



## Slippery in Seattle: The Winter's Tale

by Sean Henry. Written on 2016-12-27. Published in 2017 Issue 2.

For the production: *The Winter's Tale* (2016, Seattle Shakespeare Company, USA). See production details at the end of the review.

THE SEATTLE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY OPENED ITS TWENTY-SIXTH SEASON IN SEPTEMBER 2016 with *The Winter's Tale*, directed by Sheila Daniels at the Seattle Repertory's Leo K. Theatre—an intimate space that suited this relatively spare production. Soothing recordings of classical guitar played before the performance, perhaps signaling to the audience that what followed would be a traditional production of the play. And, indeed, apart from two interpolated entrances by the entire cast (at the opening and at the beginning of Act 4) and a spectral appearance by Hermione behind Antigonus during his soliloquy before his death by bear, the production was straightforward and unfussy. With minimal sets (a collection of rectangular pillars that served in turn as the architecture of the Sicilian court and the trees of Bohemia) and little stage business to distract from Shakespeare's words, such straightforwardness served to emphasize how the play divides in two parts that resolve each other, moving from Sicilian winter to Bohemian spring.

Daniels incorporated a few interpolations, however. The play opened with the cast entering the darkened stage, carrying lanterns and chanting part of Pablo Neruda's posthumous "Winter Garden" in turn:

*I am a book of snow,  
a spacious hand, an open meadow,  
a circle that waits,  
I belong to the earth and its winter.*

During this opening, a spotlight focused on an hourglass downstage left, later presented by Polixenes to Leontes when he initially seeks to leave Sicily. Although the intended effect of emphasizing the seasonal themes of the play was clear, I am not sure how successful the opening or the other interpolations were in drawing out what is already in Shakespeare. Indeed, these moments seem in tension with the trust the production otherwise showed for the text of the play.

Leontes dominates the first three acts, and in Darragh Kennan's *Leontes*, the production has its strongest performance. Kennan is comfortable with delivering verse with clarity and emotion. He presents the king's descent into jealous madness without subtext, offering no psychological explanation for the roots of the royal suspicions beyond what the audience observes on stage, but his performance does not suffer as a result. While Leontes watches Hermione and Polixenes musing "Too hot, too hot," all but Kennan freeze in tableau, allowing the actor to move across the stage to look more closely, gesture at the pair, and address the audience. Meanwhile, a protracted, dull, headache-inducing note drones over the sound system at each such aside, raising the tension of the scene. Kennan interacts with the audience, sitting on the edge of the stage and pointing at "many a man" who little knows (pointing elsewhere) that "Sir Smile, his neighbor" has fished his pond, thus interjecting a sinister merriness to Leontes. One quibble might be Kennan's tendency to rush over the sexual double-entendres embedded in Leontes' observations, robbing the crescendo of "nothings" in 1.2 of its vitriolic obscenity, for example.

Polixenes is something of a thankless (if not dull) role, but Reginald Andre Jackson plays him with dignity. Actors of color play the Bohemian royal family in a casting choice that evokes through white Leontes' rage what might be called a reversal of Othello's jealousy and the complicated anxieties of race—not only in the recollection of the Moor's tragedy, but also in a play produced in a country during the fall of 2016 undergoing a presidential election fraught with questions of race relations. The production does not allude to contemporary politics beyond this casting choice, but they are inescapable.

Sheila Daniels also seems to draw upon *Hamlet* in Leontes' costuming. Where the Sicilians begin the play dressed in simple stage versions of Renaissance costume (the women in green and red; the men in black and neutral colors), the king appears during the worst of his jealousy without a doublet or shoes, his shirt and hose unkempt, embodying Renaissance descriptions of madmen. Later, during the trial, while Leontes reappears in doublet, carrying a drawn sword, Hermione's costume echoes these mad clothes: a simple white shift. Brenda Joyner as Hermione is at her best in this scene, embodying honesty and power in ways suggesting she is more than a match for her husband. She stands upstage on a platform during her trial, a lone figure in white, shining. In contrast, Amy Thone's Paulina did not suggest the strength necessary to deal with Leontes; moreover, Thone initially seemed uncomfortable speaking verse. She physically attacks Leontes, then spoons with him when the realization of what he has done crushes him to the stage.

To modern audiences, *The Winter's Tale* can appear unbalanced, with pastoral Bohemia appearing less interesting and more ineffectual than the story of Hermione and Leontes. And, indeed, the Seattle Shakespeare Company's production wanders a bit during its time in

Bohemia. Modern lack of interest in the pastoral mode, combined with the obscurity of Perdita and Polixenes' talk of flower-breeding, made audience attention palpably flag. Costume and stage-setting signal the differences in geography and mood: the columns of the Sicilian court become trees of a Bohemian forest, and (perhaps taking "Bohemian" too literally) the characters dress in sandals, sky-blue Nehru jackets, and beads (exiled Camillo looks for all the world like a bespectacled chartered accountant who has dropped out and joined an ashram). The production includes two pastoral dances: the first reminiscent of swing dancing, while the second, incorporating bull masks and fertility rituals that seem intended to suggest (what my companion called) "a certain pagan 'witchiness' about the whole thing," emphasized the production's focus on seasonal change and rebirth. Again, I wonder whether the symbolic emphasis was overdone.

Just as Leontes dominates the first part of the play, so Autolycus dominates the latter. Some productions are known to double the parts. Here, M. J. Sieber is a knowing, carnal Autolycus, winking at Seattle and its Bohemian foibles. Sieber enters as Autolycus from the audience, bearded, strumming a ukulele and drinking a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer (reminiscent of present-day hipster culture), though dressed like a Grunge musician from Seattle's early 1990s. "Welcome to Act 4," he smiles when he reaches the stage, and passes his empty beer can to someone in the front row: "Recycle that—we're in Bohemia." If Darragh Kennan's Leontes seems unaware of all the lewdness he speaks, then Sieber's Autolycus makes up for it. He sizes up the young shepherd with a hungry eye as prey for both his thieving and homoerotic gaze. He punctuates his selling song,

*Masks for faces and for noses;  
Pins and poking-sticks of steel,  
What maids lack from head to heel,*

by brandishing condoms ("masks...for noses") and a vibrator ("poking-sticks of steel") at his would-be customers. Later, when disguised as a courtier, Autolycus' beard becomes a fashionable Bohemian "man-bun" through a quick switch. Kennan and Sieber are the highlights of this production.

When the Sicilians arrive again on stage, they are dressed in Victorian mourning clothes. The conclusion of the production had all the textual power *The Winter's Tale* carries for emotional resolution, however costumed. I have not seen a production get the wish-fulfillment implicit in the play wrong—that yearning for those people and places, states and things, we have lost and can never in this life get back. The play works. The resolution is not just one of spring-like rebirth promised by the love of the next generation, but a restoration of the nostalgic past—a

return to hope before pain, jealousy, or loss. The Seattle Shakespeare Company gets this hope, and much else, right, to judge by the tears on many faces as the audience left the theater.

## Production Details

### General

<i>Title</i>	The Winter's Tale
<i>Year</i>	2016
<i>Theater Company</i>	Seattle Shakespeare Company
<i>Theaters</i>	Leo K. Theatre, Seattle Repertory Theatre (USA)
<i>Start Date</i>	2016-09-07
<i>End Date</i>	2016-10-02

### Cast

KING LEONTES	DARRAGH KENNAN
PRINCE MAMILLIUS	FINN KENNAN
LORD CAMILLO	GALEN JOSEPH OSIER
LORD ANTIGONUS	GEORGE MOUNT
LORD CLEOMINES	SPENCER HAMP
KING POLIXENES	REGINALD ANDRE JACKSON
PRINCE FLORIZEL	RUDY ROUSHDI
LORD ARCHIDAMUS	M.J. SIEBER
OLD SHEPHERD	MARK FULLERTON
YOUNG SHEPERD	SPENCER HAMP
AUTOLYCUS	M.J. SIEBER
MARINER	DENNY LE
JAILER	MARK FULLERTON
QUEEN HERMIONE	BRENDA JOYNER
PRINCESS PERDITA	JASMINE JEAN SMITH
PAULINA	AMY THONE
LADY EMILIA	JONELLE JORDAN
MOPSA	JONELLE JORDAN
DORCAS	RACHEL GUYER-MAFUNE
LORD	MARK FULLERTON
LORD	DENNY LE
LORD	RUDY ROUSHDI
LADY	RACHEL GUYER-MAFUNE
LADY	JASMINE JEAN SMITH

SHEPHERD

DENNY LE

## **Creatives**

DIRECTOR

SHELIA DANIELS

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

MEME GARCIA

COSTUME DESIGNER

KELLY McDONALD

MASTER STAGE CARPENTER

CASE LUTES

SET DESIGNER

TOMMER PETERSON

LIGHTING DESIGNER

REED NAKAYAMA

SOUND DESIGNER

HARRY TODD JAMIESON

MASTER AUDIO ENGINEER

MARK KRIDA

COMPSER

RAFAEL MOLINA

CHOREOGRAPHER

MARC KENISON

TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

ADRIAN DELAHUNT

ADVISORY TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

CRAIG WOLLAM

STAGE MANAGER

MIRANDA C. PRATT

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

EMMA PIHL

WARDROBE MASTER

CINDY SABYE

MASTER ELECTRICIAN

JEDIDIAH ROE

PROPERTIES DESIGNER

ROBIN MACARTNEY