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Chapters And Verse

To Be or Not To Be Paul Gross

When Paul Gross stepped onto the venerable Stratford Festival stage for the opening night of Hamlet I was there, holding my breath and rooting for him.

It's not that Paul as the Prince of Denmark is difficult to imagine, or that he's not talented enough to pull it off, but his television successes had made the critics skeptical. Well, so much for the critics. Paul's performance was simply wonderful. In fact, his film and television experience makes him a very physical, emotional performer and therefore, a very appealing Hamlet. He truly inhabited this amazing character.

After the standing ovation subsided, I was reflecting on a conversation we'd had last winter. Paul was just wrapping up the wildly popular mountie drama called Due South, which he wrote, produced, and starred in and he was starting to look ahead to this very moment in time. "I haven't done anything on stage for 10 years", he said, "so that opening night of Hamlet at Stratford will be a little scary. Maybe a lot scary."

No kidding. It's a long, long way from his days as a gopher at the Stratford Festival box office when he was just 16. That, Paul said, was where he first heard that there was such a thing as acting school. Of course, later he went on to become the playwright-in-residence at Stratford, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Despite his years of acting, this must still be just a little intimidating because he is playing one of literature's most fascinating characters, in what may be Shakespeare's most famous play. It's also personal. When asked who he most admires it was "Shakespeare," he said, paraphrasing the writer Harold Bloom, "because he invented us."

Paul has spent the better part of a year researching Hamlet, and when I asked him about the play, he said:

"I have no idea what this play is about, and I don't think Shakespeare did, either. And I don't think anybody can sit there and say "This play is about this...." It's actually about everything, everything you can even imagine – that you've ever thought about, that you've ever read about – is somewhere in that play.....I sit down with Joe Ziegler who is

directing it and we'll start talking down a fairly narrow bandwidth about, say, the scene with the mother, and then, before we know it, somehow, the former Yugoslavia is in there; and airplane accidents, and how people cope with their grief and all of that – somehow – is contained in that play. It's really bottomless – it's not an essay, there's no didactic purpose to it...but it is something that has clearly stirred us for hundreds of years and will continue to because he's on something that is the pith of the mystery of life."

So how on earth does one prepare for this role? "The truth is you don't even have to think about it. As soon as you start thinking about playing it, it's there with you all the time, it's constantly rolling around your head," Paul explained. " And it's astonishing, I realized I actually even know most of it and we haven't even started rehearsing it, but it's something you absorb in your lifetime – it's in all of us now, it's part of our collective unconscious. At least, everyone in the world knows "To be or not to be..."

Well, I thought, maybe not everyone in the world. But many people know about Hamlet and the ghost of his murdered father, and Ophelia and even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But, as Hamlet said, "the play's the thing.." and many of us need to re-visit it to really remember. Paul's bold performance actually allowed me to really hear the dialogue, the asides and the humour for the first time. And I realized how much I really love this play.

All of Shakespeare's best and most quoted lines are there, in context. The themes are timeless – revenge, of course, but also the mining of human nature and why we do the things we do, our motivation and the reality of the consequences. It's the ultimate onion – layers and layers.

And for the many who may have considered Paul just too pretty by half, or who doubted the brain beneath the tousled head of hair, think again. It's well worth the trip to Stratford.