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Review: 'Ophelia' at Blue Theatre

By Joey Sailer | Monday, November 17, 2008, 02:54 PM

Edgar Allen Poe wrote that "the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." If that's so, "Ophelia" gives us poetry five times over. The new work, written and directed by Dustin Wills for Tutto Theatre, gives us five different aspects of Ophelia, makes the audience come to sympathize with or even share Hamlet's love with each, and then kills her off.

Poe continued that "equally it is beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover." That's certainly true in the original "Hamlet," where the prince himself hauntingly wails her death in the graveyard, but here the bereaved is Ophelia herself.

That's both a strength and a weakness. At its lowest, "Ophelia" can seem overly introspective, insidery, and academic, all of which goes with the territory. It's easy to lose the sense of real relationships and emotions unfolding in the, admittedly clever, allusions to, echoes of, and twists on "Hamlet," "Romeo and Juliet," "Macbeth," "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and more.

At its best it's just as easy to forget all that and simply watch a young girl, or five, slowly descend into madness on her own.

The play opens ominously. The five Ophelias sit on a starkly white, wooden framed stage, designed by Lisa Laratta, under the boughs of a weeping willow made of tangled ropes and swings that grows, of course, aslant a brook. They dangle their feet, splash each other, and laze about until, sharply, they join in song and spoken word to recite Queen Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning.

From there the story follows Ophelia as she falls deeper in love with Hamlet, is warned away by her father, and devises a plan to trick him into madness. The plan, though I never could figure out why, is meant to both appease her father and win Hamlet's heart --- letting Ophelia please all the men in her life at the cost of herself.

While the plan itself may not make much sense, though it's certainly no less confusing than Hamlet's original device of feigned madness, the presentation is touching. Wills, a stronger director than writer, has an eye for beautiful and poignant scenes, bringing strong performances out of his entire cast.

Sofia Ruiz, as Ophelia in Love, opens the play with charming naiveté and innocence. Each subsequent Ophelia teeters closer to the line between madness and reason, adding conflict to her aspect of the psyche as saner, balancing aspects are removed, until finally all that's left is Kim Adams' Ophelia, undone, and a moving rendition of madness set to violin by Emily Tindall as Ophelia, in water.

Gabriel Luna, as both Hamlet and Polonius, offers the male side. While he's occasionally childish and jokey as Hamlet, Luna retains sincerity and power, particularly in Wills' unique twist on the classic "Get thee to a nunnery."

Separating most of the Ophelia's time on stage are dreams of lyrical dances, choreographed by the ensemble. Coming after a scene of high hope and love or one of despair and anger, they offer moments of quiet reflection that set the tone for "Ophelia" as much as any of her conversations.

"Ophelia" as a play may occasionally be more academic than human in its exploration of Ophelia outside of the male-dominated "Hamlet." As a production, though, it manages, as its lead character struggles to, to balance the head and the heart.

(Joey Sailer is a freelance theater writer and critic.)

("Ophelia" continues at 8 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays through Nov. 23 at the Blue Theatre, 916 Springdale Rd. \$12-\$15. 927-1118, tuttotheatre.org.)

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