

“Undiscovered Country” // Theatre Eddys

Undiscovered Country

Ava Roy



Hunter Scott MacNair, Ava Roy & Chris Steele

It's the ol' West when armed, masked bandits regularly rob frightened passengers riding bumpy stagecoaches, only to turn around the next day to hold up a bank, tying up teeth-chattering customers while taking their jewelry, watches, guns, and money. Only in this version of the Ol' West, our rather dashing robbers are picking their victims from volunteering audience members, who readily bounce to reenact the dusty coach ride and acquiesce to being bound together with appropriate looks of fright in between nervous laughs. And in this neo-western, the guys with the guns spout in iambic pentameter, reeling off phrases from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as naturally as the Bard's own King's Men.

And what else might we expect from We Players, the local theatre company whose site-specific, highly interactive productions of Shakespearean themes have occurred since its founding in 2000 everywhere from Alcatraz to Sutro Baths to Golden Gate Park. For this latest premiere, entitled *Undiscovered Country*, the indoor site is in the glass-and-wood, 1898, octagonal gem located in a little-known, hundred-year-old garden, the Sunnyside Conservatory. Founding Artistic Director, Ava Roy, has adapted lines from *Hamlet* to create, direct, and co-star in a triangular love story where the madness of the Prince of Denmark jumps off the pages and into the lives of the two robbers and one of their victims – a mysterious woman who shares their deep penchant for the Bard.

Jack and Horace live duo lives. By day, they eagerly don their guns and masks and with much bombastic flair, rob innocents of their money and valuables. Back at their stark campsite at nighttime, they quickly fall into conversations with lines drawn from Shakespeare, even to the point of re-creating particular scenes from their current focus, *Hamlet*. Jack in particular pushes his buddy, Horace, to memorize lines for the next night's foray into the play and is the one of the two who seems most inclined to eat, live, and breathe the words of his literary idol on a continual basis.

Which is all the more why the two – especially Jack – is astounded when a beautiful woman dressed in a widow's silk and lace of black lands on the stagecoach they are about to rob, speaking also the tongue of the Bard. When she is once again in the targeted bank the next day, Jack cannot help but begin a *Hamlet*-rich tete-a-tete with her, finally prying from her in everyday English where she lives in the town. His immediate attraction to both her beauty and her Shakespearean delivery draw him that night to gaze upon her window and to call out, “Do you know me, lady?,” to which she answers, “You are a fishmonger.” Their back-and-forth play of lines from various parts of *Hamlet* clearly intrigues the woman (who finally lets Jack know she is Aurelia), but it takes a second night's visit and a back-and-forth quoting and finishing each other's lines that finally convinces Aurelia that she might – and in fact does – love this outlaw.

As the common outlaw Jack, Hunter Scott MacNair speaks in a Shakespearean tongue befitting actors whose only gun ever held is one made of wood. The intensity he brings even to everyday conversations is sometimes startling, even to his buddy Horace, who more reluctantly goes along with Jack's continual game of their playing “Shakespeare.” The degree of that intensity only grows after Jack meets Aurelia, with the Jack we see only a few feet away from us in this intimate stage-in-the-round becoming ever more distant from the reality around him. His Jack becomes more and more like the Hamlet he quotes – wandering off in the night leaving sleep far behind; seeing his own entrances of ghosts that send him into manic reactions; or returning in the morn with eyes popping wild, head curiously cocked, and reality long gone from own his crazily created world of warped Shakespeare. The sweat and tears streaming from Mr. MacNair's own mad Hamlet are stunning and enough to send shivers down the spines of all us watching.

Even before she meets Jack, Aurelia is taking on the role of Hamlet's Ophelia, saying to herself in a line portending the changes about to come into her life, “Lord, we know what are now but not what we may become.” Ava Roy provides her Aurelia with a mysterious air of distance from the world around her as she wanders through her own abode, talking to herself with lines like “Tis an unweeded

garden that grows to seed.” But as her Aurelia is drawn to the pull of Jack’s wooing via Shakespeare, she cannot stop herself in replying in kind and even in joining him in spoken and over-lapping duets. Their union as a couple is erotically accompanied by further, quoted lines, with Aurelia being drawn into the danger-zone realms of Jack-as-Hamlet in ways that she cannot yet predict.

The effects of Jack’s increasing obsession with Aurelia as well as his increased bouts of total madness as the Prince of Denmark leave Horace suddenly alone and lonely. Chris Steele (who prefers “they/them”) rounds out this excellent cast of three bringing their own march toward a crazed sadness and jealousy to full bare with emotional outbursts that are so real as to draw tears from near-by audience members. Both Horace and Aurelia share a love of Jack that they cannot shake, no matter how violently crazed Jack becomes; and the mutual recognition and acceptance of their joint feelings of affection for Jack lead them into territories heretofore undiscovered by either.



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Ava Roy directs herself and her fellow thespians in a manner and pace that begins light-hearted and playful and slowly turns more foreboding with touches like an increased pace of Jack’s circular pacing, the ever-quickening tick of Aurelia’s metronome, or the nights of a now-alone Horace marked with his whimpers and groans. The authenticity of the times has been assured by the historic weapon and leather consultation of JD Durst and by the men’s chaps, canvas coats, and leather fringes – as well as elegant outer and inner wear of Aurelia – by costume designer Brooke Jennings. Special kudos goes to actor Chris Steele, who doubles in the role as Fight Director. From a few feet to just a couple of inches away from the two rows of wide-eyed audience members, pounding clashes of fists and physical entanglements of falling bodies cause those of us watching to grimace and to hope no harm was really done. The beautiful indoor setting whose two levels of windows allow the drought-tolerant garden on the outside and the dusk-to-night sky to become a convincing part of the neo-western’s scenery.

Because most of the dialogue of *Undiscovered Country* is drawn from *Hamlet* but done so in no particular order of the original play’s story (or at least, not seemingly so), there are a number of times when the lines chosen and spoken go in and out of our listening ears without making total sense, other than we are watching these characters live in a world of their own Bard-ian poetry. I found it more helpful often to ignore the words and just take in the emotions and underlying meanings being projected.

San Francisco has many unique gifts she bestows upon the inhabitants of the Bay Area. On this evening, we in the audience were awarded two that for too many people are still strangers. Sunnyside Conservatory is well-worth a visit, both for its beauty of surroundings and

for its ongoing programs of performing arts. We Players is a company whose popularity is certainly growing among its loyal audience but whose singular approach to mostly outdoor, ambulatory, participative Shakespeare is a treasure still needing to be discovered by more folks who relish great theatrical experiences.

Rating: 4 E

Undiscovered Country continues through May 19, 2019 at the Sunnyside Conservatory, 236 Monterey Blvd., San Francisco. Tickets are available online at www.weplayers.org.

Photos by Lauren Matley