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Theater Review: Barrymore tries to teach 'Hamlet'

By Jim Lowe

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Dorset Theatre Festival is closing a most successful season — appropriately — with dessert.

Paul Rudnick's delicious 1991 comedy "I Hate Hamlet" opened in a thoroughly delightful production Friday at the Dorset Playhouse — one that was well-cast, fast-paced and ridiculously funny.

Set in the '90s in legendary actor John Barrymore's Manhattan apartment, superficial television star Andrew Rally (J.D. Taylor in a particularly dimensional performance) struggles with the possibility of playing Hamlet for Shakespeare in the Park.

When Andrew's virginal girlfriend Deirdre, a sweet but wry Haley Bond, and his Realtor Felicia, a delightfully comic Annie Meisels, attempt to conjure up Barrymore's ghost, they are disappointed when the star doesn't appear.

But Barrymore, a larger-than life David Lansbury, does appear — after they leave and pretty much only to Andrew.

What ensues is a battle of wits, or wit in the case of Barrymore, stubbornness and fear in Andrew. Andrew, in fact, doesn't want to play Hamlet. One, he's too scared and, two, he hasn't read it.

Two other friends of Andrew weigh in at various points — his elder German agent Lillian, given a sympathetic arrogance by Carole Monferdini, and his greedy Hollywood producer Gary, given delightful sleaze by Benjamin Pelteson.

As the stakes get higher, it gets much more intense — and much funnier. And it's an interesting discussion of playing Hamlet to boot.

Directed by Carl Andress, Dorset's production is virtually seamless and sympathetic. Even seeming caricatures like Gary the producer exhibit some human depth. And the central story is treated with restraint and respect, resulting in emotional power as well as both deep and superficial humor.

One oddity this summer, though, is that people jump on furniture when overly excited — something I personally have never seen in real life, save for children. Odd.

Barrymore's beautifully Gothic apartment was created by Kevin Judge, creatively and sometimes Gothically lit by Michael Gianniti. The delightful costumes were by Gregory Gale, and the fun swordfight was choreographed by Unkle Dave's Fight-House.

Dorset's "I Hate Hamlet" is pure fun — and even more.

Dorset Theatre Festival

Dorset Theatre Festival presents the Paul Rudnick comedy "I Hate Hamlet" Aug. 20-Sept. 5 at the Dorset Playhouse, 104 Cheney Road in Dorset. Performances are at 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays, 3 p.m. matinees Aug. 26 and Sept. 2. Tickets are \$20-\$49 (\$20 for students, \$8 for 12 and younger); call 867-2223, or go online to dorsettheatrefestival.org.