

Rachael Davies applies the foundation for zombie makeup



GRETCHEN DREW

Bloody or Nothing

UO prof takes his *Hamlet* with a zombie chaser

John Schmor sees *Hamlet* as the original teen horror flick.

"That first scene, Bernardo's lines are, 'The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead / Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets,'" he says. "Right away, it's a Fright Night movie!"

So Schmor, theater department chair at the UO, spent a year working on a script that melds Shakespeare's words into the context of zombie movies. His *Or Not to Be* opens Friday, May 9, at the Lord Leebrick Theatre (there's also a preview on Thursday, May 8).

Schmor has more backing than a guard's idle chatter. He has history on his side.

Picture the British audience in 1601. Their

queen had consolidated Protestant control of England, but the Catholic Church told them that they would experience torment after their deaths. Catholic dogma warned that the Devil himself could appear in many guises. For instance, he could take the shape of a ghost — the ghost of an old king, perhaps.

Add to that the history of British monarchs murdering each other, usurping the throne and creating widespread instability in prices and politics, and a lot of audiences, Schmor says, didn't have a great deal of trust in the ruling classes.

So when they watched young Hamlet fall under the sway of old Hamlet's ghost in William Shakespeare's new play, "they would

have been watching a college-educated kid, a prince, tricked by the Devil," Schmor says. "The play would have been deeply unsettling and scary."

Wait a second. Tricked by the Devil? What about our view of Hamlet as plagued by indecision? Hamlet as wishy-washy, passive one minute and crazed the next? You know, velvet-jerkin Hamlet, all pale and wan?

"I don't think that's how the play worked in its time," Schmor says. He calls this image the legacy of the Romantics who saw young Hamlet as a sensitive, tortured soul — only not in the sense of an actual soul tortured by demons of Hell but in the "I'm a teenager full of melancholy" manner.

"Hamlet as a figure and as a direction for youth is so foundational," he says. "They come into class with their sunglasses on and their iPods in their ears, wearing black and being unhappy with the world, always on the sunniest possible day."

Schmor, who adapted and condensed *The Tempest* for the Leebrick in 2004, wanted to recreate the bloodier, scarier original — and he wanted to examine a culture obsessed with *Hamlet*-influenced archetypes.

So he started watching zombie movies as he read and reread the play. Not that he liked zombie movies, at least not to begin with. "I had some dreadful nights where I watched two or three of them in a row because I wanted to get the conventions right," he says.

Schmor knows he'll have the avid zombie subculture of Eugene watching those conventions — as a matter of fact, one of the popular zombie walks takes place before the play's previews. But *Or Not to Be* isn't

a spoof or a *Rocky Horror*-like homage. All of the lines save a very few come from *Hamlet* and most of the rest from other Shakespearean tragedies. That means it's not a comedy though some things about it should elicit laughter from the audience. Again, it's grounded in Schmor's study of history. "Zombies are revived corpses, and their rudimentary impulse is to eat," he says. To eat human brains, that is.

"Cannibalism is straight out of Shakespeare's period," Schmor says. In the European imagination, some of the indigenous peoples they encountered in the New World were terrifyingly different — hence the obsession with cannibalism.

The 90-minute adaptation, with no intermission, bears down on the characters with relentless logic. There's a survivor — but, Schmor notes, as in zombie movies, it isn't the character you might expect.

Schmor loves the cast, a mix of experienced professionals, community members and UO students, and he says rehearsals have been great fun. "We have laughed and played hard and scared each other," he says.

But when Schmor proposed the play to Leebrick Artistic Director Craig Willis, he outlined more than scary fun, more than that teen horror flick. "I've tried to take the play seriously," Schmor says. "I promised Craig an unusual entertainment, and I think we're delivering."

EW

Or Not to Be runs through June 1 at the Lord Leebrick Theatre. Tix at www.lordleebrick.com or 465-1506.

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