

The play's the thing: Andrew Fleming's *Hamlet 2*

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Almost immediately, *Hamlet 2*, the new film from director Andrew Fleming and *South Park* writer Pam Brady, takes up a number of interesting and important themes. The film contains more than its share of promising material. In the opening sequences, Dana Marschz (Steve Coogan), in voiceover, describes his passion for acting. At the same time, we see a montage of his work. Years were spent toiling in infomercials, bit parts on embarrassing television shows, advertisements for the most personal of medications.

Unable to find more substantial work, partly due to the limitations of his talents—which we soon discover are rather severe—but also due to the very real lack of serious work, Marschz now finds himself in a thankless job, teaching drama at a high school in Tucson, Arizona. Adding to the disappointments of a failed career in the arts and an unhappy marriage, Marschz discovers the drama department is soon to be dismantled due to a fiscal crisis that has forced arts programs onto the “chopping block.”

A plan is soon hatched in which the teacher will attempt to save the drama department by writing and producing what he hopes will be an extraordinary original play. In a fit of inspiration (or is it desperation?), he writes “*Hamlet 2*,” which will soon create a scandal in the community with its outrageous and offensive content.

Unhappily, *Hamlet 2* does not fulfill the promise of its material. The filmmakers have avoided the most interesting questions and implications of their work and have made a film that takes the least challenging avenues, involving itself with the most simple-minded forms of contrariness and attacks on political correctness.

Following the example of *South Park*, the film's broad assault on political correctness frequently leads

the work into some very backward territory. Why, for example, are we invited—even urged—to laugh at the expense of a gay character who is a prize pupil in the drama department? He behaves with all the stereotypically gay signifiers we've come to expect in such comedies, and these are the primary source of his laughs. One has to ask just what precisely is the joke here and what are we meant to take from it?

In another strange characterization, Saturday Night Live's Amy Poehler appears in a small role as a meddling ACLU lawyer eager to sue someone (anyone) and exploit the controversy over the production of “*Hamlet 2*” for her own purposes. Whether through carelessness or conviction, one feels the ridiculing of her character tends to come primarily from the right. It leaves a bad taste in one's mouth.

The swipes at religion that come as part of the “*Hamlet 2*” play during the film's climax, and which are presumably supposed to make it edgy or controversial, are simply predictable and tame. Jesus, one of the lead characters in the play, being the literal *deus ex machina* that makes an otherwise unthinkable sequel to *Hamlet* possible, sings songs like “Rock Me Sexy Jesus.” He wears blue jeans in the musical number, something akin to a blasphemous version of *Grease*.

In another scene—and one would have to be blind not to see it coming—Jesus will say, “When my dad finds out what I've been up to, he's going to *crucify* me.” The line is only intended to make one groan, delivered as it is with a wink a nod. But all in all, this is pretty harmless stuff.

Hamlet 2 is just the most recent in a string of trivial comedies, trading in “random” humor and quirkiness. So much time is wasted here! Actress Elizabeth Shue, for example, appears as herself, or a version of herself.

She has abandoned the film industry in favor of working at a fertility clinic. She soon enough comes into the orbit of Marschz and his drama class.

What sort of possibilities might this have offered? A well-known actress appearing as herself in a film who takes every opportunity to point out the rotten nature of the film industry? As far as *Hamlet 2* is concerned, it comes to nothing. Shue is made to look like a fool for no discernible reason, the primary motivation for her appearance being so that the writers can make countless pop culture references to her films of the 1980s.

Other running gags involve the repeated head injuries suffered by a mute student in Marschz's class and the teacher's lack of coordination on roller blades. Both involve the least inspired forms of slapstick.

With its peculiar brand of "randomness" and its lack of depth, one misses in *Hamlet 2* the satisfaction found in far better comedies that comes when a character or situation is pegged down dead-to-rights and portrayed with such acute observation that one can't help but laugh *with recognition* at the type. One searches in vain for that sort of thing here.

It's clear the filmmakers share a genuine distaste for religious superstition, the wretched state of the entertainment industry, and the lack of access to cultural programs in schools. Their anger over such issues is more than evident. But these are issues that require a far more serious and thoughtful approach. One can't just swing wildly in their direction, hoping to land a punch or two.



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