

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

May 2, 2016

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Shakespeare's Ophelia Meets UCSB College Students

What happens when the roughly 400-year-old ghost of Ophelia, the young Danish noblewoman in Shakespeare's "Hamlet," unexpectedly meets up with a group of contemporary college students?

One outcome is playwright KJ Sanchez's "Too Much Water," presented in a workshop production by UC Santa Barbara's Department of Theater and Dance. The play combines Shakespeare's text with transcriptions of interviews with current students and highly theatrical movement to explore the role of "good girls" through time. Meeting Ophelia, the students find the challenges she faces in Elsinore mirror the experiences of students at UCSB in 2016.

The play opens Friday, May 6, at 7:30 p.m. in the campus's Performing Arts Theater. Additional performances are slated for 7:30 p.m. May 10-14 and 2 p.m. May 7, 14 and 15.

In a play about madness — with Hamlet's sanity in the spotlight — young Ophelia moves through the periphery, truly going mad. "Too Much Water" gives voice to her experience as she encounters 21st-century college students and finds parallel experiences between their trials and tribulations and her own.

"'Too Much Water' is extremely relevant in today's world because in giving Ophelia a voice — separate from her onstage interactions with the men of 'Hamlet' — this play

examines the representation of women in both the canonical literary tradition and contemporary society,” said Joyelle Ball, a doctoral student in UCSB’s Department of Theater and Dance and a co-director of the production.

“An old play made new with contemporary accounts of those who share today’s versions of Ophelia’s struggles and a reimagination of Ophelia’s own story, ‘Too Much Water’ challenges societal expectations of gender and explores the ways in which they manifest in relationship to family, mental health, and our cultural iconography,” Ball continued.

The production of “Too Much Water” at UCSB is roughly 15 years in the making. Playwright KJ Sanchez, in her first attempt at developing a performance based on Ophelia, made a dance theater piece titled “Too Much Water” with master of fine arts students at the University of Washington. Among those students was Jenny Mercein, now a lecturer in the department of theater and dance at UCSB. Mercein became an integral part of the collaboration and development.

Last summer, Mercein, who is co-directing the current production of “Too Much Water,” approached Sanchez with the idea of revisiting the play, and Risa Brainin, a professor of theater at UCSB and director of the campus’s LAUNCH PAD program, invited Sanchez and Mercein to participate in the summer LAUNCH PAD series. During Sanchez’s residency at UCSB, she conducted interviews with bachelor of fine arts students, asking questions related to relationships, family, gender and mental health, among others.

During rehearsal, Sanchez also asked the students what being a “good girl” meant in their families and asked them to name women they most respected and why. She also asked them to relate situations in which their parents embarrassed them. The end result of these interviews and conversations was a piecing together of the various transcriptions into a collage that Sanchez interwove with text from “Hamlet.”

“It’s been thrilling to build this piece with bright and engaging students here at UCSB,” Sanchez said. “While we are using the same title as we did many years ago at the University of Washington, this is a brand new play — not a rewrite.”

Sanchez’s research for the original piece began when she played the role of Ophelia in an early production and discovered the depths she had to reach in order to truly understand what madness means and how a woman succumbs to madness, especially when playing alongside a prominent male character such as Hamlet.

“For my mad scene, I was wearing the coat and glasses Polonius was buried in, caked in mud,” she recalled. “I imagined her at his freshly dug grave, in the rain, digging up his remains, needing the comfort of his coat and glasses, needing to hang on to something, *anything* because she was so terribly alone. To me, that’s what real madness was — being completely, absolutely alone. Everyone else in the play is focused on Hamlet’s madness, yet here is this young woman truly going insane and no one takes notice. She falls between the cracks and all the while is doing her best to do everything everyone asks of her. She’s a good, good girl and she breaks apart without anyone noticing ... until it’s too late.”

More information about the production, including a complete schedule and tickets, is available at www.theaterdance.ucsb.edu. Questions can be directed to Una Mladenovic at (805) 893-3022.

About UC Santa Barbara

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