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Cal Shakes Pushes the Parameters in 'A Winter's Tale'

By Lou Fancher



Tristan Cunningham, L. Peter Callender, Aldo Billingslea, and Margo Hall in Cal Shakes' production of "A Winter's Tale", directed by Patricia McGregor
Photo mellopix.com

(it happens, and the gentleman on Sunday, Sept. 29 did a fine, if distracting, job): the production value at the outdoor amphitheater remains high.

The plot itself, of course, is topsy-turvy. Leontes, the sporadically crazed king of Sicily, suffers sudden mental madness and accuses his wife, Hermione, of improprieties with his best king friend, Polixenes. Leontes refuses the reasonable defenses presented by his loyal and nine-month pregnant wife; her servant, Paulina; his servant, Camillo - and he fatally ignores the fading health of his son, Mamillius. His rash, royal fury sears reasonableness to a char and before the end of the first act, Hermione and their newborn daughter are sentenced to death. Even a declaration of Hermione's innocence by an Apollonian oracle does not sway Leontes' conviction that his wife is "slippery."

An announcement, that his beloved son has succumbed to stress due to the loss of his mother and has died, jolts Leontes from his monstrous mindset. A flood of regret overwhelms: "Tears shed at her grave will be my recreation," he mourns. Minstrels from the play's opening return and a surreal scene shows the newborn infant, Perdita, secreted away and now in the care of a kindly shepherd. She's been saved by Pauline's husband, Antigones, who is famously chased from the stage by a bear, the animal named in Shakespeare oft-noted stage direction.

If that's not enough of a bizarre journey, Shakespeare places a 16-year span between the first and second acts. Act Two sprints from the union of the two kings' offspring, Florizel and Perdita, to the back-thumping reconciliation of Leontes and Polixenes to the miraculous "awakening" of Hermione, who is not dead after all. Or perhaps she was, but she's reborn and all is forgiven by the play's end.

L. Peter Callender (Leontes) is stunning. Tufts of humor ruffle out from under the skirt of his daunting rage to deepen his fascinating, prone-to-wild-excess portrayal of monarchy gone mad. The lightness serves him well as the kindly shepherd in his double-duty casting. Omoze Idehenre (Hermione) commands the show's most convincing moment: dressed in orange prison garb, facing the executioner, even her gasping pauses speak volumes. And multi-taskers Christopher Michael Rivera and Margo Hall are impeccable; capturing the peculiar quirks and poignant quandaries of their dual roles with equal fervor. Aldo Billingslea's (Polixenes) and Tristan Cunningham's (Perdita, Emilia) gentler presence - and a promising appearance by young Akili Moree - add needed dimension.

Set Designer Michael Locher's gypsy blue trailer and imposing "magic box" (containing a fiery red spiral staircase whose design was nicely echoed by "very not yellow brick road" spirals on the blackened stage deck), fails to align, despite being artfully rendered. Costumes by Katherine Nowacki are energetic, even groovy, but suffer the same misfire, adding to the "trying too hard" impression of the audience interactions.

Despite the impression that McGregor's usual vivacious direction is muted by devoting attention to too many disparate components, her ambitious vision is admirable. After all, thick theatricality, hysterical joviality, comedic cavorting and supernatural shamanism are an armful. If the production's reach sometimes fails to grasp, the fine actors - many of whom deserve to be seen more often on Bay Area stages - are to be applauded.

"A Winter's Tale," presented by California Shakespeare Theater, runs through Oct. 20 at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (off Highway 24), Orinda. For information, call (510) 548-9666 or visit www.calshakes.org.

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