



Puzzling choices cause confusion in 'Rosencrantz'

"There is a design at work in all art," states a character in "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead." Maybe, but the University of Alaska Fairbanks' current production of the play puts that assertion to the test.



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To be fair, Tom Stoppard's celebrated work is not interested in driving a central character through a traditional story arc. Instead, it is an intellectual meander as two minor characters from "Hamlet" explore questions of human freedom, identity and death.

The play's action lies in language and ideas. Stoppard's work delights in puns, literary and theatrical in-jokes and lightning-fast exchanges. All of this could frustrate those playgoers looking for straightforward conflict and resolution.

Unfortunately, some of director Anatoly Antohin's stylistic choices offer their own challenges. The result, at least for me, was a dramatically puzzling theatrical experience.

Take, for example, the performances. Two fine actors, Hadassah Nelson and Anna Gagne-Hawes, portray Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The fact they are women portraying men is inconsequential: Both give controlled and emotionally complex performances.

However, once we reach the Danish capital we encounter a court of caricatures: a hobbling and mumbling Polonius, a spasmodic Hamlet, a Claudius and Gertrude who blow each other exaggerated kisses. All the actors here play their parts for broad laughs.

I don't doubt the performers — Frank Francis-Chythlook as Polonius, Luke Roberts as Hamlet, and Kerry Velon and Sayrah Langenberg-Miller as Claudius and Gertrude — are capable of subtlety. However, Antohin has directed them toward farce, and to what ends?

The costumes mirror this stylistic collision. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are attired like contemporary businessmen, complete with briefcases and a laptop; but the Danish court is outfitted in 18th century regalia. Costume designer Paula Daabach has constructed some dapper suits and gowns — but again, for me, the contrasting periods only compounded my confusion.

Is Antohin contrasting the Age of Reason with our own? Is he drawing a distinction between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's modern authenticity against the artificial life of past royalty?

We cannot tell because we lack context. As they say in theater, Antohin's choices didn't read for me.

However, I found other elements more satisfying. The troupe of players that weaves itself throughout the play is engaging. Special kudos go to Mathew Krell, the lead player. The character is the play's inciting intelligence, part con-artist and part wise man. Krell is entirely convincing in the role.

Kade Mendelowitz' set is elegantly spare and flexible with a bare minimum of elements to suggest scene changes. His overall lighting is evocative, but the frequent spotlight cues seemed to challenge some actors, introducing minor distractions.

Theatre UAF has often demonstrated it is not afraid to challenge audience expectations as it pushes the envelope of theatrical convention. Anatoly Antohin's production of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" clearly aims to provoke thought, and I left the production with plenty of questions, just not the ones I think Antohin wanted. I like to see the design in a work of art, but the dramatic contours of this production were beyond me.

Robert Hannon is a Fairbanks resident who has been involved in local theater for more than 20 years.