

# Preview of UA theater's 1950s-set "Hamlet": Reimagining pairs Shakespeare and jazz - News - Tuscaloosa News - Tuscaloosa, AL

By Haleigh Amend Special to The Tuscaloosa News

When pondering a new production, Seth Panitch hears music. Not literally, in the beginning, but during development of the script, when finding his own approach.

For "Hamlet," what he heard was '50s cool jazz.

"When I choose a play, the first thing I think about is the music," said Panitch, a professor in the University of Alabama's Department of Theatre and Dance and director of MFA and undergraduate acting programs. "Every director has a different way into material and for me it is usually music. I had done a New Orleans jazz 'Twelfth Night' two years ago that worked really well, and I adapted the monologue into songs. I did not want to do that (for 'Hamlet') because that works in a comedy, but it does not work in a tragedy. So what I wanted to do instead was to have Hamlet speak in rhythm to jazz."

Because he doesn't compose, a musical collaborator came next.

"I contacted a local jazz musician, Nicholas A. Boyd, with this crazy idea before the summer and said 'This is what I want to do,'" Panitch said. "'I want to have an entire jazz score to it, and I want to score all of Hamlet's major speeches.' The second line of one of his famous speeches is where the music will come in, and it will die right before he dies. My concept was that this flustered, angst-ridden jazz music is conjured by Hamlet because of his inabilities, and when he finally accomplishes what his life is meant to accomplish, he can let that music die, and then he can die peacefully. That is the concept of the piece."

Shakespeare and jazz don't blend often, so building the score was challenging, Boyd said.

"I knew from experience that a project like this, a marriage of mediums, inevitably places you outside of your comfort zone," he said. "1940s jazz saw a musical dam break and bebop rushed out, notes flurrying every which way. 1950s jazz was no less intellectual, but the raging torrent had slowed to a pensive and contemplating gurgle."

"That's how it earned the moniker 'cool' jazz; it contrasted starkly with the 'hot' jazz of the previous decade.

"Seth's vision on this was clear and right on, I think. Hamlet is so dark and brooding; the mood created by the thoughtful music of Miles Davis and John Coltrane was the perfect choice to supplement Hamlet's experiences. I'd say 75 percent of the cues are new melodies written over pre-existing chord changes. I only took the framework the masters provided and gave it a Shakespearean context. The other 25 percent are original and were written to create a specific mood or sound."

One thing this production has in common with a comedy: Timing is crucial.

"Nick and I worked together to make sure that the music turns when Hamlet's mind turns within those songs," Panitch said. "Now that is what Ian Andersen — who plays Hamlet — and I have been working on, making sure that they time out, and in some respects we are allowing the musician to be an artistic component of Hamlet's voice."

Andersen, an MFA acting student, worked professionally before landing at UA. He's been with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival, American Players Theatre and others. Since arriving, he's starred in shows from the farce "Boeing, Boeing" to Molier's "Tartuffe" and Panitch's original play, "Here I Sit, Brokenhearted," a bathroom comedy that debuted here and off-Broadway back in midsummer.

Hamlet's a significant change of pace for Andersen, who's typically not seen as dark and brooding.

"I play a lot of comedic characters, and Hamlet is not necessarily a comedic character," Andersen said. "I don't really fit that mold of a tragic hero. This role isn't like 'Romeo and Juliet'; it's simply just a human being that we're trying to capture. It's more about the humanity of the man than it is about looks and type."

Andersen's Hamlet will be decked out in black from shoes to turtleneck to leather jacket, summoning the beat generation of the '50s. Courtiers typically don cocktail or casual wear that wouldn't be out of place in an Eisenhower-era suburban back-porch barbecue. Royal figures such as King Claudius (Billy Green) and Queen Gertrude (Bailey Blaise Mariea) dress formally, in tailored suits and gowns.

Though Hamlet's suffering sometimes leads directors to cast him as a teen -- a more depressed Romeo -- by the chronology of events in the play, he's at least 30.

"I think it is more important that we show a witty young man who has the potential to make people laugh, who instead is clinically depressed when the play opens," Panitch said. "I think it is more interesting to show a character that is fighting towards humor and toward lightness than giving up to the dark."

"I picked Ian for his lightness. I also picked him for his age. I think Hamlet is older than what he is played. Ian is a feather's weight beyond 30."

The stage is spare and stark, backdrop arches topped by a projection screen which shows colors, ghostly and abstract images to match moods. The set's mostly from a series of movable cabinets that resemble coffins; they shift to form walls, closets, beds, chairs and benches, and late in the game, an actual coffin.

Panitch's cut brings it in at about two hours; uncut, Shakespeare's tragedy runs twice that long.

"I think that when you cut a Shakespeare play and tell it in a very fast pace, compelling nature, it doesn't allow an audience that knows the story to get ahead of the story, and to be really sensitive to the way this company is interpreting this play," he said.

