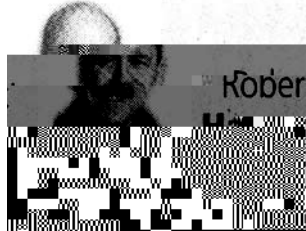


Friday, April 25, 2008

Puzzling choices cause confusion in 'Rosencrantz'

"There is a design at work in all art," states a character in "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead." Maybe, but the University of Alaska Fairbanks' current production of the play puts that assertion to the test.



The costumes mirror this stylistic

To be fair, Tom Stoppard's celebrated work is not interested in driving a central character through a traditional story arc. Instead, it is an intellectual meander as two minor characters from "Hamlet" explore questions of human freedom, identity and death.

The play's action lies in language and ideas. Stoppard's work delights in puns, literary and theatrical in-jokes and lightning-fast exchanges. All of this could frustrate those playgoers looking for straightforward conflict and resolution.

Unfortunately, some of director Anatoly Antohin's stylistic choices offer their own challenges. The result, at least for me, was a dramatically puzzling theatrical experience.

Take, for example, the performances. Two fine actors, Hadassah Nelson and Anna Gagne-Hawes, portray Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The fact they are women portraying men is inconsequential: Both give controlled and emotionally complex performances.

However, once we reach the Danish capital we encounter a court of caricatures: a hobbling and mumbling Polonius, a spasmodic Hamlet, a Claudius and Gertrude who blow each other exaggerated kisses. All the actors here play their parts for broad laughs.

I don't doubt the performers — Frank Francis-Chythlook as Polonius, Luke Roberts as Hamlet, and Kerry Velon and Sayrah Langenberg-Miller as Claudius and Gertrude — are capable of subtlety. However, Antohin has directed them toward farce, and to what ends?