

# 'Ankht' examines life, philosophy of 3,000 year old pharaoh

by Susan Kuhlmann

Although archeologists delight in discovering unexplored tombs filled with artifacts giving clues and information about past civilizations, what they do not expect to find is the spirit of the deceased inhabitant.

That's the dilemma faced by Dr. Alexandra Philips in "Ankht," the current production of the Omaha Workshop Theatre, directed by Connie Sutherland-Pearson. In the play, Philips, while on a routine dig not far from the present-day Te ElAmarna, encounters the Ku spirit of a 3,000-year-old Egyptian pharaoh Akhnaton. The original work of Omaha playwright Clarinda Karpov is based on historical character, with some interpretation and speculation on the part of the author.

Akhnaton, who ruled Egypt for 17 years, was the husband of Nefertiti and an older brother of Tutankhamen. Yet his reign remains a mystery.

Philips is a renowned archeologist with impressive credentials, yet hers is a subordinate role in the project. She is, in fact, under the leadership of Dr. Judith Raban, a former student.

Both women have strong, if not stubborn personalities, which clash more than once. But they also reveal feelings of vulnerability and self doubt, to both the audience and one another, as the play unfolds.

The two share a firm belief in the competence of women in their profession and it seems important to both that they



J. Michael Lee in his portrayal of the mysterious Pharaoh Akhnaton.

dissipate any doubts or discrimination which may exist regarding their gender.

For Philips and Raban, archeology is a search for answers not only about the past but about life itself. In the course of the project, the women share secrets about their pasts which motivate a faithfulness to work.

Because she has lost some esteem among her peers and is looking to prove herself during the project, Philips is caught in the dilemma of being unable to either deny that she has encountered the spirit or tell others of its existence. Her situation is complicated by the growing fascination and respect she feels for the Ku.

After a somewhat lengthy two acts, set in the tomb and dealing primarily with narration and emotion, Act III takes the audience back to the time of Akhnaton's reign. Bright lighting, colorful costuming and dramatic action bring the past and the ancient ruler to life and enhance the understanding of the man.

His philosophy, beliefs and methods of ruling were in sharp contrast to others. He chose to share power with his wife and his brother; viewed men and women as equals and was a lover of peace. The departure from his predecessors and the changes he embraced created fear within the hearts of his subjects.

Most significantly, Akhnaton differed from other rulers in his firm conviction that there is but one god, the source of sunlight. He envisioned the being as a source of good and of unity. It was the pharaoh's eventual attempt to eliminate the worship of other gods and the greedy, corrupt priesthood which supported the concept that led to Akhnaton's demise.

While Karpov portrays this mysterious king as a kind, just ruler who was a victim of circumstances, her play is not so much about death and defeat as it is a reawakening to a discovery of self. Some 3,000 years after his death, Akhnaton's spirit has a lesson to teach. His nature and love

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of truth give Philips the strength and answers that had been missing from her life.

Although the drama retains a serious mood, the play has moments of humor, particularly in Karpov's use of puns. An example is Philips' description of the crypt as "a tomb with a ku."

Pegeen Reilly gives a commendable performance as Philips. She is equally convincing as the self-assured expert on archeology, the daughter who never quite measures up to a father's expectations and the practical scientist, afraid to believe what she sees.

Reilly's portrayal is especially satisfying at the conclusion of the play when she demonstrates a real sense of liberation from all the restrictions she has previously adhered to and expresses a genuine love and spirit of sacrifice in the name of her new found teacher.

No less impressive is the performance by J. Michael Lee as the Ku and later as the young ruler Akhnaton. He portrays a passion for truth and justice while being tormented be-

cause he is uncertain how to make those ideals a reality. He is generous and self sacrificing in both his world of ancient Egypt and his present day tomb. Lee's eyes are particularly expressive as he looks to his beloved sun for answers.

The role of Raban is performed well by Donna Maria Rohm. Her character is in the awkward position of having authority over a former teacher, a person she has idolized. "To live with your heroes is no picnic," she states.

While she wants to have total faith in the other and wants to restore any credibility Philips may have lost, Raban is plagued with uncertainties about the stability of her counterpart. Rohm convincingly portrays Raban's conflicting feelings and the resulting frustration.

Another character who feels pulled in two ways is Smenkhkare, Akhnaton's younger brother, with whom he shared power. While he has a strong sense of love and loyalty toward his older brother, Smenkhkare is more practical and cannot help but be persuaded by the priests' logical arguments. Kent Anderson does an admirable job portraying the vacillating emotions experienced by the sibling.

The set for the play is stark, to emphasize the meager setting left in the tomb by Akhnaton's enemies. A few simple props are effectively used to connect the two worlds.

Also effective is the way characters in the background are interjected into the present to enhance the story line. They appear to come to life from the dark, cold walls of the tomb.

Subtle music by Mark Nelson and Phyllis Dunne, with an Egyptian tone, is well used to add to the mood of a long ago era.

The play, which is being shown at the Creighton Interim Performing Arts Center, runs through May 28.