

'Hamlet' travels to Alcatraz

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Scott D. Phillips plays Claudius in the We Players' production of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet,' uniquely staged on Alcatraz Island. (Courtesy of Peter Merts)

Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is one of the most well-known plays in the world and has been performed in hundreds of different venues by a variety of actors. However, it is safe to say it has never been performed like the We Players performed it on Alcatraz Island. By using the island itself as a set, director Ava Roy transformed Shakespeare's well-known play into a fresh and unexpected artistic experience.

This production of "Hamlet" was not set on a traditional stage. Instead, the audience followed the actors around to different locations on Alcatraz Island to watch the scenes play out. The scenes occurred outside in places like the old exercise area of the prison and the rocky paths surrounding it, and also inside locations such as the old hospital wing. Minimal set pieces were used to guide the scenes, but the island served as the main backdrop. Even the characters' costumes echoed this minimalist scheme, made with mostly gray or dark colors and simple designs.

The acting in the play was mostly strong. The character of Hamlet, played by actress (yes, actress) Andrus Nichols, however, was somewhat flat. Throughout the play, the actress focused on the more manic aspects of Hamlet's personality, playing the character as extremely depressed, dramatic and flustered. Although the performance was certainly attention-grabbing, by leaving out the more nuanced aspects of Hamlet's character, the play suffered in quality.

Scott D. Phillips, playing Claudius, was a firm counterpoint to Hamlet. Equal parts menacing, creepy, confident and tormented, the actor brilliantly conveyed Claudius's character while still communicating that he is, without a doubt, the villain. Misti Boettiger, playing Ophelia, was also strong, especially during

the character's descent into madness. She showed all of the vulnerability and innocence of the character while lending her a confident, self-assured edge in the first part of the play, offering a stronger interpretation of Ophelia's character. Laertes, played by Benjamin Stowe, also offered a convincing, tragic performance as Ophelia sank into madness.

The setting of Alcatraz Island was perfect for "Hamlet." The island is very bleak, usually cold and famous for the old prison structure that dominates it. The various unkempt ruins around the island also contribute to its bleak, decaying image. All of this perfectly mirrors the atmosphere in "Hamlet," which is set in the coldest, darkest months of the year in Denmark, a country Hamlet refers to as "a prison." Walking around the island with the characters, it is easy to understand Hamlet's growing despair. The action of the play is so much more real and engaging when it takes place just feet away from you, rather than up on an isolated stage. Roy makes excellent use of various features of the island, as well as minimal set decoration, to enhance themes in the play while remaining true to its original meaning.

The roaming play was also accompanied by a small group of musicians, who added a subtle soundtrack to certain scenes and played for the traveling audience. The haunting trumpet melodies and eerie cello tunes perfectly accentuated the play's mood. Also, sometimes the chorus members would sing along with the musicians to accentuate certain moments, which worked effectively at times, but sometimes drowned out the actors' lines, hampering the flow of the play.

Overall, this production of Hamlet was extremely well done. The perfect setting of the island coupled with strong acting and flawless creation of a somber, brooding mood made for a unique theatrical experience.