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Quartet of young actors share classic Shakespeare role

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From left, Great River Shakespeare Festival Intern/Apprentice Company members Sarah Naughton, Alex Stage, Kate Kremer, and JJ Gatesman will star in "Hamlet" performed Tuesday, July 21, through Saturday, July 25. Photo courtesy of the Great River Shakespeare Festival

Hamlet. It's the dream role of most any actor. And it's a dream role four young actors are all getting this summer, thanks to the creative casting of Rick Barbour, director of the Great River Shakespeare Festival Intern/Apprentice Company's "Hamlet."

"I didn't want to do everyone's 'Hamlet,'" Barbour said.

And he isn't. The role is split between Sarah Naughton, 20, from Cazenovia, N.Y., Kate Kremer, 20, from Seattle, J.J. Gatesman, 22, from Las Vegas, and Dylan Roberts, 21, from Appleton, Wis.

The play opens Tuesday and runs through Saturday at Winona State University's Performing Arts Center's Black Box Theatre.

The foursome of Hamlets isn't meant as a gimmick.

"It makes a lot of sense with Hamlet," Kremer said of sharing the role.

Barbour saw splitting the meaty role among actors as a good way to give them all a great experience and tell a classic Shakespeare story in an interesting way.

"There was a certain weird logic to it," Barbour said.

No other character is shared, although other actors in the 13-person cast play multiple roles.

"I was very intrigued by the concept," said Naughton, the Hamlet who gets to say "To be or not to be, that is the question."

The other Hamlets aren't jealous.

"There are so many other great speeches," Roberts said.

The Black Box, which holds about 120 people, offers an intimate place for storytelling. No audience member will be more than about 15 feet from the actors.

"Everyone's connected," Gatesman said. "They immediately become your friends and confidants."

The cast only had three weeks to rehearse, first learning their lines as understudies for the main stage productions of "Love's Labour's Lost" and "The Tempest." They also paid their dues by helping in the costume and prop shops. But now, it's time for them to take the stage.

While it's a different way of telling the classic Shakespeare story, Barbour says audiences won't be confused or disappointed.

"Trust us," Barbour said. "We're not doing it to be cute, but because it was a good way to do the play."

If You Go

WHAT: "Hamlet," performed by the Great River Shakespeare Festival's Intern/Apprentice Company

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, 3 p.m. Thursday, 7:30 p.m. Friday, and 3 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: Winona State University's Performing Arts Center Black Box Theatre

TICKETS: \$15, 474-7900

WEB SITE: www.grsf.org.

The annual GRSF Variety Show will be prior to the opening performance of "Hamlet." The free show, which features various talents from company members, starts at 6 p.m. Tuesday outside of Winona State University's Performing Arts Center.

After the "Hamlet" performance, cast members will join play-goers for a celebration at Jefferson Pub & Grill, 58 Center St.