

Hamming Up Hamlet

Tennessee Rep's *I Hate Hamlet* is easy to love once you get past the first act
by Martin Brady *Nashville Scene*

Perhaps half a play is better than none. That seems to be the case with Paul Rudnick's *I Hate Hamlet*, a comical paean to the world of theater. It's a humorous piece that eventually achieves a certain charm in the Tennessee Rep's new production at TPAC. But it gets off to a slow start.

Wading through Act 1 is a trial, despite the best efforts of director Rene Copeland and the energetic cast. They do their level best to give us the setup: TV actor Andrew Rally moves into a New York apartment just as he receives word that he's been selected to play the lead in *Hamlet* in Central Park. As all New Yorkers (and theater people everywhere) know, this is a plum gig. If only Andrew felt worthy. To make matters worse, it turns out that the magnificent apartment was formerly inhabited by the late great John Barrymore, which only increases Andrew's anxiety. Fortunately, his real estate agent knows how to conduct séances, so they get one going right there on the spot, conjuring up Barrymore himself.

The premise is a little lame, rooted in too-easy rationales and one-liners that rarely rise above the level of sitcom. Plus, only Andrew can see and hear Barrymore, until it's revealed that his agent once had an affair with the legendary thespian years before. Then she can see him too. It's not completely logical, but the suspension of disbelief comes easily enough in the fantasy scenario. (This isn't Shakespeare, after all.)

Eric Pasto-Crosby plays Andrew, and in Act 2 he interacts engagingly with the dulcet-toned Barrymore (played with royal zest and impish glee by Lane Davies). A veteran of soap operas and prime-time TV, Davies is also the founder of Southern California's Kingsmen Shakespeare Festival, so he's no stranger to the Bard's greatest roles.

While it's Andrew's story, it's the presence of Davies that keeps this lighthearted, tongue-in-cheek exercise afloat. The scene where the actors exchange famous Hamlet speeches is nicely done, ultimately serving as a reminder that Rudnick's comedy aims to convey honest affection for theatrical tradition.

Marin Miller plays the ingenue Deirdre, and her characterization lies somewhere between airhead and hopeless romantic. She interpolates a lot of physical comedy into her performance and, like everybody else, she benefits from the better writing in the second half, thus exiting with a flourish.

The supporting players make the most of their time onstage. Henry Haggard, as Andrew's L.A. agent Gary, livens things up with welcome energy and funny line readings. Rona Carter plays the middlebrow real estate lady with the right offhanded style. Lastly, as Andrew's New York agent, there's Ruth Cordell, a fine actress who classes up the stage; her brief scene with Davies — in which they flirt with the notion of rekindling the passions of the past — is endearing.

Gary Hoff's set is nothing if not impressive in its elaborate two-story detail. It looks like a sumptuous Upper East Side version of the Globe Theatre, and it's certainly in tune with the Shakespearean theme. Sometimes it's easy to wonder if it isn't just too grand; the actors are enveloped in its richness, for sure, but it also dwarfs them, occasionally requiring long strides between line readings and extra effort to fill up the space. Still, Hoff provides a gorgeous long staircase, which effectively serves as the setting for swordplay between Davies and Pasto-Crosby. Moreover, it affords the hyperactive Miller an opportunity for a giddy slide down the banister.

Chris Wilson's lighting design enhances Hoff's typically ambitious creation, while Trish Clark's costumes provide contemporary chic for the ladies and the appropriate tights for Davies and Pasto-Crosby in Elizabethan mode.

There are times when Act 1 of *I Hate Hamlet* is sleepy enough to make the play fairly unlikable. (That probably explains why it didn't even make it to the three-month mark in its Broadway run.) But the rewards are there in Act 2, and the Rep cast doggedly ensures that the entertaining moments are worth the wait.