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'Gambit' explores social issues

Strong acting overcomes obstacle of unclear play

By Jonathan Siegle
Of the Emerald

The current University Theater production of "Royal Gambit" exemplifies what's best about a university theater.

The play itself certainly has its problems. At times it is vague and confusing. But it serves as the vehicle for some very talented people to perform a very professional show.

Although considered historical, "Royal Gambit" is largely symbolic, and in the end allegorical. German playwright Herman Gressieker liberally manipulates the relationships between Henry VIII and his six wives to illustrate his thesis that modern political and ethical decay can be traced to 16th century liberalism.

Henry, who "uses his conscience as a calculating machine," changes politics as easily as he changes beds. His behavior fulfills the modern dictum that governments have no friends, only interests.

"Royal Gambit" is powerful drama, however, not because of the profound simplicity of its theme, but because of the strength of its characterizations. Each wife is clearly drawn to illustrate a side of Henry's "modern man."

Director David Wheeler has assembled a marvelous cast, placed them on a plain and effective set and paced his production to move without lagging. It's a thoroughly enjoyable and ultimately moving evening of theater.

Steve Springston is Henry. He's big and jovial, corrupt and nasty. He looks the part. Neither director nor playwright gives Henry much opportunity to grow, yet Springston manages to be consistent and at the same time give the appearance of evolving.

Springston shares the stage with the six women who play his wives. Each is wonderfully cast.

Teri Thomas is marvelous as Henry's first wife Catherine of Aragon, who is present throughout the play. She is a tall, commanding woman, who still possesses an almost housewifely quality. Her face is at once evidence of her strong emotions and yet a mask. It is she alone who truly understands Henry.

Charlotte Eve London, who plays wife number six, Kate Parr, is brash and blowsy as the widow who nursemaids Henry in his final years. She banters with the old king and is unafraid of his now toothless bite.

Melissa Meyer is sweet and gentle as Jane Seymour, the wife who gave Henry his only son. Tina Richey is equally simple and pretty as Kathryn Howard, the young wife Henry takes in his later years and beheads because of her frivolous past.

Katha Feffer is stunning as the German princess Anna of Cleves, Henry's least regarded wife, who may be perhaps his most interesting. She alone escapes marriage unharmed and strikes a good bargain as well.

Trisha Todd portrays the fiery and sensuous Anne Boleyn. Her performance is solid, but she may tend to posture a bit, which gives her acting a studied quality.

Theatre Review "Royal Gambit"

The sign of a well-directed play is when the seams don't show. David Wheeler has done a credible job in directing his talented cast in the dreadful Arena Theater, with its poor sight lines and awful acoustics. His hand is evident everywhere, yet never shows.

The dominant feature of the set is a large back-lit red cross that Henry stands under often in his role as "defender of the faith" — it works.

It may be true that in order to understand "Royal Gambit" one must know a bit about the history of Henry and his wives, but it's not necessary. Gressieker only uses history as a tool to comment on modern society. In fact, at the end he has the wives return in modern dress to divide Henry's legacy, and thus cement the connection between the 16th and the 20th centuries.

Henry VIII introduced the modern age we see crumbling about us, weighted down by archaic notions of nationalism, and carrying destruction in the megaton range as we "destroy mankind in the name of civilization." Man's current condition, said Catherine of Aragon, is "superior to the highest and wallowing in the depths."

It is Kate Parr who sums up Gressieker's theme. The next age, she says, "must be different, or there will never be another one for the creatures of this earth."

Fall courses vary from 'prime' hours

Beginning in fall 1983, students will be able to select classes for a wider variety of times.

Courses currently are compacted into "prime" time hours — between 9:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., according to Registrar Wanda Johnson.

In a memo to all faculty,

deans and department heads, Johnson says scheduling the bulk of classes during prime time leads to "an inability of students to register for a complete study load and reduced classroom utilization."

Starting in the fall, all courses offered four or more times will have to schedule

one section in the morning, one in the afternoon and one in the late afternoon or evening (after 3:30 p.m.).

The new policy also "urges" departments and schools to rotate single section courses into late afternoon and evening slots over a period of years and requests "particular attention be given to expanding the time patterns for lower-division courses."

The policy changes comes from recommendations contained in the Strategic Plan proposed by the chancellor's office, according to Provost Richard Hill, and should result in increasing student enrollment.

"The changes will be significant since we are asking that a substantial number of classes be made available to students outside of the schedule patterns that have been typical in the past," said Hill in a memo to faculty, deans and department heads.

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