

There's Much to Like About I Hate Hamlet at Attleboro Community Theatre



I Hate Hamlet, Paul Rudnick's 1991 comedic sendup of both the relevance of Shakespeare's characters in today's television culture and the cost of fame, opened last night at Attleboro Community Theatre's home in the lower level of the Ezekiel Bates Masonic Lodge, 71 North Main Street, Attleboro. The venue itself dates back to 1929, and the lodge's inherent stone masonry and super-secret man cave vibes lend themselves perfectly to the setting of the play, the storied Greenwich Village apartment where famous actor John Barrymore dwelled in the early 1920s. Thanks to the fine set design work of director James Sulanowski, David Blessinger and Paul Nolette, the stage has been transformed into an ornate Gothic lair complete with stained glass windows and a large stone fireplace.

I Hate Hamlet opens with New York real estate agent Felicia Dantine (sweetly played by Alicia Harris) showing young TV star Andrew Rally (Benjamin Shane Christie) around the cavernous gothic apartment that he has rented sight-unseen on her recommendation. Rally has made the move from LA to NY in order to play Hamlet in Joe Papp's *Shakespeare in the Park*. Felicia, who fancies herself quite psychic, is convinced that since Barrymore was famous for his portrayal of Hamlet, the apartment is a "perfect match." Cue the arrival of Rally's fiancée Dierdre (played as a bubbly ball of cheer by Rebecca Cunha Christie) who is star-struck to be in Barrymore's old digs and Rally's sharp-tongued theatrical agent Lillian Troy (played with dry reserve by Elizabeth Parent) who fell under the actor's spell and into his bed for a passionate one-night fling. The women echo Felicia's sentiments that not only should Rally stay, but he should also embrace the Barrymore connection and they should all stage a seance — right here, right now.

Cue the thunder and lightning and we soon have our friendly neighborhood psychic-slash-realtor engaging in some very funny summoning of the spirits. After speaking briefly to her mother (because, why not?), the group disperses after what seems to be a failed encounter. Cue the dramatic entrance of the most dramatic of stage actors — it's the ghost of Barrymore! Although in this case, the entrance is quite ... anticlimactic ... as director Sulanowski has actor Stephen L. Hug just sort of amble onstage amid a cloud of smoke. Hug, clad in the requisite black velvet and tights costume we expect, brings the right gravitas and a delicious deep basso voice to the role, but after the amount of build-up we have had about the character's greatness, Barrymore really needs to hit the ground running and take over the

proceedings.

As Andrew Rally, Benjamin Christie has a wonderfully low-key and natural delivery — a delightful surprise considering the program notes that this is his first time acting on stage. His character is supposed to be a well-known TV star with a very successful commercial career and playwright Rudnick's jokes at his expense come fast and furious, yet Christie manages to still make the role utterly relatable and charming.

Rally's flighty fiancée, Dierdre, is played by Christie's real-life wife, Rebecca, as a perpetually perky yet (improbably) 29-year old virgin who is saving herself for the moment when she is sure of her partner's worthiness. The two have nice chemistry together onstage that helps normalize the ridiculous nature of the characters' situations. While Rally is fighting to prove himself to Dierdre, he is also battling the feeling that he has made a terrible mistake in taking on the role of Hamlet as he simply doesn't really care for Shakespeare. When the ghost of Barrymore reveals that he has come back in order to help Rally become a great Hamlet and can only return to the afterlife after the young actor performs the role, the machinations of the play are set in motion.

First entrance issues aside, Hug's Barrymore really starts to shine when taking advantage of his "ghostliness" and the fact that only Andrew can see him. Hug's eyes glint with such delight that I started to really have fun with the proceedings.

Picking up the energy considerably with his entrance is Dave Almeida as a fast-talking TV producer, Gary Peter Lefkowitz. He's come to talk Rally into moving back to Los Angeles to take the lead in a lucrative (but completely inane) new super-hero series.

The play starts to really find a better tempo with the ensuing debates about pop culture fame and celebrity versus the glory of performing live theater. Christie finds some nice emotional depth in his monologues, especially when confessing that when he was on TV, no one really cared if he was talented. The verbal sparring allows the playwright to take more than a few swipes at the theater, acting and fame, leading up to the eventual physical blows in the climactic swordfight (wonderfully choreographed by Chris Cardosi) that ends act one with a flourish.

The director and hard-working cast of *I Hate Hamlet* have obviously put in the effort to make these parts their own and have succeeded in finding much of the humor in the material. With a bit of tightening to remedy the pacing issues that threatened to drag down the first act, as well a weekend of performances under their belt, I predict that they will enjoy a very successful run that would make even Barrymore proud.

Attleboro Community Theatre presents I Hate Hamlet, written by Paul Rudnick and directed by James Sulanowski. Performances continue through May 19 at the Ezekiel Bates Masonic Lodge, 71 North Main Street, Attleboro. Friday, Saturday performances are at 8pm, and Sunday matinees are at 2pm. Tickets at the door and online at attleborocommunitytheatre.com.

