

Kate Hamill's 2022 play based on Jane Austen's last novel Emma, misses by a country mile

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American actress and **playwright Kate Hamill** makes clear in her biographical material that when she adapts the novels of Jane Austen for theatrical presentation 60% of the re-write is her own original material. Hamill's boast proved uncomfortable on opening night October 13, 2023 as the **Theatre Group of Santa Barbara City College** presented her adaptation of Jane Austen's subtly satirical, gently comedic, and seriously message-driven last novel **Emma (1815)**. Playwright Hamill has turned Austen's perceptive masterpiece into cringe worthy slapstick.

Director and instructor of acting at SBCC Theatre Arts **Katie Laris** set her company of student and adult amateurs an unnecessarily difficult task from the get-go by deciding to present the play in British English. The resulting mishmash of accents - questionably British, predominantly American, and otherwise unidentifiable – was regrettable. Dialects appeared and disappeared throughout the evening with the regularity of a pesky speech impediment.

Laris' cast struggled valiantly but without much success to meet the director's unnecessary language challenge when they could have presented the play far more successfully in American English. Playwright Hamill had, after all, turned the literary

cheek by morphing Austen's British masterpiece into American comedic schtick.

Co-chair of the Department of Theatre Arts **Patricia L. Frank** didn't have much to do as Scenic and Lighting Director for *Emma*. Her lighting throughout the play's two acts stayed pretty much ice cold bright, more-or-less unchanging and static - decidedly unimaginative. Her single set piece for the show, more Crusader castle than English country estate, begged the question - budget constraints?

Sound Designer **Barbara Hirsch** scattered credible period music samplers spanning a hundred years or so up to and around 1815 throughout the play, but considering Jane Austen was a well-known and gifted musician, Hirsch might have sought out popular pieces for fortepiano and voice (Austen sang too) from the Georgian Period; the tunes most likely to have been on hand and performed by wealthy amateurs at their country estate social gatherings (the motif for most of the play). A little research would have made for a more focused and interesting sound ambiance.

Stage movement and other blocking – the dance choreography for party and wedding scenes in particular – was an entirely improvised mess on stage - embarrassing. To her credit, Costume Designer **Pamela Shaw** achieved excellent results at assembling wardrobe with the look of the Napoleonic Period. Brava!

The cast for *Emma* - City College students with adult amateur actors from the community - needed much more artistic leadership than director Laris delivered. **Lexie Brent** who

played the title role of Emma, was all over the map in her attempt to prod laughs from the audience. A little balancing by director Laris of these raw fluxes of temperament and accent would have redounded to Brent's credit. **Clayton Barry** in the role of Mr. Knightley managed his English accent and improvised blocking with solid success – a job well done in a generally precarious ensemble acting environment.

Grace Wilson as Harriet Smith, and **Jenna Scanlon** as Miss Bates navigated their scenes together with rough-hewn but empathic finesse. Playing the vicar as a dandy - who came up with that one? - **Mario Guerrero** was permitted unfettered tastelessness as he improvised his way through a ballet of awkward moments on stage. His delivery? Indecipherable.

The character of Mr. Weston was imagined by **Robert Allen** as something between P.T. Barnum and Boss Tweed. At least Allen made no bones about speaking in gangster American English exclusively. A sensible decision. **Anikka Abbott** as Jane Fairfax Emma's perceived rival, managed to hold her own, despite apparently limited pedagogic help from faculty to understand at a deeper level, one of the most pivotal characters in Austen's novel.

Luke Hamilton, who stepped into the role of the amiable young sex object and true dandy Frank Churchill, found himself also abandoned by leadership - un-coached thus uncouth in his understanding and presentation on stage of this crucial character in Austen's novel. Other cast members – **Van Riker** as Mr. Woodhouse, **Rachel Brown** as Mrs. Weston, **Lana Kanen** as Mrs. Elton and a maid, and **Sue Smiley** as Mrs. Bates - pretty much sorted out character development on their own. It showed.

Playwright Hamill states her mission in adapting Jane Austen's novels for the theater is about looking at Austen's work through a 21st century lens, especially a modern woman's perception of sexism, marriage dependency, independence, and self-worth. Jane Austen's advocacy for women and their struggle for equal rights, the thematic subtext of all of her novels, was prescient in 1815 and more so today. Adapting her last and some say best novel for the theater is a noble project. Hamill has unfortunately missed the mark by opting for cheap laughs.

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