What a piece of work is Hamlet

By Margie Beals

The Boston Shakespeare Company's September 13 presentation of Hamlet marked not only the opening of a new season for the four-year-old repertory group, but the elements of the Boston Shakespeare Company Theatre at 300 Massachusetts Avenue as well. While it is unfortunate that the excitement naturally attendant upon the opening of a new theatre didn't translate better into dramatic intensity in the ensemble's performance, its presentation was made with a great deal of care, professionalism and style.

The acting was by no means flawless throughout the evening, yet generally it was executed with an attention to fine details of motion, intonation, and facial expression indicative of a serious creative effort at an original interpretation of Shakespeare's work. Performers are, with a few exceptions, consistently in character and thoroughly convincing. The greatest part of the ensemble's work in the past has been in Shakespeare's comedies, and this becomes clearly evident in the lighter scenes, where lines are delivered with impeccable wit and timing. However, this propensity for comedy is not too noticeable elsewhere in the presentation, for many tragic scenes lack the force and depth necessary to ensure the greatest dramatic effect.

Will Lebow's portrayal of Hamlet is a fascinating and beautifully controlled study in alienation. He renders the oft-repeated soliloquies with considerable thought and sensitivity, creating an unassailable separation between himself and other characters as he vacillates between brilliant distraction, introspection and rage. As Queen Gertrude, Catherine Runt displays a remarkable talent for reflecting the action of the moment in the moods that play across her face. Her characterization is superlative, and her exchange with Hamlet following the re-enactment of his father's death is a high point in the performance.

Thomas Apple, as King Claudius, delivers his lines with force, but lacks the shadings of emotion in his characterization that would lend it credibility. Kirsten Giroux gives us an unsteady Ophelia throughout the early acts of the play, but gains confidence in time to play the mad scene with an air of eeriness that is somewhat frightening and extremely convincing.

Henry VononiZ delivers a carefully crafted performance as Horatio that complements Lebow's Hamlet rather nicely, while Paul Dunn's Laertes is of a unison emotional texture consistent almost to the point of dullness.

Douglas Overtoom and Zachary Grenier play across her face, alternately chiding his daughter Ophelia and advising Laertes, his son. The theatre's stage is designed to resemble the stages of the Elizabethan era and while this adds a pleasant touch of authenticity, the set's simplicity soon seems drab, and highly visible entrance and exit curtains become awkward at times. However, the production also contains several visual treats, notably the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, and Hamlet's encounter with his father, where juxtapositioning of figures is fully the equal of that in a still from Bergman's "The Seventh Seal." Recorded background music is highly effective in the supernatural scenes, but not so at other instants in the play, where it tends to obscure dialogue. The members of the Boston Shakespeare Company are generally talented, exuding, and well-rehearsed performers, and their work merits attention, regardless of occasional lapses. Hamlet will continue to play twice each week through December, in repertory with As You Like It and Moliere's The Miser. If this opening performance is indeed indicative of the general quality of productions, any of the three shows would likely be well worth the price of a ticket.