

Hamletmachine (Castillo Theatre)

By Zak

5 POINTS OR LESS

edgy • intriguing • unconventional

BOTTOM LINE: Avant-gard theatre that pushes the envelope and challenges the audience.



Photo: Ronald L. Glassman

Something pretty interesting is brewing at The Castillo Theatre with their newest interpretation of Heiner Muller's *Hamletmachine*. The Castillo is one of only a handful of theatres in the country who regularly produces the work of Muller (a protégé of Bertold Brecht) who strived to transform the theatre for a new social use.

Hamletmachine, written in 1977 in East Germany, is a postmodernist drama which borrows from Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, and Jean-Luc Godard and deals not only with the ideas of communism and feminism, but the idea of being trapped in any time or situation.

With only about ten pages of dialogue, the play has been interpreted in vastly different ways throughout the years defying every convention of theatre. Some could argue that a play set at the end of East German communism is a little out of date, but Austrian director Eva Brenner says, "The only way to get rid of the play is to leave it behind, to

work our way out of the despair it articulates...brush off the costumes, turn on the lights, look at each other and ask what do we do together next." Brenner does just that but abandons the conventional interpretation of the play, creating a unique ensemble piece that keeps the audience entranced for a captivating seventy minutes.

So, I don't usually give quite that much background about a particular play, but I think it's important for this one. It truly is a theatrical experience that is unlike anything you have probably ever seen. The actors perform throughout the entire theatre space and even greet audience members in the lobby by creating window art that depict people's perceptions of *Hamlet*, communism, and the like. There isn't a "conventional" plot in this interesting piece. It's more like watching a hip, living modern art installation. You might not fully understand everything that you are watching, but you will probably be intrigued.

The play has pretty good street cred with a fancy European director and the uber-captivating actress Yap Sun Sun, direct from Vienna. That's not to say that the Americans in the cast don't represent as well. Anneka Fagundes, John Boonin, and Melvin Shamby Jr. are particularly engaging and throw themselves into the text with fierce abandonment. You feel like you are watching European protest theatre as it is meant to be watched. While I didn't love every choice that was made, I did have a true "experience" at the theatre. I was very pleasantly surprised. It's hard to say more because everyone will take away something vastly different from this play. Some will think it is bizarre, others will flip for it. It definitely is not for everyone. If *Mamma Mia* is your idea of high art, you should probably skip *Hamletmachine*. If you like to be challenged at the theatre and see something different, check out this show.

(*Hamletmachine* plays at The Castillo Theatre, 543 West 42nd between 10th and 11th Avenues, through June 28th. Performances are Friday and Saturday at 7:30pm and Sunday at 5:00pm. Tickets are \$35 with \$10 tickets for students and seniors. To purchase tickets and for more info visit castillo.org.)

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