


The Gamm's entrancing Hamlet

The stuff of greatness

By BILL RODRIGUEZ | November 8, 2011

 Like 16

For many years, Tony Estrella is perhaps the strongest off-Trinity actor around here. One performance in particular — his 1997 *Hamlet* title role for Alias Stage — has had devoted theatergoers talking about it ever since. Now finally, in what has been the most anticipated theater event of the season, Trinity actor Fred Sullivan, Jr. (arguably the best off-Trinity director around here) and Estrella are reprising their collaboration at the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre (through December 11).

The Gamm is the successor to Alias Stage — and it's where Estrella has his day job as artistic director — so the full circle is complete.

The performance is amplified by an even better supporting cast this time, so this is not a mere exercise in nostalgia. If anything, Estrella has more inner life to bring to the role than he did at 25.

As with all finely tuned theater work, our satisfaction with this production is largely an accumulation of careful detail. When Hamlet is taken by his sympathetic friend Horatio (the perfectly cast Marc Dante Mancini) and the night watchmen to witness the wandering ghost of his murdered father, part of the response of the excitable prince is a flash of desperate joy in finally having an answer. When Polonius (Sam Babbitt) is ticking off advice in sending his son Laertes (Kelby T. Akin) off to university, his admonition to not dress ostentatiously is accompanied by replacing Laertes's colorful silk handkerchief with his own plain cotton one. Details like that.

Of course, that scene with the pedantic Polonius is one we always look forward to in *Hamlet*, here especially so because Gamm veteran Babbitt is also reprising his role. But this time around, director Sullivan and the actor not only tamp down the pomposity of his "neither a borrower nor a lender be" litany of advice, but pump up the comic potential in

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DYNAMIC DUO Babbitt and Estrella.

many of his other lines, such as a flicker of braggadocio when he mentions having played Julius Caesar. The character is further filled out when son Laertes seems honestly affectionate toward the old man, not simply humoring him, in the above send-off. That emotional layer also adds a dimension to his fury at the deaths of his father and sister. Numerous vivid moments accrue. When Rosencrantz (Ben Gracia) and Guildenstern (Joe Short) enter the empty throne room, they look above and around them like giddy groupies who have sneaked into Tom Brady's bedroom. (The set, with the help of scenic artist Katryne Hecht, couldn't be simpler: blood-red curtains, and floor and door the color of dried blood. Near the end, when everything will be made clear, the curtains are torn away to reveal a white background.)

New to the Gamm is Gillian Williams, whom you may have seen on TV in *The Good Wife* or *Body of Proof*. She gets to play an especially distraught Ophelia, not a vaguely disoriented young maiden with garlands in her hair, reciting snatches of songs on her way to accidentally drown in a stream. No, in this incarnation she is also barefoot but bloodied and grimy with filth, evidently having wandered about too long in this dangerous world as well as in her madly confused mind.

What keeps us entranced each moment in this familiar retelling of the brooding Dane's story is witnessing Estrella intently doing the same. Unlike other Hamlets, this one seems to be muttering aloud one long interior monologue throughout. It's more like we're privy to his thoughts rather than listening to speeches. That's not surprising with the most familiar soliloquy, "To be or not to be, that is the question", since that's explicitly a meditation. But while Estrella all but snaps his fingers at the start, like he has just then solved a quandary, he seamlessly continues its emotional insight into the next scene.

In this way, Hamlet's "Get thee to a nunnery!" charge to Ophelia becomes heartfelt imploring rather than petulant, as he begs her to have nothing to do with men like him, broken louts who will break her heart. Poignant stuff. What could be ordinary anger is now sad, ironic generosity.

Such a treat. Shakespeare's greatest work and the Gamm's finest hour. Catch Estrella in another 50 years and enjoy him as another terrific Polonius.