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THEATER BY WADE CHRIST NSEN

Can the Bard Take a Joke?

Fortinbras thoughtfully sticks it to Shakespeare

If you have ever thought, “You know, *Hamlet* is a silly story,” or screamed inside your head, “Kill Claudius already; you’re complex; we get it; get on with it,” you should love playwright Lee Blessing’s comedy *Fortinbras*, now playing at the Very Little Theatre.

In *Fortinbras*, Blessing attempts to sneak a discussion about the complexities of truth, power and death into his hilarious script. The VLT’s production grabs the text and expands the comedy to its full force. Director Michael P. Watkins delivers a show that keeps the audience laughing and thinking the whole time. In an attempt to communicate Blessing’s play, the cast delivers a rich show and strong performances on a simple yet effective set.

The curtains pull back to reveal *Fortinbras*’ opening scene, which happens to pick up where *Hamlet* ends. Immediately, we are aware that the show will be a laugh fest — even if it comes at Shakespeare’s expense. The ridiculousness of the scene is magnified by being performed in slow-motion. *Hamlet* (Vince Camillo) and *Laertes* (Jesse D. Lally) fight while being cheered on by the rest of the royal family and friends. The decelerated acting in the scene is convincing, best seen in the reactions of *Horatio* (Benjamin Newman). His fluid movement and oversized facial expressions help underline the slow-motion scene.

With the majority of *Hamlet*’s characters dead, *Fortinbras*, Prince of Norway (Michael Walker), enters dressed in a maroon-purple suit, accessorized by his gleaming medallion. The scene proceeds with the *Captain* (Scott Shirk) removing the royal bodies in a comic manner — let’s just say *Hamlet* isn’t carried away in high fashion. The show makes excellent use of blocking to piggyback on an already hilarious script.

Upon learning that he has become king of Denmark, *Fortinbras* decides that the true story of *Hamlet* is far too unbelievable and that a new story must be created. Crafting a tale about a Polish spy, *Fortinbras* creates a tangle of lies and military action that he can’t control. Here we see the show begin to make commentary outside of its comedic frame with lines like, “We need someone we can hate, right here, right now,” and “Kings don’t make mistakes anyway; they reassess policies.”

As the lies spiral out of control, *Fortinbras* encounters the ghosts of *Polonius* (Don Kelley), *Ophelia* (Cate Wolfenbarger), *Hamlet*, *Laertes*, *Claudius* (Don Aday) and *Gertrude* (Sharon Wetterling). Seduced by *Ophelia*, *Fortinbras* begins to make even



Horatio (Ben Newman) and Fortinbras (Michael Walker) in *Fortinbras*

JOHN BAUGUES

more topsy-turvy decisions, to the outrage of *Horatio*.

Walker’s portrayal of *Fortinbras* is charismatic, and we see him develop the character through his relationships to others. Walker tracks a character arc from arrogant and haphazard to a reflective person attempting to fix the situation he created. His interactions with *Ophelia* also allow *Wolfenbarger* to develop *Ophelia* as the show continues. Though she begins her performance with a crisp enunciation that seems uncharacteristic of the piece, *Wolfenbarger* warms into the role nicely and fills the character’s place in the show with great energy. At first, the up-front manner *Wolfenbarger* gives *Ophelia* seems to be too much, but it later fills a vital place in story and her character development.

Much of the show’s comedic force comes from Newman’s *Horatio* and Tom Wilson’s *Osric*. The two characters share a physical comedy relationship akin to the *Three Stooges* but also work well as independent characters. Newman’s robotic spasms at the sound of *Fortinbras*’ lies are quite funny, as is the effeminate and people-pleasing aspect *Wilson* gives *Osric*.

The acting shines in front of the simple, clever set. The castle consists of a wall made of metal siding that folds open to create new sets in front of the plain, white lights. This simplicity fits well with the rest of the production. The sound design, on the other hand, adds more uproar as set changes are performed to songs like *The Buggles*’ “*Video Killed the Radio Star*” and *Steppenwolf*’s “*Magic Carpet Ride*.”

Whether you’re looking for inquisitive social commentary, all out laughs or Shakespeare lampooned, you’ll be getting your money’s worth at *Fortinbras*. **EW**

Fortinbras runs through June 23. Tix are available at 344-7751.

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