

Review: ‘Hamlet’ remixed as cowboy romance in San Francisco

Sam Hurwitt, Correspondent

“Speak the speech, I pray you,” the young madman says, and indeed, he and his fellows recite all the familiar lines and speeches, from “To be or not to be” to “Get thee to a nunnery.”

No, this isn’t “Hamlet,” though most of the dialogue is taken from William Shakespeare’s famous tragedy. This is “Undiscovered Country,” an original play by We Players derived from Shakespeare’s text.

Like We Players’ recently revived “Mother Lear,” the play uses reshuffled lines from Shakespeare to tell a very different story from its source material. Adapted and directed by company founder and artistic director Ava Roy, who’s also one of the three performers in the piece, it’s dialogue and monologues from “Hamlet” reshaped into a “neo-Western love story”

Outlaw Jack Spear (feverishly manic Hunter Scott MacNair) robs banks and stagecoaches while spouting Shakespeare with his adoring sidekick Horace (alternately giddy and brooding Chris Steele), who’s not as into all this recitation as Jack is but happily plays along for his sake. In two separate robberies they run across Aurelia (brooding Roy, displaying a long-muted spark of life rekindled by these encounters), who is a seemingly well-off widow who quotes “Hamlet” just as prolifically as Jack does.

This quickly turns into a tormented love triangle, as Horace feels threatened by the palpable heat between Aurelia and Jack, who find their fathomless melancholy mirrored in each other as well as their love for the bard. All three have to grapple with Jack’s increasingly apparent mental illness as well as their deep discontent in their own lives. As Aurelia says over and over again, “Lord, we know what we are, but not what we may be.”

It’s a rare indoors show for We Players, which usually performs site-specific adaptations of classic works in partnership with various local state and national parks and historic sites. “Undiscovered Country” is performed inside Sunnyside Conservatory in San Francisco’s Glen Park area, a lovely 1898 octagonal redwood building surrounded by a century-old garden. Most of the company’s shows involve a great deal of hiking around from scene to scene, but in this 90-minute show the audience stays seated in one place throughout.

As usual for the company, it’s an immersive production that sometimes incorporates the audience, in this case as robbery victims. Bandanas are given out to attendees when they check in, the different colors indicating each person’s preferred level of audience participation.

The dialogue isn’t entirely Shakespearean. There’s some modern talk easing into scenes or simply breaking out of flowery speech for a reality check.

The quoted lines from “Hamlet” are sometimes appropriate to a given situation, often in ways very different from their original context, but they seldom appear to flow naturally from the situation. The quotations are always quotations, whether it’s a game the characters are playing or a monomania that they can’t shake. Sometimes, as in “Mother Lear,” characters are using dialogue from Shakespeare to humor and pacify someone lost deep in agitated delusion.

It’s an interesting device, and it also leaves unanswered a whole lot of questions about what exactly is going on beneath all these recitations, especially at the end. As besotted as these people are with this richly poetic language, the action of this play is ultimately conveyed more in motion and images than in words, even just in the way Horace and Aurelia are usually positioned on opposite sides of the stage area.

It’s not that the plot is unimportant, by any means, or the connection of the words being spoken to what’s actually going on in a scene. Still, in moments where those aspects prove elusive, what’s left is the raw emotion of the performances, up close and undeniable, and it’s on that level that this “Undiscovered Country” proves most effective.

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‘UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY’

By Ava Roy, derived from “Hamlet” by William Shakespeare, presented by We Players

Through: May 19

Where: Sunnyside Conservatory, 236 Monterey Blvd., San Francisco

Running time: 90 minutes, no intermission

Tickets: \$30-\$65; www.weplayers.org