

Dancing with Hamlet at the Brumder (//thesmallstage.weebly.com/blog/dancing-with-hamlet-at-the-brumder)

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Melody Lopac and the back of Donna Daniels in DANCING WITH HAMLET at the Brumder.

Russ Bickerstaff

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Playwright **Deanna Strasse's** *Dancing With Hamlet* has a very raw and organic emotional connection about it. The family drama makes its world premiere this month in one of the coziest spaces in town: the early 20th century domestic warmth of the **Brumder Mansion Bed & Breakfast**. A space that once housed a family now serves as home to a family of characters who are dealing with a funeral and a wedding.

Dancing With Hamlet is a contemporary middle-class American sort of thing. A husband and father have died and his divorced wife is getting remarried. Wedding plans have been made and they will go through regardless of the death of the bride's ex-husband. The three adult children of the wife and her late ex-husband are a bit upset about the whole situation.

There's a powerful simplicity about the contrast between wedding and mourning that Strasse does a respectable job of rendering. The three adult kids play like the three parts of the Freudian model of the human psyche:

Melody Lopack plays **Elvira Flack**. She's the Ego of the play. We see everything more or less through her eyes. She's a professor of English and she's learning to cope with the death of her father. Naturally the juxtaposition between death and marriage is going to remind her of *Hamlet*. The play is punctuated in her mind onstage by bits from *Hamlet*, but to her credit, Strasse doesn't try to gouge Shakespeare's tragedy too far into the heart of the contemporary family drama. Lopack is irresistibly fun in the role on an intellectual level. Lopack says as much in silence as she does in dialogue. In any given moment there are about a half a dozen things that Elvira could be saying. She chooses one of them and the dialogue continues. Lopack surrenders herself so completely to the role that we see Elvira drift between possible responses in silence as thoughts glide across her face.

Cory Jefferson Hagen plays **Beau Flack**. Of the three siblings, he's the most grounded and totally together so naturally...he's the Superego of the play. He's stable. He has a solidly grounded and realistic perspective on things. And he drinks liquor...just like a *real* Superego. Being the calm voice of reason in the room would run the risk of coming across as being profoundly dull were it not for the fact that Hagen's playing the role. He has this almost *comically* level-headed poise about himself that's a lot of fun to watch in the role.

Josh Scheibe plays **Wilde Flack**. He's the Id. He wants to deal directly with the emotions at the heart of everything that everyone else seems so intent on diverting or pivoting away from in some way. He wants to feel the pain of the loss and really embrace it, but he may love the loss more than he loves the father he lost. So it's complicated. And so is he. They say he's named after Oscar Wilde. So he's got just as much of a sense of the dramatic as Elvira does...only he acts on it. Scheibe cleverly keeps

Wilde's wild in check. The character's temperament is erratic and emotional, but he's very methodical in his approach to it all. Scheibe does a really impressive job of delivering the cold calculations of the character without compromising his passions.

Donna Daniels plays matriarch **Rosie Flack**. She's excited about her marriage. She's quite happy. And her longtime husband has just died. Daniels plays the in-your-face mystery about the character with a theatrically casual demeanor. Does she really think she's starting her life with a man at this stage in her history? Is the wedding about her or is it about her AND her intended husband? Why does she seem to have no response at all to the death of her ex-husband? Clearly she has issues going into this marriage. It is to her great credit that Daniels doesn't over-render those issues because the center of her personality really rests in her ability to ignore it all and just have a good time. Daniels delivers that beautifully.

And then there are the two who AREN'T related to anyone else by blood...

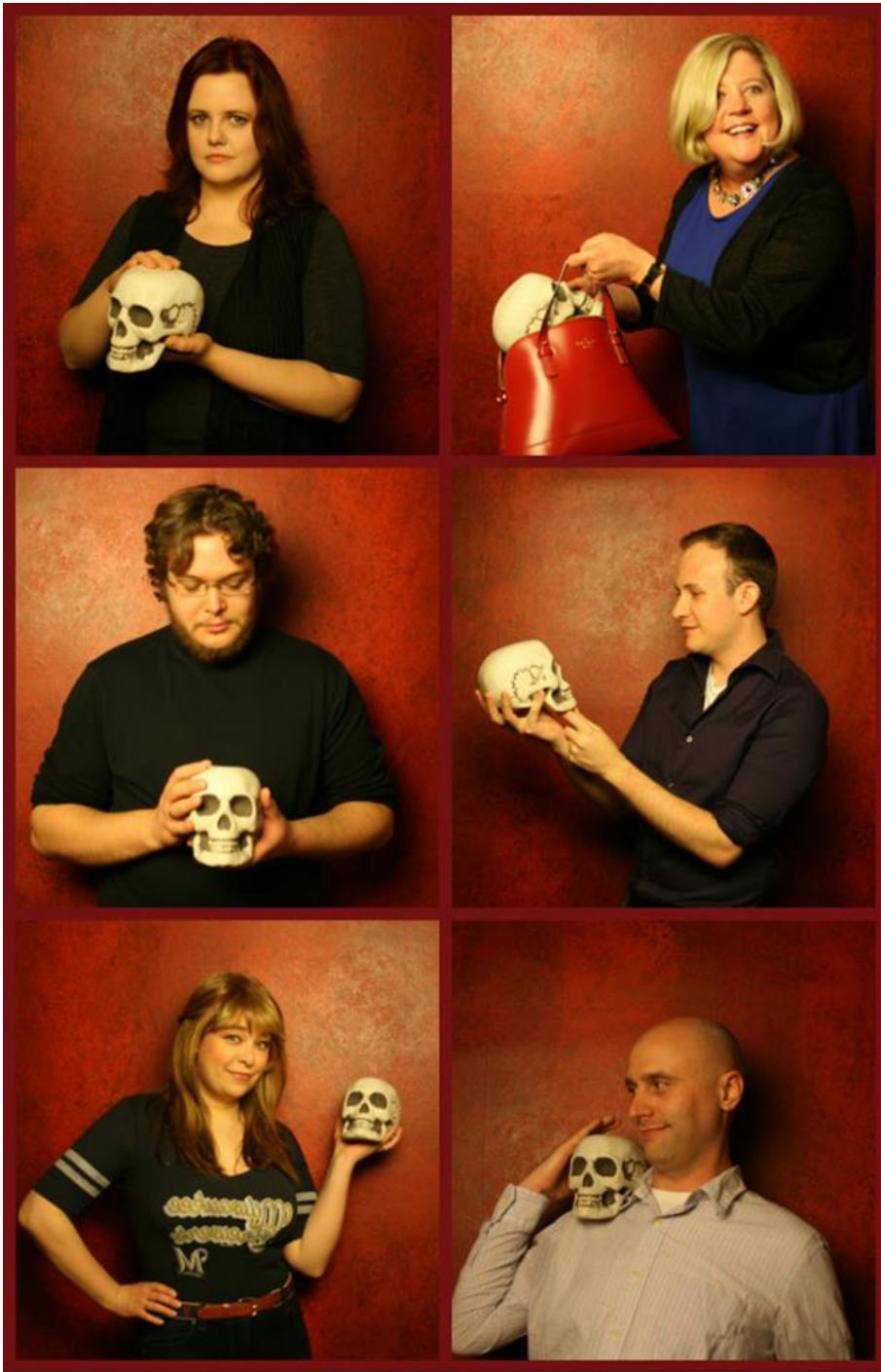
Emmitt Morgans is delightfully awkward as a cancer research scientist **Dr. Tony Simms**. A bit of a socially flaccid individual, Simms seems to have followed Rosie around long enough to have stumbled into a wedding where he he just happens to be the groom marrying her. Morgans plays it just a few shades shy of outright silliness, allowing the character just enough emotional center to feel heartbreakingly real throughout the play. There are people like this. There are people who feel like cartoon characters in real life. It can be monumentally difficult to bring that kind of thing to the stage and make it still feel like real life. Strasse and Morgans have done an informally brilliant job of this.

Amanda J. Hull plays the girl next door. Literally. She's **Jean**: a receptionist who could have been a hair stylist who just happens to live next door to the family with her mother. She grew-up right next to the three siblings and right along with them. As she's playing a bit of an outsider, she's not given a whole lot of depth to explore. The comedy of the character may come in the fact that...even though it's not her home, she's actually the only one playing the part of the hostess trying to smooth things over and make them pleasantly sociable throughout the play.

Thankfully, Hull plays half of the single most memorable scene in the entire play. There's a conversation between her and another. Hull does a clever job of slowly backing into a moment between Jean and one other character and it really IS a heartbreakingly sweet moment that has so tragically little to do with the rest of the play. To say more would be to ruin the moment, which I may well have done simply by bringing it up. With this and so much else, director Carol Zippel has found just the right balance.

Beyond the Freudian family drama there's real allegory that could be read into the plot as any well-rounded family tends to echo the society that it's a part of. On one level, *Dancing With Hamlet* can come across as being profoundly political. Maybe we're all Melody Lopac carrying around our father's ashes just trying to make sense of it all in such a strange and strangely familiar world that isn't *quite* what we want it to be.

Windfall Theatre's (<http://www.windfalltheatre.com/>) production of ***Dancing With Hamlet*** runs **Mar. 15-24** at the **Brumder Mansion** on **3046 W. Wisconsin Ave.** For ticket reservations, call **414-332-3963**.



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