

Stratford Festival's 'Wilde'

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Two actors put their stamp on famous roles and another shows his range, moving easily from drawing room comedy to swashbuckling adventure at this year's Stratford Festival.

Stratford is offering an eclectic season with only three Shakespeare works among the 13 plays being presented. In fact this year the emphasis is not on the Bard but on the bad boy from Ireland, Oscar Wilde, to mark the 100th anniversary of his untimely death. Stratford is offering Wilde's most popular comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play about Wilde's scandalous life. *Oscar Remembers*, a Gilbert and Sullivan musical based on Wilde and a month-long series of lectures throughout August. The season also features an appearance by legendary Broadway star Uta Hagen in *Collected Stories*.

Here's a sampling of what you'll see:

'Hamlet'

Paul Gross' Hamlet is an exposed nerve. This isn't just a melancholy Dane but an emotionally overwrought young man full of guilt, disdain and self-loathing.

At first Gross, known in this country as the star of the TV series *Due South*, seems too emotional, but his solid command of the language draws us into his riveting interpretation of Shakespeare's most famous character. Unfortunately, none of the other characters are as well defined, robbing the production of the tension and depth it would have if we had a fuller interpretation.

Director Joseph Ziegler gives *Hamlet* an early 19th century setting, similar to that of Kenneth Branagh's recent film version. But the production is fairly straight forward except for the emotional fervency of Gross' per-

Stratford Theatre

At the Festival
Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, through Nov. 5
Rohy's *The Three Musketeers*, through Nov. 4
Stein, Bock and Hamrick's *Fiddler on the Roof*, through Nov. 4
Moliere's *Tartuffe*, Aug. 1 to Nov. 3

At the Avon
Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, through Nov. 4
Goodrich and Heckett's *The Diary of Anne Frank*, through Nov. 5



CELLA FOR THEATRUM
Noble Dane: Paul Gross plays Hamlet with emotional force.

formance. The other performances are solid, workmanlike but unfocused. Benedict Campbell's Claudius is a man of outward charm but nothing else is suggested either of evil or guilt. Even less clear is Domini Blythe in the pivotal role as Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. Ziegler avoids the Freudian spin of Laurence Olivier's famous film, but he gives Blythe nothing on which to hang her performance. There is no passion here, either for Claudius or Hamlet. Similarly, Marion Day's Ophelia is too vague.

There are some fine performances, including Jerry Frank's officious Polonius, David Kocley's sympathetic Hor-

atio and Graham Abbey's dashing Laertes.

Overall, this is a good introduction to the work, clearly outlined, clearly and simply spoken, directly performed. But for those looking for new insights into this profound tragedy, it will be less satisfying.

'Fiddler on the Roof'
It's not just that Brent Carver is physically smaller than the actors usually associated with Tevye (Zero Mostel, Herschel Bernardi, Topol), but he also plays the role smaller. Carver's Tevye is just an ordinary man, weighted down by his work as a dairyman and by his family of five daughters. When he complains to God, his conversation is wry, gentle, modulated. Carver sings well but he isn't the bombastic clown of Mostel or the big, bear-like leader of Topol.

This interpretation of Tevye allows director Susan H. Schulman to shift attention to the town of Anatevka and the rich life of its Jewish community in 1905, a time of pogroms and revolution.

The Festival Theatre stage is colorfully transformed into a Marc Chagall painting come to life full of riotous peasant colors, surreally flying animals and, yes, a fiddler on the roof.

'Fiddler' is a joyous celebration of life even under the harshest of circumstances. The Jerry Bock-Sheldon Harnick songs draw on the rich legacy of Jewish culture that informs all American popular music. Here the songs (*Sunrise, Sunset, Tradition, If I Were A Rich Man* etc.) and Jerome Robbins' dances, under choreographer Michael Lichtfeld, are superbly performed by a generally excellent cast and a fine orchestra.

The three daughters, who each break from tradition in their choice of mates, are all performed with warmth and zest by Robin Hutton as Tzeitel, Tracy

'The Importance of Being Earnest'

Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, through Nov. 4
Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, July 11 to Oct. 13
At the Tom Patterson
Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, through Sept. 30
Euripides' *Medea*, through Oct. 1
Findley and Thompson's *Elizabeth Rex*, through Sept. 30
Margulies' *Collected Stories*, July 21 to Sept. 2
Mazurder's *Oscar Remembers*, Sept. 8-29

To get to Stratford: Take the bridge to Windsor, follow Highway 401 east to Exit 222 (the next exit after Ingersoll), then follow County Road 6 north to Stratford.

For ticket information: Call (1-800) 597-1600, or check their Web site at www.stratford-festival.ca.



A deal: Lazar Wolf (George Masswohl) and Tevye (Brent Carver) celebrate a marriage arrangement under the watchful eye of the fiddler (Phillip Hughes).

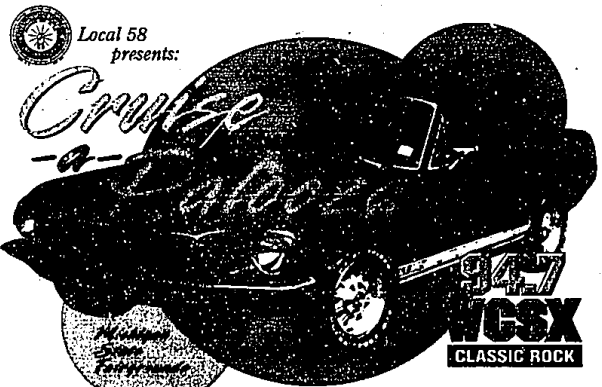
Michailidis as Hodol and Amy Walsh as Chava. Michael Therriault affects a tailor's stoop in his small body and gives a witty, nervous performance as Motel on *Miracle of Miracles*. Fred Love is strong as the revolutionary student Perchik.

It is only in Theresa Tova's Yente, the matchmaker, and Keith Dineola's Rabbi that the performances go over the top

into Jewish vaudeville. They might have learned better from Carver's restrained, realistic and winning performance as Tevye - a little is good.

(Thursday, Graham Abbey moves from *Laertes* to two very different roles in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Three Musketeers*. Next Sunday, a look at *Ningara-on-the-Lake's* Shaw Festival.)

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