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Theater review: 'Rosencrantz' spins words into circles

By *MICHAEL MORAIN*
mmorain@dmreg.com

Hamlet, shmamlet - the real story in Elsinore happens behind the scenes.

While the prince broods about that nasty business with his mom and uncle, his two friends (and eventual betrayers) tell a tale of their own in Theater For a Change's nimble rendition of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead." It opened Tuesday and runs through Sunday in the community theater's home base at Grand View University.

First, a refresher: R and G are minor noblemen in the original "Hamlet," two toadies Shakespeare brings in to spy on the prince. They escort him to England, get attacked by pirates and, through an unfortunate mix-up, die by execution. As roles go, theirs aren't exactly plum.

But here, in the 1966 comedy by Tom Stoppard (who co-wrote another back story, "Shakespeare in Love"), the same events unfold, but the spotlight shines on the overlooked duo rather than Hamlet himself. He says little; they say a lot.

And I mean a lot. Their dialogue, in modern English, is loaded with wordplay, double meaning and arguments that don't just go in circles but spin into spirals and figure 8s. Consider this one, from Guildenstern: "A man talking sense to himself is no madder than a man talking nonsense not to himself."

Got that? Go ahead and re-read it but know that on stage it races by like the old shtick about Mr. Who and the national pastime, only to make way for something else that's equally absurd - and occasionally true. For even though the pair makes an Olympic sport out of beating around the bush, they still find things in the branches. As in "Hamlet," all kinds of observations about life and death and memory and perception hide between the lines.

If all that sounds hard to follow, well, it is. This isn't the kind of play that lets the audience coast.

Fortunately, the cast seems entirely at ease. Joseph Gentzler's Guildenstern makes all the philosophical discourse sound almost chatty. His character is a regular guy in tights - a smart one, sure - but maybe he just had too much caffeine. His bigger balder buddy Rosencrantz, played by Mark Littlejohn, accelerates more slowly, holding back before sparring with his friend word for word.

Eric Bench revels in his role as the mischievous leader of the traveling actors who come to Elsinore to present the play within the play (within the original play, "Hamlet" itself) and hints at the ever-switching perspective with a sly grin: "We do things on the stage that are supposed to happen off."

It's hard to tell where the actors' talent ends and director Virginia Cobb's kicks in, but there's a good chance her knack for language deserves credit for the show's clarity. She has both a theater and a law degree from Drake and works as a judge in Iowa's Fifth Judicial District.

Her guidance and the actor's dexterity help the play actually say something despite all the words, words, words.

Additional Facts

'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead'

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. today and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Grand View's Viking Theatre, 2811 E. 14th St., Des Moines

TICKETS: \$12 for adults, \$10 for seniors and students