

METROLAND

The alternative newsweekly of New York's Capital Region

***Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, directed by Dov Weinstein, Tiny Ninja Theater, Woodstock Fringe Festival, Byrdcliffe Theatre, Woodstock, NY through August 20.**

“There are no small parts, only small actors.”
Tiny Ninja Theater credo.

Hamlet is played by a red, one inch tall plastic ninja with a grappling hook forever poised to be flung into action: I think it is a metaphorically perfect image for Hamlet.

Claudius is played by Derek Smile, a slightly taller-much-wider-and-much-whiter-than-the ninja Hamlet, vaguely Casper-the-ghost shaped with black eyes and a black smile. Gertrude is played by Mrs. Smile, presumably wife of Derek, only she has on a blue dress and wears a pink rubber ribbon on her head. Ophelia is played by Daphne Hipchikz, which is self-descriptive. She's a babe, as far as plastic brunette toys go. The Ghost of Hamlet's father is a black ninja inside Tiny Ninja Theater's artistic director Dov Weinstein's mouth.

Which is symbolically perfect because Tiny Ninja Theater's *Hamlet* springs from Dov Weinstein's head, and the show is brilliant. It's one of the best *Hamlets* I've ever seen, and the only area *Hamlet* that next plays in Stratford-Upon-Avon, England as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's year long celebration of the complete works of the world's greatest playwright. Having years ago caught a SoHo Hamlet Festival where in addition to people, sock puppets, shadows, and, in a bit of breed blind casting, a golden retriever played the melancholy great Dane (like most actors playing Hamlet, she got half of what the role demands: the playful energy, but not the intellectual depth), I've seen lots of gimmicky fringe theater, and Tiny Ninja Theater's *Hamlet* is not just a fringy gimmick.

Tiny Ninja Theater's *Hamlet* uses the 1603 "Bad Quarto" *Hamlet* (many of Shakespeare's plays from his lifetime have multiple printed text, and modern editors pick and choose amongst them for the version they print as "Shakespeare's" play) as the acting text, preserving the shortness of the quarto version versus the folio (2100 vs. 3900) and the names ("Corambis" instead of "Polonius"), if not the words (the 1623 folio's famous "To be, or not to be, that is the question" is used instead of the 1603 quarto's "to be, or not to be, aye there's the point" though the earlier text is stricter iambic pentameter). This is a smart production, not just clever for cleverness' sake. It's a unique slant on the most famous of plays, made more unique by those plastic ninjas of many colors.

Seen occasionally on TV monitors downstage left and downstage right and three black raised acting areas (two black boxes and a black cart) on a diagonal running up center right to midcenter to down center left, Weinstein creates all the voices for the 33 characters in Tiny Ninja Theater's *Hamlet*. Remarkably, all 33 are distinct, unique, memorable, and well-enunciated, even the lispig Laertes. By manipulating the ninjas and the other plastic dolls on the various acting areas and the two monitors, the focus stays on the characters, and Weinstein, in his dark blue overalls, monk haircut, glasses, and bare feet, seems to melt into the roles. The audience laughs with the sheer audacity of the concept and the changing stage pictures (I defy anyone not to laugh at the drowned Ophelia in a wine glass), but you watch the damn stuff; the biggest budgeted, most expensively trained and/or famous actors couldn't create a *Hamlet* whose characters and plot are clearer or more engaging. By manipulating the tiny video cameras (this is at times like *Cops* in blank verse) supplying the live feeds to the monitors, Weinstein shifts the focus of the play; sometimes it's what Hamlet sees, sometimes what an omnipotent power (the audience from its raised perch overlooking the stage) sees, and, most memorably, what Corambis' sees from his viewpoint behind the arras for the "get thee to a nunnery" scene and, most remarkably, before, during, and after Corambis' death scene hiding in Gertrude's closet.

This 7 year old, NYC based company is a treat for anyone who likes novelty, a sight for anyone who enjoys arresting visuals, and a not to be missed treasure for anyone who loves and reveres theatre. And if you miss this week-end's performances at the Woodstock Fringe Festival, your next opportunity is in the town of Shakespeare's birth, where he most assuredly won't be spinning in his grave; applauding, yes, but spinning, no.