

***Hamletmachine* a successful collaboration of academic and professional theatre**

What does the end of the world look like?

Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine* may not offer any answers, but it certainly raises a lot of questions. This apocalyptic deconstruction of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* exploded onto the stage this past spring, the result of a collaboration between the University Theatre and Atlanta's 7 Stages Theatre.

7 Stages Artistic Director Del Hamilton was invited by the University Theatre to collaborate on the staging of this challenging play for the 2006-2007 season. *Hamletmachine* opened in mid-February for a two-week run in the Cellar Theatre, then moved to 7 Stages Back Stage in March. The production crew, including MFA designers and actors as well as faculty and some of the department's dedicated undergraduates, gave up their spring break for the opportunity to work in a professional theatre setting.

According to Hamilton, *Hamletmachine* is not usual fare for 7 Stages audiences. "We were all worried that nobody would come to see it. However, we sold out, or at least we filled the house. The enthusiasm in the talk back after was significant."

Hamilton is no stranger to UGA, having graduated from the university with an MFA in drama in 1969. "I'm directing a one-act play in the theatre where I directed my first one-act play, as a student," says Hamilton. His last collaboration with the University Theatre was three years ago, when he directed Luigi Lunari's *Our Father*.

While this collaboration marks a step forward in providing opportunities to the department's students in the professional world, it offers benefits to 7 Stages as well. "Relations between the non-profit theatre community and universities is a real way for both entities to deal with our lack of resources," says Hamilton. "I'm hopeful that we can engage meaningfully with colleagues at universities, and they with us."

This production of *Hamletmachine* was also a first in its use of dramatic media to create a virtual actor, pal.Hamlet, who shares the character of Hamlet with real-life actor Norman Ferguson, member of the Graduate Acting Ensemble. Ferguson spent considerable time in a motion-capture lab for this production, since the pal.Hamlet character is based on his body and voice.

"Working with this technology was one of the reasons why I wanted to come to UGA," says Ferguson. "I feel very fortunate to be involved with this type of production. I was a little nervous at first, but then I was able to dive right in. I was taken aback when I saw the initial results, especially seeing my movements on a computer screen for the first time and thinking, 'That's me! Weird.' But it was a good kind of weird."

Pal.Hamlet is the brainchild of PhD student Michelle Smith, whose research into media performance was the catalyst for the current production. "I was fascinated by the concept of Hamlet as a split consciousness," says Smith. "He's in a constant struggle with himself, trying to

cope with the upheaval in the world around him. Pal.Hamlet represents an alter personality of sorts, who seizes control at moments when Hamlet himself is paralyzed by his own mind.”

Smith received a grant from Ideas for Creative Exploration, an interdisciplinary initiative for advanced research in the arts at the University of Georgia, to develop her virtual actor concept. Pal.Hamlet is the first stage use of her concepts. “It’s an extension of the Holodeck,” Smith laughs. “The Gorillaz [a popular band made up of animated musicians] can perform live at the MTV Awards. Pal.Hamlet is the same thing, only the goal is to have him controlled by artificial intelligence rather than being canned animation.”

Smith and Hamilton went to Berlin in March to speak at the International Heiner Müller Society’s “Hamletmachine Workshop” about the production. Hamilton is excited about the trip. “It’s a great opportunity,” says Hamilton. “The Society is offering a year of *Hamletmachines* from around the world. There are performances, workshops, and scholarly lectures, all about this single play. Intellectually, that’s astonishing.”