



Arts: November 21, 2008

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Arts Reviews

By Avimaan Syam

Ophelia

Blue Theater, through Nov. 23

Running time: 1 hr, 35 min

When delivering the tragic news of Ophelia's death in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Queen Gertrude calls her "one incapable of her own distress." Indeed, dealt the double loss of lover and father, bereft of the men who made decisions for her since she was born, Ophelia's descent into madness – and death – has been often discussed but not nearly as often questioned. Or, as in the case of Tutto Theatre Company's *Ophelia*, completely retold.

From Tom Stoppard to John Updike to Austin's Refraction Arts, the totemic tale of Hamlet has been retold many times (not to mention the countless times it's been straight-up told). So whither Ophelia? As the girls put it, *Hamlet* was never Ophelia's story. More than deconstruct the tragedy of the prince, writer/director Dustin Wills deconstructs the tragic figure of Ophelia. He's found her character and arc broken into five pieces: in love, impassioned, on edge, undone, and in water. Instead of seeing the Ophelia we're used to in the nunnery scene or going mad in front of the court, we see these five parts of Ophelia working out their problems and desires behind the scenes.

So five Ophelias try to figure out this girl/woman/love/royalty/power/father/mother thing called *Hamlet* and fall one by one as the story moves past each's moment in the hierarchy. The ladies form a truly formidable Fab Five of Ophelias, a gaggle of gals at times brimming with sexual excitement, at times being sisterly, at times throwing ideas and concerns at one another. One at a time, they interact with Hamlet and Polonius (both played by the talented Gabriel Luna), then work through their trapped, tricky situations with the other facets of their character.

This may sound esoteric, but Wills' stellar direction keeps it mesmerizing throughout. *Ophelia* is full of so many wonderful moments and images right from the get-go, when the Ophelias harmonize Gertrude's speech about Ophelia's death. They dance wildly together, Hamlet leaps across the stage, books are hurled, women writhe, pants are taken off – things aren't just happening; they are *happening*, dynamically, all the time. With a shallow pond, five chairs, five ladders, ropes festooning the ceiling, and a wall full of love notes, the set is a playground that the cast romps around.

Ophelia is a terrific blend of simple and complex pleasures: A creepy, synchronized dance that marks the exit of one Ophelia is followed by another unabashedly crowing like a rooster to mark the next day. The electricity of the nunnery scene is balanced by the gals crying, "Fuck yeah!" in unison when Hamlet kisses one of them. Retelling *Hamlet* through Ophelia's eyes could easily be pedantic, mired in metaphor, or boring, so perhaps Tutto's greatest success is telling Ophelia's tale so beautifully, so vibrantly.

This Ophelia differs from the character we know. She must act for herself, because she will never be afforded the time and power otherwise. Contrast this with Hamlet, who has the righteous, royal power to do anything and yet dawdles past the chance to choose. Here, Ophelia's successes are her own. So is her downfall, and that's certainly different than the tale we know.

This is the first review where I just don't feel I've done the show justice. There's so much to take in, provocative ideas and great moments and a zillion Shakespearean references that I can't include here. Simply said: *Ophelia* is riveting.

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