

House Lights: *Ophelia*

Tutto Theatre Company's contemplation of that sad girl in the water



Jonelle Seitz November 17, 2008

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There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy
stream;
There with fantastic garlands did she come,
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples...

Five Ophelias teeter precariously over a shallow pool, singing, chanting, and mumbling these drenched and flowery lines—easily one of the most purple passages in the canon of English literature. From their first utterances, it's already clear they will all end up in the water, but it's suddenly edge-of-your-seat imperative to see how they get there.

In Dustin Wills' 2006 play (which grew out of a workshop version performed at UT in 2005, with the complete work having first been performed in Rome), *Ophelia* is composed of five avatars, each representing a different stage in the life of one of Shakespeare's most recognizable female characters, from her romance with Hamlet to her unraveling last days. Early on, a collective brainstorm among this sisterhood of Ophelias uncovers the play's purpose: Although *Hamlet* was a fine piece, it wasn't the whole story (the same conclusion drawn by Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead*). As it turns out, the tragedy of Ophelia has plenty to do with Hamlet's rejection, but there's also her absentee mother, her overbearing father, and her own adolescent obsessions.

Wills plays liberally with the original source, taking established bits and running with them in revealing new directions in order to flesh out Ophelia's character. *Hamlet* tells us that Ophelia has saved one of Hamlet's love letters; *Ophelia* tells us that she covets any scrap bearing his scrawl, covering her wall maniacally with notes, letters, and school papers. While the loss of Hamlet's father imbues the Melancholy Dane with a world-weariness, Ophelia feels her mother's absence as unrealized potential: "She let her heart fall from her chest... into her womb, from which I came. I am her heart." Although the play leaves the cause her mother's absence unexplained, her mother's unhappiness is frequently alluded to, becoming a cloud of inherited angst that informs Ophelia's every action.

Wills' dialogue is masterful, a seamless blend of contemporary and Victorian language with a double-shot of humor and charm. The young cast members (three of them are UT undergrads) exude a natural freshness, among other virtues. These Ophelias screech like slumber-party girls—fitting, since Hamlet himself is but a nervous, ukulele-strumming virgin. To keep them straight, the characters are named with descriptive phrases: Ophelia In Love is girlish and skittish as Hamlet makes his first advances, while Ophelia Impassioned is a matter-of-fact seductress with the seen-it-all wisdom of a fortysomething, who goes from shaken to empowered to desperately grasping when her plan to marry Hamlet misfires. Ophelia Undone—the most familiar of the group, obviously—is full of considerable pathos, teetering on the edge as she tries to regain Hamlet's trust. And when her big moment comes, the final Ophelia is just the "sad girl who fell in the water with all those flowers." Witnessed here in the first person, it's a revelation that casts well-known literature in a brand-new light.