

# Review: Estrella mesmerizing in 'Hamlet'

BY SUSAN McDONALD FOR THE SUN CHRONICLE

Tuesday, November 8, 2011 11:34 AM EST



Tony Estrella as the title character in The Gamm production of "Hamlet." (Photo by Peter Goldberg)

## Director's risk-taking also pays off in winning production at Gamm

PAWTUCKET - As simple as it sounds to act insane, it is definitely an art form and no one has perfected it more than Tony Estrella.

Fifteen years after first playing the lead role in Shakespeare's classic tale of revenge, "Hamlet," Estrella takes to the stage at the Sandra Feinstein Gamm Theatre this month in a performance that is mesmerizing and utterly amazing.

"Madness in great ones must not unwatched go," Claudius says at the end of Act One.

Indeed.

All eyes are on Estrella, who starts off meek and barely noticeable on stage during his mother's wedding to his uncle, Claudius, just weeks after the death of his father, King Hamlet. But, once he is visited by the ghost of his father, who reveals that Claudius murdered him to claim his throne and his wife, he vows to seek revenge. He does

that in a somewhat circuitous way, so haphazardly that his mother and Claudius confer with the king's councilor, Polonius.

Polonius believes Hamlet is smitten with his daughter Ophelia and the headiness of love has him acting strangely. They stake out his meanderings to see if they can pair the two. Instead, Hamlet gives the well-known "get thee to a nunnery" speech to the heartbroken Ophelia.

The king and queen then engage Hamlet's friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to help snap him out of his funk.

Act Two gets more violent as Hamlet climbs out of his madness to physically avenge his father's death. There is poison dropped in wine goblets, swords dipped in poison and other Elizabethan treachery. And, there is death. This is, after all, a tragedy.

Undoubtedly, this production of "Hamlet" is strong because of risks taken by director Fred Sullivan Jr. and the talents of Estrella.

Sullivan's biggest risk is a set that is entirely red, perhaps symbolic for the blood shed on it, the love that threatens to grow on it, or the jealousy that unfolds on it. Although the lighting in some moments briefly cast the stage in a deep shade of pink, the red is largely effective and startlingly bold.

Estrella, on the other hand, was no risk. Sullivan and Estrella had worked on the same production in 1996, under Alias Stage, the predecessor of The Gamm. His director's notes in the program even state that, "(Estrella) has the technique and expertise of a great leading actor." As Hamlet, Estrella is superb, allowing his emotions to swing wildly from anger to introverted sadness. His portrayal of mania is eerily realistic and riveting. His is bolstered

by other strong performances by Sam Babbitt as Polonius, Gillian Williams as Ophelia, and Tom Gleadow as the ghost of the king. Each tackles Shakespeare's soliloquys with ease and fervor. Gleadow tells the story of his murder with deep passion as he writhes on the floor at his son's feet. Babbitt skillfully infuses his unique sense of mirth into various scenes, pausing as if losing a thought while relaying an important message, only to pull it together with a chuckle. Williams, who is on stage for the first time at Gamm, showed the chops that earned her the 2011 International Actors Fellowship from Shakespeare's Globe. She is stunning.

This production of "Hamlet" takes an age-old classic and breathes new life into it. The show is onstage through Dec. 11 at The Gamm Theatre, 172 Exchange St., Pawtucket. Tickets are available at [www.gammtheatre.org](http://www.gammtheatre.org) or 401-723-4266.