

STAGE

Shakespeare gets a shaking out in scenes from tragedies

Troupe takes drama and asks 'what if?' questions

BY JENN MCKEE
News Arts Writer

Tom Stoppard's innovative 1967 play "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" built a fully realized alternative world within the periphery of Shakespeare's "Hamlet." Now, in a similar spirit, the Brass Tacks Ensemble has compiled "The Shakespeare Variations," an original show of short sketches inspired by 10 of the Bard's tragedies.

"All of us kind of took a part of a play that intrigued us and we gave it a 'what if' kind of a twist," said Anne Rhoades, a co-director and performer.

Among the "what if?" questions explored by the company are: What if Cole Porter wrote a musical based on "Titus Andronicus," the bloodiest, most gruesome tragedy Shakespeare wrote? What if the "MacBeth" witches wanted a change of pace? How did the Capulet patriarch, worried father of pretty, teenaged Juliet, view the predatory Montague boys? What if humorless Coriolanus landed in a sitcom? And what if Iago was actually right about Desdemona's adultery?

As this list should indicate, most of the self-contained sketches in "Variations" are humorous, despite being drawn from the tragedies.

"We certainly wouldn't have tried to do all of the plays, and the comedies are already comic," said James Ingagiola, who is also a co-director and performer. "But there was something really appealing about having fun with the tragedies."

While a description of "Variations" may call the Reduced Shakespeare Company's shtick to mind, there are distinct differences. "When I've read and seen the work of the Reduced Shakespeare Company, it seemed like what they do is a running sum-

PREVIEW

'Shakespeare Variations'

Who: Brass Tacks Ensemble

What: A series of original sketches inspired by Shakespeare's tragedies.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday

Where: Kerrytown Concert House, 415 N. Fourth Ave.

How much: \$10, students \$5

Info: For tickets, call 769-2999.

mary of plays," said Ingagiola. "These are scenes inspired by the plays. They may have nothing to do with the plot at all."

Rhoades agreed, articulating the distinction between the groups in a slightly different way. "I think what (RSC players) were trying to do was to put the plays into teeny little nutshells, while we'll take a section from a play and pick it up and examine it without going into the whole play," she said.

Another point of departure is that the Brass Tacks Ensemble, in the midst of all the humor, incorporates a few serious scenes into "Variations"—specifically, a scene concerning the adaptation of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech, as well as one imagining the Earl of Oxford's potential unmasking via the seemingly autobiographical play "Timon of Athens," as the true Bard.

Those familiar with the ensemble's previous work in the last five years (including "King Lear" and "As You Like It" at Performance Network's Tree-Town Festival) know of its abiding interest in the work of Shakespeare.

"There's something about

working on those texts that's so enlightening," said Rhoades. "It's this window to another world, another time, and then there's just the pleasure of the language itself. There's always something there to explore. You can always do something different with it."

Ingagiola, meanwhile, appreciates the works' universality. "With Shakespeare, you don't just get a story about so-and-so, who's about to lose his job, and what he does," he said. "You get a story about someone about to lose his life. It has a much grander scope. It's life and death, dealing with things everyone deals with."

This notion contributes to Ingagiola's larger vision of theater, which embodies Thornton Wilder's quote about Juliet needing to appear on a bare stage, as Shakespeare's directions demand, in order to represent all girls in love effectively. "Great theater—and a lot of people won't agree with me on this—is philosophy in action," said Ingagiola. "The best scenarios ask, 'What is life? What is love?' and show different arguments brought into conflict. Theater should be metaphorical and symbolic."

Obviously, the Brass Tacks Ensemble's theatrical goals are lofty, but its means nonetheless entail a big dose of humor, promising a night of thought-provoking, Shakespeare-driven laughter and reflection.

"('Variations') makes Shakespeare very accessible," said Rhoades. "High school kids would love this show, because there's some of the humor of adolescence in it, and we make fun of the language a bit. ... I'm really hoping we get some young people in the audience. It's been really fun to work on."

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MARRIED FROM C1

Goal was to get back to original 'Angel' songs

Cole Porter tailored each song meant to a character or a situation, so they're not as extractable. Rodgers and Hart songs, you could sing on the radio. They were more generic in general."

Getting back to the pure, original versions of the songs in "Angel" was one of the Comic Opera Guild's goals, since a 1950s recording, by various artists, had altered their tone (giving one number a Latin flavor, doing another in a Dixieland style, etc.). This recording, though, planted the seed for the current revival when Aceto picked it up last winter in New York.

"There were hits I knew on it,

but also some great songs I didn't know," said Aceto. "I just thought, if the script is even halfway as good as the songs, we've really got something."

Aceto and Petiet revised the script with an eye to capturing the spirit of the original show, removing its 1950s pop culture references and making it less jazzy in tone; these alterations proved challenging, since Aceto and Petiet had no access to original source materials. The music, however, was another matter. Through scholarship and listening to early recordings, Aceto was able to modify the score.

"We collected as much material

as we could, and there was tons of it," said Aceto. "We wanted to know how the songs were supposed to go. The music had been rewritten, so we had to make it a little more square again."

Square or not, Rodgers and Hart, like their peer Cole Porter, had one common goal.

"Their shows are all after the same thing," said Aceto. "Though they were done in socially bad times, they were fanciful and fun. They just wanted people to have a good time."

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