

'Ankhst' examines life of a pharaoh

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REVIEW

Preaching peace has probably caused more personal wars than any other message. Socrates, Gandhi and Jesus Christ are examples of prophets whose ideas weren't anxiously embraced by their peers.

The Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten (1380-1362 B.C.) is arguably one who can share company with these men of peace. Ancient Egyptians weren't ready for his vision of monotheism — one god symbolized by the sun. It brought about a rift between him and his brother, Smenkhkare, and cost him the empire.

Questions posed by this poet-philosopher come to light when an archaeologist stumbles upon his tomb and converses with the ghost of Akhenaten, in a new play entitled "Ankhst." Whether you believe he was a prophet is unimportant; playwright Clarinda Karpov merely poses the questions in an entertaining fashion.

The Omaha Workshop Theater presents a well-crafted, if somewhat long, production about this little-known Pharaoh at the Creighton University Interim Performing Arts Center.

Director Connie Sutherland-Pearson adequately handles a tricky script, but the pacing in the middle could use some work.

Karpov's main characters are two women archaeologists with clashing methodology and personalities. Dr. Alexandra Philips (Pegeen Reilly) is an impulsive, passionate artist whose interest in the science stems from her insatiable quest for truth.

Her foil, Dr. Judith Raban (Donna Maria Rohm), is a by-the-book intellectual who is seemingly more concerned with her reputation than whatever secrets the ancient ruins may hold.

Their Egyptian digging site becomes a battleground for differing philosophies, and provides dramatic tension at the beginning and end of the show. The middle portion — which takes us back in time with the

Pharaoh — could use tightening.

This section features some thought-provoking dialogue between Akhenaten and his brother, plus an intriguing subplot about his demise brought about by a self-serving bunch of high priests.

It runs too long, however, making a difficult transition back to the present.

Nonetheless, this is a challenging production that features believable performances and strong writing.

Reilly embraces the free-spirited role of Alexandra wholeheartedly, never doubting for a minute the strength of her convictions. It is a plum role, and she sparks it with rarified wit and honesty.

Rohm's role, by its very nature, is less likeable. She does a convincing job with a character whose main purpose is to act as devil's advocate. At times she seems a bit too stiff, but it could be just the nature of the role.

Good performances are also delivered by J. Michael Lee as the peaceful Pharaoh, Dave Dechant as a high priest and Kent Anderson as the Pharaoh's brother.

Karpov uses a great deal of symbolism in her script.

Akhenaten — who was the older brother of King Tut and married the beautiful Queen Nefertiti — refers to the Phoenix that rises from the ashes; seemingly he does, too. Unlike other Pharaohs of the day who were carefully preserved, his body was cremated. It takes a young, idealistic archaeologist to bring him to life.

In turn, he brings her to life, and forces her doubting peer to confront her own prejudices.

"Ankhst" is a meaty show full of well-rounded characters. Just a little plot tightening and some work on pacing is needed.

"Ankhst" will be performed through May 28 at Creighton Interim Performing Arts Center, 30th and Burt streets, Omaha.