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A melancholy Dane, indeed

By Joseph T. Rozmiarek
Advertiser Drama Critic

One isn't quite sure whether University of Hawai'i graduate student Chong Wang is on to something or is just annoying with his production of "Hamletism," on stage this weekend as part of the Earle Ernst Lab Theatre's Late Night Series.

Anyone looking too hard for literal connections to the original drama will be frustrated. In fact, the closest "Hamletism" gets to the source is the pre-show screening of the 1948 Laurence Olivier film version of the tragedy.

Instead, in this politically charged piece, Wang uses Shakespeare's iconic play as the jumping-off point to explore "gender politics," "globalization" and "people's isolation because of high technology." Wang says he's "not interested in telling the story that everybody is familiar with," and that he uses key lines from the play to "express his own thoughts."

It's just as well that the Elizabethan verse is not central to "Hamletism," because the young cast chokes on it as if they were gargling oatmeal. The focus instead is on images that, initially at least, have some relationship to Shakespeare's "Hamlet."

The gravedigger's scene is played from the light booth and catwalk, with the actors shining flashlights into the audience as if searching for corpses. Ophelia sings her mad song, then encores with a concertina solo.

Polonius' "To thine own self be true" speech is delivered by a lunatic in a tassled mortarboard to a slovenly Hamlet figure who unzips his fly, inserts a banana and proceeds to peel it, while channel surfing with a remote control device.

The central cast, dressed in black and white, often look like "Four Characters in Search of an Author." They sit frozen under harsh lights, do considerable shouting in the dark, and march like automatons, giving peace signs that morph into Nazi salutes.

A recording of the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine" plays while we watch film clips of a Marine amphibious landing and short glimpses into a slave ship.

Ultimately, Wang addresses the nature of theater itself, and his conclusions aren't pretty. Near the end of the play, when words have long since given way to images and Hamlet and Ophelia have been reduced to code names in an online dating search engine, he deals his final death blow to Shakespeare.

One wonders why Wang chose "Hamlet" as a springboard for his work, since it has no immediate relevance to globalization and high-tech isolation. But in the end "Hamletism" successfully illustrates the ultimate failure and futility of words: A dazed and forlorn guitarist takes center stage, singing lines from Hamlet's most famous soliloquy. "To be or not to be" is mournfully repeated, each time stopping shorter in the phrase until it ultimately strangles itself.

For a big finish, the cast invites the audience outside to the entrance ramp, where the actors continue to address them from the lawn below. I took that opportunity to find my car in the parking lot.

As I pulled away, I saw in the rear-view mirror that the actors were walking away into the darkened campus. My best consolation was that I had turned my back on "Hamletism" before its cast had turned their backs on the theater.

'HAMLETISM'

Ernst Lab Theatre,
University of Hawai'i-
Manoa

11 p.m. Friday and
Saturday

\$ 8, \$7 seniors, military,
UH faculty/staff, students,
\$3 UHM students with ID

956-7655

[Back](#)