

THE BAY CITIZEN

## *Alcatraz's Newest Star, the Melancholy Dane*



Misti Boettiger, center, playing Ophelia on Saturday in a rehearsal of "Hamlet" on Alcatraz.

Adithya Sambamurthy/The Bay Citizen

**By Elizabeth Lesly Stevens**

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For any director, putting on a full-scale "Hamlet" is notoriously intense.

But 29-year-old Ava Roy has it tougher than most. Ms. Roy, an Oakland-based actor and artistic director of the We Players theater troupe, has devoted nearly two years to pulling together the logistics, resources and cast for a production now in rehearsals on Alcatraz.

Her "Hamlet" is being staged using the entire island, including many areas of the former prison normally off-limits to visitors. The audience will move all over Alcatraz with the actors, following Shakespeare's tragedy as it unfolds. Many scenes will also be visible to the thousands of tourists who visit the island each day.

As Hamlet and Ophelia rehearsed their grueling nunnery scene on Aug. 5 in a normally off-limits part of the decrepit prison hospital, all endured bone-chilling cold and concentration-shattering interruptions by tourists attracted by Ophelia's sobs.

Besides the cold and the tourists, Ms. Roy must also plan the production around the gulls and cormorants that nest on the island. Some scenes cannot be rehearsed until the birds relinquish their territory just two weeks before the play's opening on Oct. 2.

An intrepid sailor she sailed for five months to Mexico and Hawaii in spring 2009 Ms. Roy says her time at sea prepared her for these challenges.

"You use what you have. You just deal," she said about life on a boat. "There is no illusion of being in control."

Ms. Roy founded We Players in 2000 as a Stanford undergraduate and has been staging site-specific theater in the Bay Area, usually classical works, ever since. "Hamlet," with a cast and

crew of about 50, is by far her biggest undertaking, with a run of 25 performances over seven weeks. Its budget is a slim \$58,000, and all involved are volunteers except the stage manager.

The play will begin on the ferry to the island where the actors and audience will share a special area of the boat. Musicians will perform pieces inspired by prison work crews and chain gangs, riffing on the buoy bells, howling wind and other sounds of the island to produce music that will propel the audience from scene to scene, Ms. Roy said.

Ms. Roy was invited to be the first artist-in-residence on the island in November 2008 after Amy Brees, the National Park Service's Alcatraz site supervisor, saw her production of "Macbeth" at Fort Point, the Civil War-era brick-and stone structure tucked under the Golden Gate Bridge.



Ava Roy directing members of the We Players troupe in a rehearsal of "Hamlet," which is to have a 25-performance run. Adithya Sambamurthy/The Bay Citizen

That "Macbeth," with its closing sword fight on the roof, bridge footlights casting stark shadows and a full moon in the distance, was "the most amazing theater I had ever been to in my life," Ms. Brees said.

"The Park Service is interested in provoking people to think about these places and their meanings," she said. "At Alcatraz, those themes are justice, punishment, crime, redemption."

Ms. Roy, a native of Lenox, Mass., has lived in the Bay Area since her years at Stanford, where she designed her major around interests in religious drama, ritual and the aesthetic foundations of education.

She staged the first We Players production, “Romeo and Juliet,” at Stanford in spring 2000, with the opening fight between the Montagues and the Capulets set in the student cafeteria.

On her first visit to Alcatraz in late 2008, Ms. Roy said she immediately envisioned presenting “Hamlet.” But “I would push it back as too obvious,” she said. “But it usually works to trust gut instinct.

“I knew I had to do something I could succeed at in a very visible location. ‘Hamlet’ had the gravity and structure to support me.”

(“Hamlet” will be the second act of her residency. Her first production, in fall 2009, was a more traditional production of “Iphigenia and Other Daughters” by Ellen McLaughlin. Her residency will culminate with an as-yet-undetermined event in 2011.)

The Park Service does not give Ms. Roy or the We Players financial support. For bureaucratic reasons associated with being a volunteer organization on Park Service land, the troupe cannot charge for tickets. Instead, free tickets 100 per performance can be reserved starting in mid-September via the [weplayers.org](http://weplayers.org) Web site. The company hopes that a suggested donation of about \$60 will allow it to recoup production costs and distribute any profits among the cast and crew.

“This is not just a cool place” to stage a play, Ms. Roy said. “Theater is a tool for interpretation, to dig in and explore the entrenched themes and issues of the space.”

Her hope is that long after the actors and musicians putting on “Hamlet” leave Alcatraz , the work “leaves residue in the space and mind’s eye of the people who were part of that.”

[estevens@baycitizen.org](mailto:estevens@baycitizen.org)

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