

Sometimes, to be is not to be



Dave Jenniss with Marjolaine McKenzie who's playing Ophélie

Photo credit: Benoit Aguin

By Danielle Valade

Hamlet dances in a teepee, dressed in furs, holding the skull of a beaver. Wait a minute; the prince of Denmark has a Native side to him?

So it seems: Hamlet resides on a reserve. Hamlet le Malécite, that is. Expecting old English and men in tights? Not quite; drumming echoes off the walls here at the theatre. Hamlet le Malécite is a play produced by the Ondinnok theatre company in Montreal. Ondinnok is an old Huron word meaning 'Inner vision, the secret desire of the soul'. This production, created by Yves Sioui Durand and Jean-Frédéric Messier, consists of an all-Native cast, the first in Quebec.

The red curtains open up on a story of humanity's eternal quest for identity and justice. However, the directors of Ondinnok have extended the search of Shakespeare's Hamlet and incorporated a Native identity. In the play, they explore spiritual codes that have influenced peoples all over the world, including the ways that colonization has affected First Nations peoples.

Hamlet le Malécite demonstrates the break in modern Aboriginal society and its communities: political lies, corruption and greed. Youth who search for answers and find only dead ends instead. Individuals who seek knowledge, often with fateful outcomes or suicide. The absence of art, of free speech, of self-determination, of the inability to be who one wishes to be within this collective dream, this illusion of modern North American society.

What have First Nations People become? What is it to be a Native? Dave Jenniss, the

actor, plays a young Dave living on a reserve in Quebec, desperately wanting to emulate Hamlet in an Aboriginal theatre to save himself from a crumbling and contrived world. He makes efforts to answer these questions for his own survival.

Asking for support from his reserve to put on a play, Dave, our young wannabe Hamlet, faces injustice, ignorance, abuse of power and greed. He finds out that Hamlet's fateful circle is real; he is of the essence of the prince of Denmark after all. In tragedy, art will be his survival tool.

"Why didn't they kill us all?" asks a crying Ophélie beautifully played by

Marjolaine McKenzie, and this question sends a chill to the audience. The standard of living for most Native people is better nowadays, but what is the price paid for this; a Nation with a loss of identity, of traditions and mythologies.

The ambiance of the whole building gives the play a unique cachet. The old American Can factory in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve district, the venue for this play, could not have been a better choice. The theatre is a darkly seductive, gutted cement carcass lined with pillars and huge windows overlooking the city bathed in sun-setting light. "It (this building) is extremely significant," says director Sioui Durand. "It says

that we the Natives are squatters on our own land and even more in the city." The set utilizes strategic and poignant videos such as the Kanesatake crisis and Leonard Peltier footage to illustrate the story.

Projected against curtains and on the teepee wall, the video blends the theme of old traditions and modernization beautifully. The décor is simple and effective. The view is a vision when in one scene Dave pulls open the curtains of his city dwelling to reveal a stunning downtown Montreal vista.

Ondinnok, the only Inter-Tribal Native theatre company in Quebec, has been in existence for almost 20 years. Founded by Yves Sioui Durand, Catherine Joncas and John Blondin, its mission is to create a theatre that is innovative and responsive to the present, asserting the power of art over reality. The troupe's current priorities include the urgent need to develop theatre within Native communities. They are investing in the formation of actors that are coming from Native communities.

Ondinnok has just joined forces with the National Theatre School of Canada. They are launching a theatre workshop program for Native actors, starting next September. The classes will be held at the NTSC in Montreal but also the school will be nomadic — a unique concept in North America. It will be travelling to remote areas of Quebec where performing art is almost non-ex-

istent. It can be difficult to thrive as an artist in some places and the Ondinnok's project wants to help the actors to grow.

There is an element of Hamlet in the artistic director Yves Sioui Durand. A member of the Huron-Wendat, he chose theatre as a special way to express his culture. Co-founder of Ondinnok, he is a true pioneer of Native theatre in Quebec. "I believe in the talent and the beauty that inhabit the new generation, and in its power to make a difference. This is exactly what Hamlet le Malécite proposes to us."

At Ondinnok, the focus is on a theatre of cultural resistance: it is an attempt to decolonize culturally. "The youth do it in front of us," says Yves Sioui Durand proudly. "It is a testimony; when no one wants to talk, like the events at Kanehsatake, only artists have the courage to talk and break the wall of silence."

Ancestors taught peoples around the world that they are part of the circle of life. The eternal quest for identity, for justice and for expression of oneself is indeed a revolution in itself. Will humankind find the quintessential answer of 'to be or not to be'? More importantly, will First Nations peoples find the answer? That is the true question.

Hamlet le Malécite, an Ondinnok production, runs until June 19, presented at American Can, 2030 Pie-IX (Pie-IX metro). Info and reservations: 514-593-1990. ■

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