



PHOTO: ERIC SCHENK

"People always ask, 'When is a company ready for Shakespeare?' Well, in my case, it's when I meet a Hamlet," says Actors' NET artistic director Cheryl Doyle. Above, Keith Kerns as Andrew Bally, Susan Ferrara Barto as Felicia Dantine, Tammy Koehler as Deirdre McDavey and Jo Page as Lillian Troy, rehearsing for *I Hate Hamlet*.

Good intentions aside, the trilogy poses a significant risk, especially for a young company like Actors' NET, now entering its third year at the Heritage Center. The show's centerpiece is widely regarded as one of the greatest plays ever written, so audiences and critics are likely to set very high expectations for the production.

*Hamlet* also is usually performed on large stages, and the Heritage Center provides significant space limitations. But these problems could easily be overcome by Actors' NET, especially considering that the company has a history of taking large shows and making them work on a relatively small stage. "People always ask, 'When is a company ready for Shakespeare?' Well, in my case," Ms. Doyle says, "it's when I meet a Hamlet."

Mr. Harpence fits the bill. "Hamlet embodies just about everything you'd want to do as an actor," says Mr. Harpence, who delivered a critically acclaimed performance last year in *Henry IV, Part II*, with Shakespeare '70 at Washington Crossing Park in New Jersey. He's also appeared in *The Devil's Disciple* and *Miss Jean Brodie*, both at Actors' NET. "(Hamlet's) an intelligent, witty, energetic man who's faced with the most impossible choice and not given a way out. He's given a choice and he knows any action he takes will be futile." He must avenge his father's death by killing the king.

Not every actor should do Hamlet, according to Ms. Doyle. But she thinks Mr. Harpence is ready.

"It's something you shouldn't do until you have all your equipment in place," she says.

Her biggest criterion is that her actors be able to speak Shakespeare naturally. Everything else, she says, can be addressed in rehearsal.

Mr. Harpence portrays *Hamlet* in the second and third plays of the trilogy. In the first, he plays Barrymore's ghost.

"The trick is," Ms. Doyle says, "to have all the technique—the speech, the movement—he quite transparent so it doesn't become about people talking pretty. It becomes about the story."

Ms. Doyle remembers her first Shakespeare experience. "It knocked me between the eyes," she says. Her desire is for her audience to have the same experience.

"To experience life through the arts, to know, to see the really high emotions of life translated that way, then you are not alone," she says. "If you're willing to go to the outer darkness of human experience and come back, then the next time life takes you there you can get through."

Mr. Harpence agrees that Shakespeare is powerful; the very reason he acts is to play Shakespeare. "Everything else is secondary," he says. On a lighter note, perhaps Barrymore's ghost says it best: "Where else can grown men play with swords."

The action takes place on sets designed by Ken Junk-

ins of Morrisville. "It's a wonderful and exciting design," Ms. Doyle says. "He's able to create so many ways around a stage." The trilogy's sets include a spiral staircase leading to a balcony and ramps out into the audience.

"It's a great ensemble, a great group of talented folks," Mr. Harpence says.

The cast of *I Hate Hamlet* includes Yardley resident Susan Ferrara Barto, Doylestown resident Jo Page, Philadelphia resident Keith Kerns and Pennington, N.J., resident David Anthony.

"Really good actors doing Shakespeare helps the audience understand Shakespeare. It is important to me that this be a play people can follow," says Ms. Doyle, referring to *Hamlet*. That, and perhaps getting knocked between the eyes, is her gift to the audience.

For Mr. Harpence, the play's the thing. "This, for an actor, is the ultimate new millennium gift." ●

The Actors' NET of Bucks County is located at The Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmar Ave., Morrisville. *I Hate Hamlet* runs Jan. 12-28, *Hamlet* Feb. 16-Mar. 4, and *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* March 16-April 1. *Showtimes Fri and Sat at 8 p.m. and Sun. at 6 p.m.* Tickets for individual performances cost \$10 for adults, \$8 for seniors (62 and older) and children (under 13). Tickets for the trilogy cost \$25 for adults, \$20 for seniors and children. For information, call (215) 428-0217. On the Web: [hometown.aol.com/actorsnet](http://hometown.aol.com/actorsnet)