead for hundreds of years and thus can't collect royalties or complain about what's being done to his work. Not that he would, however. Although we know comparatively little about the life of Shakespeare, we do know that he was mostly in it for the money. He went to London to make his living in the theater, and when he made enough from his plays and part ownership of the Globe Theatre, he retired and high-tailed it back to Stratford. Even so, the plays themselves are so complex and rich that they invite a variety of interpretations and treatments, and that's a good thing.

Which brings us the latest work of the Elements Theatre Company: "Shakespeare's Own — Vicious or Virtuous ... You Decide: Scenes From Hamlet and King Lear." The gimmick here is that the company presents selected scenes from two of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, "Hamlet" and "King Lear," and then asks audience members to vote "vicious" or "virtuous" for selected characters via ballots placed on their chairs. At the end, the results of the voting are revealed.

On the plus side, this is a company that really knows how to do Shakespeare. It is beautifully staged and, even better, magnificently acted. The entire acting company is superb. It has clearly worked hard on the language — the text is there in all its glory. But, more important, the director, Sister Danielle Dwyer (who also plays Queen Gertrude in "Hamlet") and her cast have understood completely that Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed, not as great reading material. The actions of the characters, their motives and machinations, are all brilliantly played out. As just one example of many, the scene in which King Lear, very ably rendered by Brad Lussier, curses his own daughter is heartbreaking. The entire company does a terrific job of expressing the actions of the plays, not just the words. You never get the sense that characters are standing around waiting for their next line. They are always fully and completely "in the moment." It's a real joy to watch.

The visual aspect of the production is equally well-done. The costumes are all rendered in shades of gray, presumably to avoid too much delineation and, thus, tipping the vote. But they are richly made and the somber tone makes the occasional use of vivid red in set pieces a visual treat. The simple staging, using only platforms and boxes, serves to highlight what Shakespeare knew — it's all about the actor. And these actors bring the worlds of Hamlet and King Lear vividly to life.

But, ultimately, it's hard to get past what's missing. Presumably, if Shakespeare could have effectively told the story of Hamlet in an hour and a half, instead of the actual four-hour running time, he would have done so. (His primary goal being schillings, they might have been able to do two shows on Thursdays.) There's no "To be, or not to be" in this production. Hamlet doesn't have a lot of time for in-depth self-reflection. Lear, too, descends into madness awfully quickly. Or is that because we know there's more than what we're seeing? It's an interesting question: Because the plays of Shakespeare are so much a part of our cultural consciousness, is this "tinkering with the Bard" a flawed enterprise from the start? One of the delights of the movie "Shakespeare in Love" was watching that audience experience "Romeo and Juliet" for the very first time. It was probably the last audience to, in total, have no clue what was going to happen at the end. We know, though, that there's more to "King Lear" and "Hamlet" than this two-hour-plus performance, and while it's very skillfully done, does the attempt to distill certain characters into either-or, one-word descriptions justify the cutting?

I, for one, would have much rather seen this skilled ensemble attempt either one of the plays in full. For all of his other virtues, what Shakespeare did best was create multidimensional, fully human characters. Even the villainous Richard III becomes admirable in his treacherous skill. It's hard not to be somehow impressed by a guy who can attempt to seduce the widow of someone he's just killed at the man's funeral. It's nearly an exercise in futility, even in a truncated version, to distill Hamlet down to "vicious" or "virtuous." Even once we do so, what's the point?

It would be highly enjoyable to watch the talented Rachel McKendree play Ophelia in her entirety, or have Chris Kanaga explore all of the rich facets of King Claudius. This company could do a great job with either of these or almost any play by Shakespeare. What it has done is highly theatrical and exceptional. But I'd give up the chance to vote to see it do the whole play.