

## A Hit, a Very Palpable Hit: "Fortinbras," at St. Ambrose University

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 21 February 2007 02:24

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St. Ambrose University's *Fortinbras* was the most thoroughly entertaining theatrical production I've yet seen in 2007. And while, if you missed the show during its one-weekend, three-performance run, I have no interest in rubbing your noses in that fact, I feel the need to write about the experience because I hope that soon (a) you

see

*Fortinbras*

and (b) you see this production's

*actors*

.

Lee Blessing's metaphysical farce opens at *Hamlet's* climax, when the dying Dane (played here by Andrew Harvey) declares that Fortinbras assume the throne after his passing. Moments after Hamlet's death, the decidedly American Fortinbras (Jacob Kendall) walks in and - with gung-ho

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spirit - begins running the joint, arguing that the citizenry will never buy the truth behind *Hamlet*

's climactic

massacres. He arranges to have the deaths blamed on a Polish spy, instead, and soon thereafter, is conquering nations (with their

*approval*

), amassing enemies, and being visited by the ghosts of

*Hamlet*

's deceased.

Amazingly, Blessing's script is even more enjoyable than that synopsis suggests. *Fortinbras* is both a funny, shrewdly parodistic sequel to

*Hamlet*

and a wickedly sharp political satire, one that, astonishingly, has become even sharper since its 1991 debut. In this production, there were more eerie similarities between Fortinbras and George W. than you could count - in one scene,

*Fortinbras*

costume designer Ellen Dixon had the title character dressed in a camouflage robe that'd be perfect for a "Mission Accomplished" pajama party - which lent the show unexpected freshness; Blessing has always been witty, but who knew he was

*prescient*

?

Given such rich comedic material, director Michael Kennedy guided his actors to superb performances. I'm not sure I can adequately describe just how funny Kendall was here. At first, his laid-back nonchalance seemed almost *too* light for the material, but it wasn't long before I realized how smart this portrayal actually was; Fortinbras' unintentionally destructive doings only work if the performer plays the role with utter guilelessness, which Kendall did with relaxed, inspiring authority. The actor's line readings were endlessly surprising because they were *real*

; Kendall's clueless egocentrism was a source of constant delight, and his character's eventual unraveling high-comedy heaven.

The actor was by no means a one-man-show. As Horatio, Seth Kaltwasser proved (as he was in *The Threepenny Opera*) unusually adept at finding exactly the right balance between character and caricature; the actor never showboated, yet always kept you aware of his focused, subversive talents. Sean Tweedale, whose Osric performed most of his scenes opposite Kaltwasser's Horatio, reined in his excitable energy and was a figure of pure comic confidence. (On Friday night, Tweedale - deservedly - received the show's biggest laugh: After Fortinbras commits a dastardly injustice against Osric and asks if he's forgiven, Tweedale,

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incredulously, said, " *No*," and waited just a split-second before giving Fortinbras the finger.) Drew Parks' and Joe Feldman's shtick as Marcellus and Barnardo found them not only speaking in exactly the same rhythm, but with exactly the same *timbre*; the audience was thrilled to see them emerge as *Fortinbras* 'romantic heroes.

And then there were the performers playing the *dead*. To be honest, when Harvey opened the show with Hamlet's final soliloquy, I was a bit bummed, because the actor (devastatingly subtle and committed in *A Lie of the Mind*) was so thoroughly, passionately in character that it made me want to see him in a *legitimate* production of *Hamlet*. By the time Hamlet's spirit was soliloquizing from the interior of a TV, though - having been caught (in a *great* visual effect) in electronic purgatory - I was more than happy for the ironic, comically fearless Harvey to take over.

Matt Mercer earned huge laughs for his speech-impaired Polonius - mortifyingly afraid of giving bad advice, the man can barely *talk* - and Dan Hernandez and Marianna Caldwell were unfailingly funny (and robustly sexual) as the ghosts of Claudius and Gertrude, so verbally and physically hot for one another that their every badinage should've come wrapped in latex.

All throughout, there were wonderfully unexpected delights: the *Law & Order* "*DUN-dun!*"s during scene changes; the business involving a sack that conceivably contained a human head; Osric's legs, dangling from overhead after the character's execution; the pop songs employed as hilarious scene-change filler. I'm not sure that I stopped smiling once during the entirety of the production's speedy 110 minutes.

I'm pretty sure that my second-biggest smile of the night came during *Fortinbras'* final, contemplative tableaux, because the moment was such a wonderful *homage* to *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* - the moment seemed like the ultimate in-joke, as St. Ambrose performed that show (and with

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Harvey as one of its principals) less than two years ago.

But my biggest smile came during the curtain call, with the cast energetically bowing and dancing to (appropriately enough) "Ghostbusters." In my head, I was dancing right along with them.