

Article published Aug 13, 2015

'I Hate Hamlet': John Barrymore's ghost teaches Hamlet

By Jim Lowe

Staff Writer

When a naïve young TV actor agrees to play Hamlet, he receives coaching from an unlikely source — the ghost of John Barrymore — in the Paul Rudnick comedy "I Hate Hamlet."

"I like the fact that it's based in reality, with a touch of fantasy, and the whimsy of a ghost story," explained Carl Andress, who is directing the Dorset Theatre Festival production. "It's rather familiar and comforting at the same time — it's pure entertainment."

Dorset will present Rudnick's classic 1991 Broadway comedy Aug. 20-Sept. 5 at the Dorset Playhouse.

Rudnick, a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker*, also wrote the plays "Jeffrey," "The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told," "Valhalla," "Regrets Only" and "The New Century." He actually wrote "I Hate Hamlet" while living in Barrymore's New York apartment.

Also set in the great actor's apartment, the play tells the story of Andrew Rally, a rising Hollywood star who has just accepted the role of Hamlet at New York's Shakespeare in the Park, leading his agent to think he's gone daft. With advice coming from unexpected directions, Andrew is left to decide between Shakespeare and the fame and fortune of a television career.

Barrymore (1882-1942) actually played a major role in creating the modern conception of Shakespeare's tragic character.

"He was 40 years old when he played Hamlet, I think in 1922," Andress said in a phone interview. "He's quoted as saying he saw Hamlet as an athletic young college boy who's found himself in a mess that he couldn't quite get out of. He was a strong sensible guy who found himself in a mess that sort of overtook him.

"Barrymore said, how can you make a simplistic halfwit out of that?" Andress said.

So Barrymore started a new tradition of an athletic young hamlet.

"It's interesting that John Barrymore's work in the theater was boulevard comedies, and he really challenged himself to become a classical actor," Andress

said. "And here Paul (Rudnick) wrote a boulevard comedy about a classical actor and a TV guy — a TV star would be the equivalent of John Barrymore.

"So there's real equivalency between the young man in the '90s and the ghost who comes to haunt him," Andress said.

Andress is a veteran director whose credits include the world premieres of Charles Busch's comedies "The Tribute Artist at Primary Stages" and "The Divine Sister" at Soho Playhouse, as well as "The Third Story" starring Kathleen Turner. Andress is also the co-writer and costar of the independent feature, "A Very Serious Person," an official selection at the Tribeca Film Festival.

Andress's approach to "I Hate Hamlet" focuses directly on the playwright's text.

"We're following the logic of the playwright and, really, within outrageous situations, to tell the truth," he said. "You perform it with precision and gusto, you elevate the playing side a little bit, and add in some smart actors who possess a comic spark, add water and stir — and just have great fun."

But, in order to have fun, you have to get it right — and that means a lot more than playing for laughs.

"I take my comedy seriously," Andress said. "Each comic writer has their own voice, their own rhythm. They sort of write in their own music because comedy really is about rhythm."

So you can't approach comedies all in the same way.

"You really have to study the rhythm of the author's voice, pay attention to the punctuation and really find where the laughs are, to find where the humor is," Andress said. "When you see actors understand that and look at a script like this as the score, as music, suddenly whole worlds open up to them.

"It's really quite marvelous — pulling that together is quite rewarding," Andress said.

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, plus 3 p.m. matinees Aug. 22,

26, and Sept. 2. Tickets are \$20-\$49 (\$20 for students, \$8 for 12 and younger); call 802-867-2223, or go online to dorsettheatrefestival.org.