

# "Hamlet": We Players stages a dramatically impressive version on Alcatraz - Page 1 - Arts - San Francisco

Chris Jensen

In this version of *Hamlet*, [Shakespeare's](#) Dane has every reason to be melancholy: he's stuck on a rock in the middle of the bay. As a concept, that's pretty ingenious. After all, Hamlet himself says that "[Denmark's](#) a prison." Why not take the guy at his word and send him to [Alcatraz](#)?

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Peter Merts

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We Players, an Oakland-based troupe under the artistic direction of [Ava Roy](#), is in the second year of an exclusive partnership with the [National Park Service](#) on Alcatraz Island. Last fall, the company produced [Ellen McLaughlin's](#) *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* on the Rock, limiting most of the action to the dock landing. With *Hamlet*, the troupe has something more ambitious in mind, marching audience members from one end of the island to the other, including a few areas normally out of bounds to tourists. The result can try your patience as much as it hurts your feet, but overall the production is a thrill to watch.

It all begins on the ferry. As the boat leaves Pier 33, the middle deck serves as a stage for the play's opening bit, in which a few sentries discuss the appearance of a ghost on the battlements of Elsinore. Shakespeare wrote this introductory scene to create a sense of uncertainty and dread; it's no mistake that the play's first line is "Who's there?" It's a scene that will be especially effective if you happen to catch the production on a foggy day. (I managed to hit some good weather when I saw the show, but this is one time when you should hope for a gloomy forecast on Alcatraz.)

After hopping off the boat, the audience meets Hamlet, Claudius, and Gertrude on the loading dock. Then there's an uphill climb toward the Officer's Club, with a pause every few hundred feet for a new plot development. This ambulatory approach to *Hamlet* certainly keeps the production from stagnating, but at times everything feels a bit rushed, as if the cast worries that we might all miss the final ferry to San Francisco. (Even the best Shakespeare isn't worth spending the night in an abandoned federal prison.)

If you don't remember much about the play, or if you've never seen it, you might want to do a quick review of the plot before climbing on the ferry. That's because the combination of heavily abridged text, stop-and-go action, and wind-blown dialogue could slightly hamper your ability to follow the story. For instance, the Ghost's speech to Hamlet in Act 1 is difficult to understand because he stands so far away from the audience. Consequently, first-timers might not catch exactly how Claudius killed Hamlet's father, which is bound to cause some confusion during the Mousetrap sequence in Act 3. These points of confusion shouldn't be major, and you should be able to enjoy the atmosphere even if you can't always follow the plot — but a little pre-play refresher wouldn't hurt.

The actors are all volunteers, and they're remarkable. Some audience members may be a little perplexed by the presence of a female Hamlet, but [Andrus Nichols](#) is good enough to win over just about anybody. I had no issue with the gender-neutral casting — women have been playing the Melancholy Dane since at least the time of [Sarah Bernhardt](#) — though I initially resisted Nichols' somewhat humorless interpretation of the role. I ended up warming to her, not only because her understated delivery slowly revealed a sly sense of humor, but also because she avoided predictable readings of the play's most quotable bits. (Her off-handed delivery of the words "Alas, poor Yorick" got a laugh like I've never heard

for that line.)

Nichols is backed up by a cast with no weak links. I especially liked Shakespearean veteran [Jack Halton](#), who doubled as Polonius and the Gravedigger — a high-minded fool on the one hand, an earthy sage on the other. [Scott Phillips](#) makes for an especially villainous Claudius. And [Benjamin Stowe's](#) Laertes manages to bring a great deal of energy to the play's final scenes, including a duel beautifully staged by Los Angeles-based stuntman [Trampas Thompson](#).

You might say, however, that the biggest star of the show is director Roy. She makes clever choices for how and where to stage each sequence (a row of jail cells for the play-within-the-play, an abandoned institutional building for Ophelia's mad scene, the Parade Grounds for the climactic duel). She finds smart ways to keep the audience moving along with the action, often using lines like "Let's go" and "Come with me" as a transition to the next setting. Her production crew manages just the right look on a low budget — especially the costumes by [Julia Rose Meeks](#), which match the muted, rusty tones of the interiors throughout the island.

I happened to see the show on a stunningly beautiful October evening, with the sun setting behind the [Golden Gate Bridge](#) as we all watched Ophelia go crazy. From time to time, audience members would turn away from the play's action to watch the sunset. At first I pitied the actors for needing to hold our attention in the face of such a gorgeous distraction. But sometimes that's just the way things go: If you perform in the middle of nature, and especially if you perform in the middle of San Francisco Bay, every once in a while you're bound to be upstaged.