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Curio offers a solid production of a perennial Stoppard favorite

By Wendy Rosenfield For The Inquirer

Hamlet's best-known query, "To be or not to be," resonates only if you know who you are - or that you matter - in the first place. In Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, receiving a solid production by Curio Theatre Company, Hamlet's boyhood chums are made interchangeable and expendable, much to their mounting dismay.

As Stoppard's first staged success, a hit in the 1966 Edinburgh Fringe Festival (and 1968 Tony Award winner), it's a prelude to many of the themes he later explored in greater detail: philosophy, metaphysics, art, fate. Hardly a season passes without this perennial favorite popping up somewhere along the community/pro/educational circuit, and with good reason: by tilting Hamlet sideways onto its comic edge, Stoppard shows it to us anew through another lens, while still retaining the spirit of the play's central inquiry.

If you've seen the show before, Curio's version, directed by Liz Carlson, doesn't open any of Elsinore's hidden doors. But its backstairs view, as experienced by C.J. Keller's Rosencrantz and Eric Scotolati's Guildenstern, keeps the boys plenty disoriented, yet gives them more dignity than is occasionally the case in other productions. Keller is motivated by empathy, Scotolati by angst, but throughout, they remain - touchingly - attached.

The show's strength, however, comes mostly from Brian McCann's dark-edged Player, head of the troupe hired by Hamlet to humiliate his mother and uncle-cum-stepfather. (McCann apparently also pitched in as scenic painter and fight choreographer; well done, all around.) Keller and Scotolati's banter tends to sag after too long, but each time McCann appears, he brings an ominous shadow to the action, an alert that greater factors - hostile factors - are on the wind whichever way it ultimately blows, hawks and handsaws notwithstanding.

Paul Kuhn's two-tiered set, along with the players' convertible stage on wheels, provides a jungle gym's supply of levels and doorways, just right for the frequent entrances and exits that keep Rosencrantz and Guildenstern so off-kilter.

This supporting cast also belongs in the background, their skills far less sharply honed than the show's principals. But a spirit of conviviality makes their believability as, say Claudius and Gertrude, less important than the set dressing they provide as clockwork-wooden props in the real drama: watching the fellows allow themselves to be pulled by their noses inexorably toward their doom.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

Playing through May 14 at South Calvary Center Church, 4740 Baltimore Ave. Tickets: \$10 to \$15. Information: 215-525-1350 or www.curiotheatre.org

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