

‘Undiscovered Country’ a Shakespeare-Wild West mashup

By Jean Schiffman
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From left, Hunter Scott MacNair, Ava Roy and Chris Steele appear in We Players' "Undiscovered Country." (Courtesy Lauren Matley)

Early on in We Players' "Undiscovered Country," the young widow Aurelia murmurs to herself in her bedroom: "Oh that this too too solid flesh would melt ..."

And we're off and running in this 90-minute, site-specific "neo-Western" directed by company founder-artistic director Ava Roy; she repurposed the text of "Hamlet," interspersed with old-Western-style colloquial language, to create something entirely unexpected.

The show follows the exploits of three unlikely Shakespeare buffs who express themselves in ways that can be illuminating (a recurring and apropos refrain: "We are arrant knaves all. Believe none of us"), funny and captivating, but also at times structurally confusing or just plain overdone (as in a lengthy scene re-enacting the obscure play-within-a-play from "Hamlet").

Aurelia (the always-luminous Roy) first meets the outlaws — Jack (an intense and explosive Hunter Scott MacNair) and

Horace (Chris Steele, in a more modulated performance) — when they rob the stagecoach she's on.

Turns out she's a Bard addict herself, and not quite as prim and proper as she seems in her widow's weeds.

As an erotic relationship develops between Aurelia and Jack, the ghosts of Ophelia, Gertrude, the Prince and all the others — right down to the castle guard — seem to haunt the threesome.

It is in fact Shakespeare's dialogue, soliloquies and poetry through which the trio can most eloquently explore their own conflicted natures.

And "Hamlet" is especially useful in tracking Jack's devolving mental state.

Across-the-board strong acting aside, there's a dizzying array of finely wrought production elements. Among them are the exquisite costumes (by Brooke Jennings), so period-perfect that a "historic weapon and leather consultant" (JD Durst) is credited in the program. Revolvers, Bowie knife, silver flasks, chaps, holsters, hats, harmonica, boots, petticoats — the attention to details of costumes, props and set design is impressive.

Notable are the elegantly choreographed fights (directed by Steele), including clever swordplay sans swords.

And there's the venue: the 1898-built Sunnyside Conservatory, a small, restored, octagonal redwood-and-glass structure on a little hill in the Glen Park neighborhood, surrounded by palm trees and foliage; the audience sits in the round.

There's also some audience participation, as is often part of We Players' signature style, but which in this case feels extraneous, not fully integrated.

The 20-year-old company, known especially for adapting Shakespeare, is currently focusing on smaller-scale works like this one, and is clearly maintaining Roy's devotion to re-imagining the classics in surprising new ways.

REVIEW

Undiscovered Country

Presented by We Players

Where: Sunnyside Conservatory, 236 Monterey Blvd., S.F.

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays and May 4 and May 18; 4:30 p.m. Sundays; closes May 19

Tickets: \$30 to \$65

Contact: www.weplayers.org