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Ava Roy's creative 'Hamlet' rocks the Rock

THEATER

By **Steven Winn**, *Special to The Chronicle*

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Players (Cara Zeisloft, Ali Hanson, Rebecca Longworth), Laertes (Benjamin Stowe), and Ophelia (Misti Boettiger) in, "Hamlet on Alcatraz."

Peter Merts

"I'm a director," says Ava Roy. "I like to be in control."

One thing Roy can't master is the weather, which washed out three of last weekend's performances of the site-specific "Hamlet" that this resolute theatrical adventurer has mounted on Alcatraz Island. Personally disappointed as she was – her family had traveled from Massachusetts to see the show – Roy looked both undaunted and philosophical as she broke the news to the 61 audience members who had showed up at Pier 33 on Sunday in a steady rain. All were hoping to board a boat for a four-hour excursion into Shakespeare's tragedy that transposes the hero's existential storms at a Danish castle to San Francisco Bay's abandoned prison fortress.

"This is the nature of site-specific theater," Roy told the crowd. "Some days we have tremendous support from nature. And some days ..." Roy turned her sea-blue eyes toward the bleak sky overhead.

The rain may have thwarted a company of 30 We Players actors, musicians and technicians who were primed and ready to go, as well as an audience that included three friends who had driven from Seattle to see the show. But it also provided an unscripted and revealing look behind the daring, technically daunting and precarious kind of theater Roy undertakes. With a writer, the Seattleites and a Mexican meal for her troupe in tow, Roy boarded the 11:30 Alcatraz boat along with a throng of tourists. She greeted two actors who play an opening scene on the boat when it docks.

"We're bummed," said Ross Travis. "We wanted to perform."

Nicholas Trengove, who had never done site-specific work before, is a convert. "As an actor in a theater," he said, "you're always thinking about the fourth wall and all those constraints. Outside you have to imagine less and can concentrate on your character. The setting is fully there, all around you."

Roy stepped aside to place a cell-phone call to a member of her production team on the island. She advised the on-site actors to take off their costumes and hang them up. "I'll get out there and start working with hair dryers," said Roy, who was still hoping the weather would let up in time for an evening show.

Improvisation and thinking on her feet are nothing new to Roy, 29, who has been devoted to directing outside of traditional theaters since her undergraduate days at Stanford. Her first foray was a 2000 "Romeo and Juliet" that began with a sword fight at noon in the cafeteria – "when the maximum number of students would be eating. The actors jumped onto the tables and started a brawl." The action spilled out into a courtyard and from there wove around the campus.

Roy was already canny enough about show business to invite 60 or so friends to show up at the cafeteria. The audience doubled as the show progressed. Roy staged other outdoor shows at Stanford, graduated in 2003 with a self-designed major – ritual and performance in aesthetic education – and found what she calls her life's work. Her We Players company has done a production of "The Tempest" at a landfill park in Albany and a "Macbeth" at Fort Point, beneath the Golden Gate Bridge.

While Roy's directorial choices are driven by a desire to serve and illuminate the text, her original impulse was as much personal and environmental as it was theatrical.

"I grew up in a small town in Western Massachusetts," she said. "My response to Stanford was trying to find a sense of place by doing my work on campus. It began as a social experiment: What would happen if Romeo and Juliet got married on the quad? It was an investigation, a way of creating moments of unusual beauty in everyday places."

"Hamlet, her biggest undertaking yet, ups the ante substantially. Invited into an unprecedented partnership with the National Park Service after her Fort Point "Macbeth," Roy and her collaborators tested out their Alcatraz legs with a small-scale "Iphigenia and Other Daughters," by Ellen McLaughlin, last fall. Shakespeare

intimate and ghost-haunted tragedy is something else again.

The resonance of the play and the place is compelling. Alcatraz conjures both the stark austerity of Elsinore and the imprisonment of Hamlet's inward-twisting thoughts. And then, of course, there's the island's own legend-laced allure. "I just had this image of standing on the Rock, and a memory of what Alcatraz was and what it means," said Emily Pfeifer, one of the Seattle pilgrims.

Roy led the way on a rain-swept walking tour of her "Hamlet" locales, which include the parade ground, a rubble pile for the grave digger's scene, the cell-lined prison hospital (for the play-within-the-play) and a cave-like gunnery opening, where Hamlet (who is played by a woman, Andrus Nichols) looms above the praying Claudius. The audience walks about a mile and a half in all, at one point chasing the actors up a hill and at others finding cast members moving among them.

The director's thoughts whisked along. There, on a guard tower she pointed out, is where one of the production's multiple ghosts appears. She praised the "vertical space" the hills and looming walls of Alcatraz afford and stopped to admire a ravaged-looking staircase that figures in one scene. "In a theater, you'd spend your whole budget to build something like this. And here it is." She recalled a moment, in one recent performance, when a single seagull lifted off at the moment Hamlet spoke the line, "Now I am alone." Full moons and sunsets have also played memorable roles.

The logistics of making this Alcatraz "Hamlet" happen on a spare \$60,000 budget are mind-spinning. Roy's negotiations involved not only the Park Service but the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and Alcatraz Cruises, the private firm that operates the boat service. Rehearsals were delayed in one location for a week during bird-nesting season, when a last cormorant was learning to fly.

And then there's the task of keeping her all-volunteer cast and crew content. In a chilly makeshift prison green room, actors clutched paper cups of tea and lo

mattresses on a long day they were fated not to perform.

"It's been a marathon," said company member [Ali Hanson](#). "Each of us has to use our acting instrument to the fullest."

Roy put her shoulder down and banged open the prison laundry door. It's here that Ophelia goes mad, in a castle-scaled chamber dominated by a double flank of imposing, time-scarred pillars, with the view of the choppy bay outside. It took a moment to register, but dozens of delicate wooden birdcages hung from the ceiling, the delicate trace marks of a young woman's last words before she drowns.

Hamlet: Through Nov. 21. Boats depart for Alcatraz from Pier 33 on the Embarcadero, S.F. Free; \$40-\$80 donation requested. The run is fully reserved, but waiting-list tickets may be available. (415) 547-0189. www.weplayers.org.

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