

Historical Play Staged at Creighton 'Ankhst' Explores Life of Odd Pharaoh

By Jim Delmont
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Clarinda Karpov's historical play, "Ankhst," is a fascinating excursion into other worlds of time, theology and conflict, and has impressive moments of poetic and dramatic impact.

In a lean production from the Omaha Workshop Theatre at the Creighton Performing Arts building, the play's considerable virtues and occasional imperfections are evident.

A woman archaeologist, played with verve, enthusiasm and feeling by Pegeen Reilly, attempts to rescue her sagging career with an important Egyptian dig in which she makes an amazing discovery — the ashes, in an urn, of the strange, disturbingly brilliant Pharaoh, Akhnaton.

This controversial ruler had tried to revolutionize ancient Egyptian religion by introducing a monotheism based on worship of the sun.

A peculiar man, inept as ruler, he enjoyed the consort of the legendary beauty, Queen Nefertiti and the friendship of his more pragmatic brother, Smenkhkare, played by Kent Anderson in a strong, effective performance.

The director, Connie Sutherland-Pearson, is fortunate to have a splendid

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actor in the role of Akhnaton, who comes to life in the presence of the archaeologist, Alexandra Philips.

As Akhnaton, J. Michael Lee fully realizes the sensitivity and anguished idealism of the living pharaoh as well as the agony of the disembodied ku, or spirit, trapped in a nondescript tomb for eternity.

With a sure sense of character and a superb speaking voice, Lee gives a memorable performance.

Playwright Karpov dares much, including spectral scenes from behind curtains, a mix of contemporary and historical action, a cast of 15 playing multiple roles, various flashbacks and a lengthy subplot involving Alexandra and a rival woman archaeologist.

Many of the historical speeches are in blank verse and achieve dignity, eloquence and a realism about the historical moments they illuminate. Much of the dialogue is moving and beautiful to the ear, a difficult task for playwrights attempting historical scenes.

In addition to Lee and Ms. Reilly, David Dechant as a treacherous high

priest, and William Yorke Hyde, in several roles, make their mark.

The first act could be tightened somewhat to get more directly to the amazing scenes with the pharaoh and his spirit, including one moment when all Akhnaton's accusers swirl about him to the beating of drums.

Interesting lighting and a properly mysterious musical score by Mark Nelson and Phyllis Dunne add to the enchantment. An audience of 44 attended Sunday's matinee. The play continues Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. through May 28.