

MAR-3-97

Director of Otterbein's 'Hamlet' makes cuts judiciously

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By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Kenneth Branagh may prefer to film an uncut *Hamlet*, but the best-known *Hamlet* in central Ohio considers a carefully edited stage version the superior approach.

"If *Hamlet* is done without cuts, it's four hours. That's too long," said Robert Behrens, who has directed, choreographed the fights of, or starred in five U.S. productions of the greatest Shakespearean drama.

The action-oriented version he is directing for Otterbein College will open Thursday.

The show runs about three hours, including one intermission.

"I don't believe it was ever performed in four hours. Shakespeare was too wise for that," Behrens said. "If he had a royal audience, he would cut out the lowlife humor; if he had a lowlife audience, he'd cut out the highbrow humor."

Behrens has cut a little of both, removing only one scene (featuring the pirates) in its entirety.

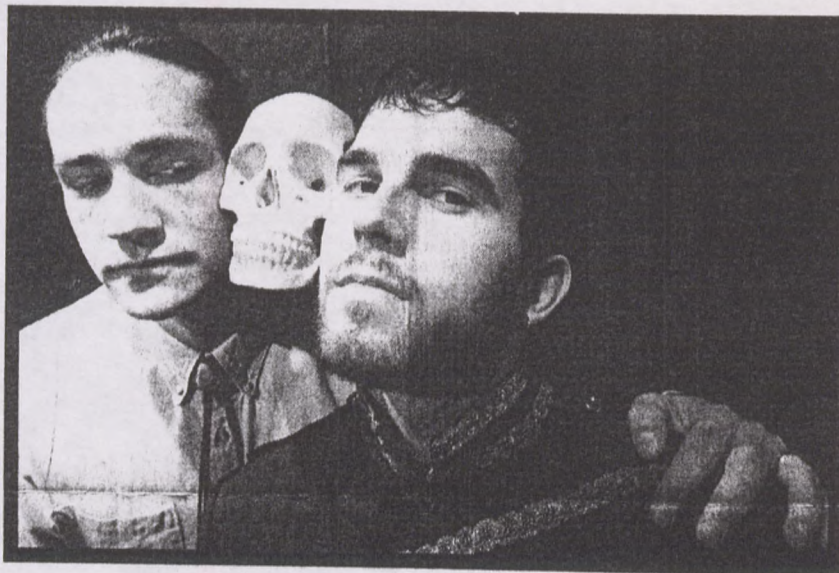
His major cuts, he said, eliminate repetition.

Otterbein, which rarely updates classical works, has updated *Hamlet* to today's royal Europe.

"I wanted to find a modern royal world, like Monaco, where something like this might happen."

Fergie and Di would feel right at home in the stylish costumes.

Director Robert Behrens, left, with Ben Sprunger as Hamlet in the Otterbein College Theatre production of *Hamlet*



Tom Dodge / Dispatch

"The king and queen dress in nice, opulent suits, as they would in Monaco or today's younger English court," Behrens said. "Everyone wears today's clothes, but there's a military feel. It's more tense, with soldiers walking around with automatic weapons. The feeling is that an invasion may be imminent."

Coincidentally, the new Otterbein production marks the 20th anniversary of its last *Hamlet* — a traditional revival with guest performer Tony Roberts in the title role. (Roberts, a Woody Allen regular, is starring in *Victor/Victoria* on Broadway.)

The latest *Hamlet* doesn't have a star — student Ben Sprunger plays the title role opposite students Adam Donnemeyer (Claudius), Kathryn Felsenthal (Gertrude)

and Jennifer McGowan (Ophelia) — but does boast a guest Equity performer: Phil Kilbourne as Polonius.

"Polonius is always played as a doddering old fool, but all his lines are really smart," Kilbourne said. "Hamlet calls him a doddering fool, but that's a generational thing. Hamlet has a problem with authority, and Polonius represents authority. He's the man behind the man behind the king."

As part of the modern concept, Kilbourne plays Polonius as a power broker "like Henry Kissinger, only without the German accent and in Alan Greenspan's clothes."

The update also changes the sex of several roles: Celina Polanco portrays

■ Otterbein College Theatre will present *Hamlet* at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 2 p.m. Sunday — and through March 16 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$10-\$12. Call 823-1109.

Horatia (usually Horatio), Hamlet's friend; and Victoria Libertore appears as Guildenstern.

Such revisions are nothing new to Behrens, who has enjoyed trying something different in four other *Hamlet* stagings.

During the mid-1980s at Kent State University, he directed a "rock 'n' roll modern" version. A few years later, he directed a "periodless" *Hamlet* for the University of San Diego at the Old Globe Theatre; and choreographed the Great Lakes Theatre Festival update in a "melted, blasted-out" postwar era.

Behrens, who is teaching stage combat at Otterbein, is known for his acclaimed starring role in *Hamlet* seven years ago with Actors' Theatre.

He will return to Schiller Park this year to direct Actors' first *Antony and Cleopatra*.

"The Kent State production didn't work well, because the towering platforms were too small for the actors, but most of the updates were fairly successful," he said. "*Hamlet* seems so modern because it is relentless in action and intention, and there is a great deal of conflict."

"Hamlet is everyman. There's no question about his existence that we as individuals don't ask today."

COLUMBUS DISPATCH
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Otterbein's smashing 'Hamlet' feels right out of today's headlines

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

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News flash: Another European government has toppled in a brutal coup. The king has been murdered; the queen, seduced; the prince, betrayed; the kingdom, undone.

Something's rotten in the state of modern politics in Otterbein College Theatre's jet-propelled update of *Hamlet*, which opened last night.

From the explosive air-raid opening to the plane that screeches overhead after the last sword fight, director Robert Behrens has reconceived Shakespeare's timeless drama about power politics for the era of the corporate state, where smooth men in Armani suits hypocritically manipulate the public interest.

Shakespeare's period language doesn't seem out of place, probably because its formality fits into the stilted milieu of today's diplomacy.

There is more justification to update *Hamlet* than most of the Bard's much-revised (and much-abused) works. Of Shakespeare's major characters, Hamlet comes closest to embodying 20th-century man's alienation and ambivalence.

Benjamin Sprunger's intriguingly youthful Hamlet is less alienated and more playful than most.

Sprunger freshens some of the Bard's most familiar dialogue with youthful passion and clownish humor, yet a few of his line readings seem oddly deflating. While spending so much of the one-hour, 50-minute first act feigning madness or grappling with his grief in manic high gear, why does Sprunger shift into a soft idle for the Danish prince's soliloquy? Perhaps the comparison is unfair, but one can't help recall Behrens' more agonized, poi-

THEATER REVIEW

Hamlet, Otterbein College Theatre's student production of Shakespeare's drama. Directed by Robert Behrens.

Hamlet Ben Sprunger
Claudius Adam Donmoyer
Gertrude Kathryn Felsenthal
Ophelia Jennifer McGowan
Polonius Phil Kilbourne

Coup d'etat! (Film at 11)

Being presented at 8 tonight and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — through March 16 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$10-\$12. Call 823-1109.

gnant and dashing romantic performance in the title role of Actors' Theatre's acclaimed 1990 *Hamlet*.

Jennifer McGowan's naive, deluded Ophelia also suffers from an abrupt shift into suicidal madness.

More persuasive are Kathryn Felsenthal's sophisticated Gertrude — a coolly competent blend of Nancy Reagan and Princess Di — and Adam Donmoyer's unctuous King Claudius, the very model of a modern major politico.

A change of sex in two roles adds flirtatious subtext to the diplomatic maneuvering. Celina Polanco plays Hamlet's savvy adviser Horatia; Victoria Libertore's seductive Guildenstern balances Ryan Migge's foppish Rosencrantz. Amusingly, the theatrical troupe entertains the royal court with exotic Japanese dance and a straightfaced parody of the Stanislavsky method.

Guest Equity actor Phil Kil-

bourne adds Henry Kissinger's suavity to the minor role of Polonius.

Also vivid at Wednesday's student preview were Damon Decker's helmeted, voice-amplified Ghost and the ensemble members serving as roving reporters, TV cameramen, PR hacks and campaign flunkies.

The play's still the thing, but Behrens' concept is king on the Campus Center Theatre's intimate thrust stage. Surreal military sound effects, Katie Robbins' smart uniforms and *au courant* formalwear, and Rob Johnson's futuristic metal prison and crisp war-room lighting invite today's audience to see *Hamlet* anew.

Shakespeare's most famous play is one of his most difficult because of the complex balance of action, emotion and intellect. Behrens' streamlined version is strong on action and surges to powerful peaks of emotion, but is weakest in the more reflective scenes.

Even with its lulls, Behrens' *Hamlet* may be the boldest stage version that central Ohio will see until the next time he plays Hamlet.

An inspired 'Hamlet'

If you hurry, you can still catch the two most interesting shows of the year to date. One is an inspired modernization of Shakespeare's best-known tragedy, while the other is the latest from one of Columbus's premier artists of the theater.

The update is Otterbein College Theatre's production of **Hamlet**. Guest director Robert Behrens sets the tragedy in contemporary Denmark without creating the kind of credibility problems such switches often pose. For example, not one man goes around with a sword hanging out under his suit coat.

Instead, we're hit with several scenes that add a 20th-century sensibility to the familiar tale without seeming phony or untrue to the original.

When King Claudius and Queen Gertrude make their first appearance, TV cameras, reporters and photographers are present to catch their every word and smile. The artificiality of the moment suggests that there is indeed something rotten in the state of Denmark.

And when Hamlet uses a theatrical troupe to test his belief that old King Hamlet—his father and Gertrude's ex-

Theater

RICHARD ADES



husband—was killed by Claudius, the actors put on the kind of avant-garde show that would seem right at home in a modern off-off-Broadway black box.

Of course, even an updated Hamlet depends on good acting to pull off the long, convoluted story. Behrens's cast mostly fills the bill.

Equity guest actor Phil Kilbourne is a delight as the eccentric Polonius, the king's counsellor. His high point is a comic scene in which he bores the royal couple with his drawn-out explanation that Hamlet is not insane but merely in love with Polonius's daughter, Ophelia.

Kathryn Felsenthal is fine as Gertrude, and Adam Donmoyer starts out well as Claudius. It's not until late in the play that he undercuts a key scene by giving in to the comic inflections and expressions that come so easily to some actors.

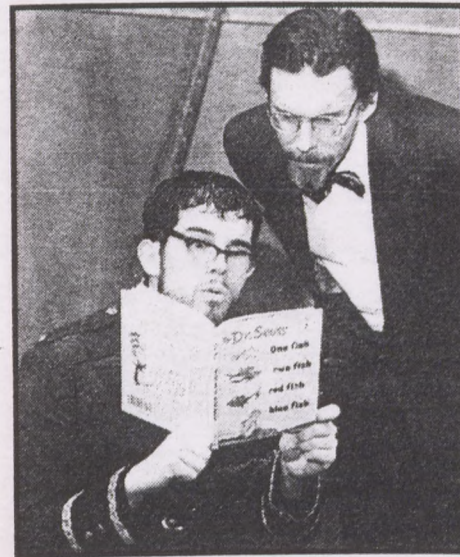
Some of the most subtly impressive performances are given in female roles, including some that Shakespeare never meant to be female. Celina Polanco makes Horatia (a feminized Horatio) a believably stalwart friend to Hamlet. Victoria Libertore communicates the unreliability of Guildenstern (another feminized role) with a certain intensity around the eyes, while Jennifer McGowen uses much the same tactic to suggest Ophelia's mental instability.

Finally, there's Hamlet, which has to be

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the most celebrated and difficult role in the English language. In fact, even after viewing the play twice at the exalted Stratford Shakespearean Festival, I've never seen a stage actor make complete sense of the prince. He just combines too many conflicting traits—action, inaction, kindness, cruelty, confidence, doubt—to homogenize into one recognizable human being.



Often playfully comical: Ben Sprunger (left) and Phil Kilbourne in Otterbein's updated Hamlet

Given the impossibility of doing the role right, then, Ben Sprunger at least does it very well. His Hamlet is passionate (but seldom overly so) and often playfully comical. You get the feeling that in another five or 10 years Sprunger will be ready to give a really masterful performance as the prince.

He'll still fail, of course, which will just make Hamlet an even bigger challenge for the next actor who takes him on.

INFO:

Otterbein will present *Hamlet* at 8 p.m. today through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Running time: 3 hours, 15 mi. in 2 acts. Tickets \$10 today and Sun., \$12 Fri. & Sat. 823-1109 (1 to 4:30 p.m. weekdays).

Living the Dream will present *The Colored Ladies Society* at 8 p.m. Fri. and 8 and 10:30 p.m. Sat. at 44 @ 44, 44 S. Washington Ave. Running time: 1 hr., 45 min. in two acts. \$15 in adv., \$20 at door, senior & students discounts available. 224-4930.

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Progress is strong, but weaknesses remain

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Central Ohio's evolving theater scene displayed strength and resilience this year, but reminders of fragility were worrisome.

Contemporary American Theatre Company and other leading troupes made strides, but too many theaters stumbled. Many Columbus companies are so young or small that one major misstep — in choosing a script, mounting a play, finding audiences or solving a space crunch — can be fatal. If some theaters are having troubles now, at the crest of an economic boom, how will they manage during the next recession?

Theaters can be destroyed by space problems. Darryl Bojanowski's 5-year-old A Premiere Playhouse folded months after losing its New Market Mall space. James Chapmyn's Living the Dream troupe is on hiatus until spring to renovate its 1-year-old Poets Cafe.

Despite an underwhelming "musical" (*Evelyn and the Polka King*) and a few other questionable script choices, 13-year-old CATCO completed its first Riffe Center season and second Equity season with its 12th consecutive balanced budget. Now the Riffe Center's official resident company, CATCO is enjoying a higher Downtown profile and one office after years of divided operations at seven locations.

With about 55 central Ohio theater troupes — including the new Directors Studio, Bread and Circus Theatre and Lincoln Theatre Company — competition for audiences and limited stages has intensified.

Columbus Junior Theatre, central Ohio's second largest theater

BEST LOCAL THEATER

■ *Antony and Cleopatra*, Actors' Theatre

■ *Chicago*, Broadway Series

■ *An Evening With Mark Twain*, Act Out Productions

■ *The Glass Menagerie*, Arden Shakespeare Company

■ *Hamlet*, Otterbein College Theatre

■ *Kwamina*, Metro Music Theatre

■ *Pierre*, Denison University Theatre

■ *The Road to Mecca*, Red Herring Theatre Company.

■ *Taking Sides*, Contemporary American Theatre Company.

■ *Yours, Anne*, Metro Music Theatre

troupe after CATCO, is on the verge of signing a one-year sublease of CATCO's Park Street Theatre. That will give breathing room to the children's theater, which must move out of its neighboring Park Street space next summer, but it could suffocate Metro Music Theatre, which will use the Park Street Theatre for two spring musicals. Metro, a musical-oriented Equity troupe, had hoped to find a permanent home there after losing its cozy first-season arrangement at the Columbus College of Art and Design.

Led by veteran producer-director Robert Tolan, Metro achieved artistic excellence with *Yours, Anne* — Jessica Grove's last Columbus musical before winning acclaim as Dorothy in New York's *The Wizard of Oz* — and *Kwamina*, a first "revisal" of a Broadway musical by legendary composer Richard Adler.

Yet the 2-year-old troupe's inability to pay some *Kwamina* actors, when the one-week Riffe Center run

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lost \$20,000, marred its otherwise consistent track record fusing artistic quality and fiscal sanity.

Of the 15 semiprofessional troupes, Arden Shakespeare Company displayed the most growth in 1997. Led by Artistic Director Mark Mann, the 3-year-old classical company is settling into its enviable role as Columbus State Community College's resident theater. Actor-instructor Robert Behrens and Jacqueline Bates headlined a gripping fall revival of the best-selling *The Glass Menagerie*.

But the fragmented classical-theater scene remains weak compared with the quality and variety of contemporary plays and musicals. While other Midwestern cities boast one well-supported classical troupe, Columbus' support is split by three small troupes: Actors' Theatre, which has not grown beyond its problematic outdoor summer seasons in Schiller Park; and Arden and Rosebriar Shakespeare Company, whose leaders split off from Actors'. If these troupes collaborated or merged, they might go further.

Reality Theatre's growth was accompanied by growing pains and internal conflicts, as the 13-year-old Short North troupe spruced up its image and expanded its support.

More hopeful signs for 1998 include new leadership at Actors' Theatre and Ohio State University's

theater department. Lesley Ferris arrives Jan. 1 to lead OSU's program, while Bill Bragg became Actors' first full-time managing director in five years, joining talented Artistic Director Steven Anderson.

Shadowbox Cabaret renovated the stage and expanded seating at its Downtown warehouse, which often sells out. Few local troupes have done more to introduce non-theater crowds to the fun of live shows.

Now at the midpoint of its 10th season, Columbus' Broadway Series has presented 734 performances of 78 shows to more than 1.4 million people. With timely tours such as *Chicago*, the series has built one of the country's largest subscription bases: about 9,600 season ticket-holders, up 3 percent from 1996.

The Wexner Center for the Arts' Theatrical Impulse Series continues to present must-see innovative theater despite disappointments, such as the overhyped world premiere of the Wooster Group's opaque *House/Lights*.

While the Broadway Series and Wexner Center can be applauded for presenting some of the best touring shows, Columbus will not develop a reputation as a thriving theater town until local productions can depend on more local support.

Four years after Players Theatre Columbus' demise, CATCO, Metro, Arden, Red Herring Theatre and a few other troupes are filling the void by filling Downtown venues.

Although CATCO's budget has surpassed \$1 million for two seasons, Columbus still has no regional theater comparable in size and quality to Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park or the Cleveland Play House.

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