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Tutto Theatre Company

Ophelia has her say

By Hannah Kenah

Women go crazy fairly often, so literature would have us believe, but the breakdown tends to occur offstage. The lovely, young, and heartbroken Ophelia is a prime example. The promotional material for Tutto Theatre Company's upcoming production of *Ophelia* describes her as "literature's most woefully underwritten female." Dustin Wills, who wrote the play and is directing this production, is fascinated by what Shakespeare doesn't tell us. "It's so shrouded in mystery," he says. "We don't have the whole story. Why does she go crazy?" The question inspired Wills to write the love story of Hamlet and Ophelia from her point of view. "Everything that comes out of her mouth is in reference to this masculine environment in which she lives. So I was wondering, 'What if you take that away and give her her own voice?'"

The play has a long and well-traveled history. Wills began writing *Ophelia* while studying abroad at Oxford. Upon returning to Austin, he did a workshop production for the David Mark Cohen New Works Festival at the UT Department of Theatre & Dance in 2005. Following that was a production in 2006 in Rome, where Wills began to develop a successful relationship with the English Theatre of Rome. Now *Ophelia* returns to Austin to mark the advent of a new phase for the company formerly known as the Coda Theater Project. Rechristened Tutto, the company has made Wills its new artistic director, and he's bringing a crisp, new focus to the troupe's work. "The mission is about going back and finding underserved communities throughout history," he says. "I'm really invested in working with biography and classical theatre but bringing it into a more modern context. To remember something but also to put something back together. To dismember and to re-member, in a way."

Wills' previous treatment of Shakespeare, a mash-up of *Cymbeline* in which half of the text was removed and replaced with text from other Shakespeare plays, garnered him an Austin Critics Table award for Outstanding Director. This time, he's giving us a *Hamlet* with five Ophelias, each under a subheading: Ophelia in love, Ophelia impassioned, Ophelia on edge, Ophelia undone, and Ophelia in water. These were the five ways in which Wills found it possible to break down the character's breakdown.

The task of reclaiming *Hamlet* is not taken lightly. Wills recognizes that he is playing with revered material. "*Hamlet* is so well known. If you're going to take some liberties, you better commit to them. You might as well be a bit audacious." In perhaps the boldest act of re-membering, Wills has given the "To be or not to be" speech to Ophelia. His tenacity and ambition should prove a fruitful thing not only for Tutto but for the entire city of Austin. He plans to continue to take his work to Rome. Whether the five Ophelias are creeping through the piazza of the Eternal City or over the stage of the Blue Theater, one thing is for sure: This time, they will have their say onstage.

Ophelia runs Thursdays–Sundays, Nov. 6-23, 8pm, at the Blue Theater, 916 Springdale. For more information, visit www.tuttotheatre.org.

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