HAMLET

The MIT Shakespeare Ensemble. Sala de Puerto Rico. March 13-17 and 19-21. 8 p.m.

By Bluel Khan

Starting March 12, the Shakespeare Ensemble will be presenting Hamlet in the Sala de Puerto Rico. Under the direction of Kim Marcoux, the Ensemble has succeeded in putting together a masterful production that is unusual and risky in many ways.

The most economic feature of the play is the presence of two Hamlets and two Ophelias. The play begins with the entire cast standing on the unit stage. The queen Gertrude tosses a coin, the outcome of which determines which Hamlet and which Ophelia appears that night. It is as though the cast has waited until the last possible moment to make their most important decision, and by then it is too late to exercise any control over the outcome. The decision is made for them, by the toss of a coin.

The space in which the performance takes place is crucial to its effectiveness. The stage is long and rectangular with nothing between the actors and the audience. The viewers sit along the length of this "passageway" stage. The actors, wearing suits and ties of symbolic color, live and speak from this two-sided stage.

The set for Hamlet is stark and minimalist, composed of abstract objects such as cylindrical pillars, beams, and blocks. On one side of the "passageway" stage are six identical pillars in a semicircular arrangement. Each of the pillars is perfect and untouched; the collective structure stands unhindered under a luminous sky.

On the other side of the stage is a similar structure, yet unlike its counterpart, it is fettured by angular cross-beams and appears knotted, uneven, and unstable. The sky is not visible on this side, because it is obscured by the dark facade of the Royal Palace of Denmark. Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern - members of the old order that now faces the results of its own corruption - inhabit this side of the stage.

The spatial configuration of the stage makes it impossible for the audience to squeeze both sides into its field of view at any one instant. In the course of the play, the viewer must often choose between watching the old order disintegrate as it tries to maintain its intricate structure of lies, and watching the new order dissolve as it grapnels with the horror of truth. Only when old and new collide in the center of the stage does the audience see both facets of reality at once. By using the space in this manner, the audience, like the cast and the characters, is forced to make decisions.

Despite the increased challenges posed by a two-sided stage and the last-minute decision about the casting of Hamlet and Ophelia, the actors work well together in an organic manner to produce authentic action. The difficult roles of Hamlet and Ophelia are well addressed by Ryan Yu '93/Christopher Crowley '88 and Andrea S. Leask '95/Natalia Elisabeth '93. Their eventual regression into seeming madness is portrayed with remarkable conviction. It is commendable that this stylized performance, extremely angst-lined at times, manages to avoid overstatement and melodrama. Humor is also remarkably prevalent throughout the three-hour performance. Polonius never loses his ability to induce laughter in the audience, especially when he decides to lecture his children. Similarly, Laertes is always overwhelmingly charming in his dealings with his sister Ophelia. Some members of the cast have multiple roles and are costumed to be noted here, such as the fact that Fortinbras and the Ghost are played by the same actor.

All things considered, the Ensemble's production of Hamlet is a credit to them and to their craft. The director's deliberate divisions of space, the use of multiple Hamlets/Ophelias, and the skill of the actors themselves, together contribute to yield one of the finer, more risky productions of Shakespeare I have seen.

MIT SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Director and Conductor: Muhly. Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor. Saturday, March 7.

By Allison M. Marino

From the opening Funeral March, to the explosive Adagio, to the explosive Finale, the MIT Symphony Orchestra performed with new-found passion and maturity, doing justice to Mahler's challenging Fifth Symphony.

MIT tackled the first movement with an energy that pervaded the entire concert, conveying the arioso and bitonality of the Funeral March through soaring tempos and large, orchestral swells characteristic of Mahler's late, programmatic romantic intensity. "Seriousness," the second movement, had an angrier character, laying into dreamy introspection, allowing the orchestrists to display their virtuosity in their outing stormy nature. MIT's dynamic range was large and exciting. Each section, playing a focal melody, was kept busy enhancing and ornamenting the main themes and variations.

A great orchestralist, Mahler employed virtually every piece of the orchestra, paying great attention to detail — he revised the score several times until he was finally happy with it — only a few months before his death in 1911. Mahler sectioned the immense symphony into three parts, grouping the first and second movements together, the Scherzo alone, and the final two movements — Adagietto and Rondo-Finale — together. MIT peeled off Mahler's expansive Scherzo (the longest he ever wrote) with style. This movement had many conflicting elements — the darkness of the first and second movements, a growing happiness embodied in waltz-like sections, and a sad theme that evolved throughout the Scherzo. The overall effect was one of partial resolution and transformation, preparing the audience for the Adagietto.

The Adagietto, with its gentle harp arpeggios and string melody, was performed with tenderly and passionately. With the broad swells and delicate, extremely romantic themes, MIT captured the love in this movement. Mahler indeed wrote the Adagietto with inspiration, for he was in love with his soon-to-be bride, Alma Maria Schindler; he proposed to her by sending her the Adagietto manuscript. The orchestra successfully concluded with the Rondo-Finale, capturing the light, celebratory nature within its contrapuntal structure with the sensitivity and intensity of the first four movements. Accelerated, the movement ended with a joyous, forte explosion.

Of course, the performance wasn't perfect, with a few cracked notes here and there, but the refined brass, moments where the strings weren't together in the faster sections, and times when the tuning of the higher woodwinds was questionable. However, MIT far exceeded its past performances, making Mahler's Fifth Symphony come alive as a coherent whole.

Enthusiastic comments filled Kresge as the night's concert was the presentation of an ancient recording of Mahler performing a piano reduction of the first movement, with the orchestra members also pleased with their performance. In fact, they seemed to enjoy playing Mahler, as evidenced in part by their absorbed expressions during the concert.

One questionable aspect of Saturday night's concert was the presentation of an ancient recording of Mahler performing a piano reduction of the first movement. Though interesting and perhaps instructive, the piano version seemed flat and lifeless compared to the orchestral performance. Mahler's score was a creation, a concept, and it is through this live symphony directly, but it was more of a curiosity than an experience. Its omission would have been a loss of an important piece of music that MIT could have revealed in its heightened talent without the interruption of an intermission.

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