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Review: *Opheliamachine* an uncompromising vision at City Garage

By Philip Brandes

In her own fashionably postmodern fashion, the title character in the visually stylish “*Opheliamachine*” at Santa Monica’s City Garage is a tragic figure, though she bears only slight textual ties to Shakespeare’s original archetype.

Instead, Magda Romanska’s fiercely confrontational new play is more directly a response to German avant-garde theater director Heiner Müller’s notorious 1977 deconstruction, “*Hamletmachine*” (also staged by City Garage, in 1996).



Ophelia (Kat Johnston, rear) confronts her own fractured psyche (Leah Harf, Saffron Mazzia, Cynthia Mance) in “*Opheliamachine*.” (photo by Paul M. Rubenstein)

Müller’s play had transformed Ophelia from victim to Electra-fied avenger, but Romanska, not satisfied with its persistent patriarchal baggage, focuses on gender relations and the struggle to liberate feminine identity from its cultural and political determinants. A writer seated at a typewriter, this Ophelia (Kat Johnston), creates her own story through stream-of-consciousness monologues as densely associative and enigmatic as Müller’s, while Hamlet (Joss Glennie-Smith) sits on the sidelines enslaved to TV programming.

Director Frederique Michel launches her staging with Ophelia’s enraged final speech from Müller’s play, neatly bridging the two productions and establishing specificity when Romanska’s Ophelia announces her determination not to identify with the past.

Easier said than done amid contemporary media-driven conformist pressures (smartly expressed in Charles A. Duncombe’s video-saturated production design). Further emphasizing Ophelia’s struggle, Michel employs her “*Hamletmachine*” device in representing a protagonist’s fractured psyche with multiple actors (Johnston, Megan Kim, Saffron Mazzia, Leah Harf).

Though Ophelia’s quest for self-determination teeters on the brink of inevitable annihilation, compared with perpetually servile Horatio (RJ Jones) or shopaholic Gertrude (Cynthia Mance) she “fails better” (in Samuel Beckett’s sense). With few traditional theater points of reference to navigate by, her uncompromising journey is not for the intellectually incurious.