



"Like an old tale still": The Winter's Tale and Bard on the Beach

by Paul Budra. Written on 2017-07-05. Published in 2017 Issue 2.

For the production: The Winter's Tale (2017, Bard on the Beach, Canada). See production details at the end of the review.

VANCOUVER BC'S ANNUAL BARD ON THE BEACH FESTIVAL MOUNTED *THE WINTER'S TALE* AS ONE of its four plays in the 2017 season. *The Winter's Tale* was performed on the main stage in a large tent (seating capacity 730) in Vancouver's Vanier Park. It was performed in repertoire with *Much Ado About Nothing*.

The director of *The Winter's Tale*, Dean Paul Gibson, is a friend and he asked me to spend an afternoon with the cast of the play early in the rehearsal schedule. I've done this before for Dean's 2012 production of *King John* and his 2009 *Othello*. As an informal dramaturg, I sat around a table with the cast, spoke for some 20 minutes about the history of the play and what I see as some of its challenges, and then I spent a couple of hours answering questions: why is that god Apollo referenced so many times in the play? What does Leontes mean by "affection"? The most confounding question came from the actor playing Antigonus. He pointed out that in Antigonus' last speech, the character addresses the baby Perdita and says, "Poor wretch, / That for thy mother's fault art thus exposed / To loss, and what may follow!" (3.3.1491-1493) Does this mean, he wanted to know, that Antigonus believes Hermione to be guilty of adultery after he has been such an advocate for her innocence? Why else would he use the word "fault"? A quick check of the *OED* revealed that the word can mean "absence" but in performance that meaning did not come across.

The production itself was highly stylized. The sets were minimal. During the Sicilia scenes, the thrust stage held five tall classical columns with ionic capitals. They were moved into various positions by the actors for different scenes. There were no columns in the Bohemia scenes; the sheep shearing festival set was a large, stylized tree that dominated centre stage. During the final scene of the play, a curtained niche containing the "statue" of Hermione was pushed on stage. Costumes were in a stylized classical fashion, and actors playing small roles often wore

cubist-inspired masks. Masked actors performing synchronized movements were used in chorus-like transition scenes. During the trial scene, masks on stands represented a crowd of onlookers (some members of the audience laughed at the ingenuity of this device). The director has said that his vision for production was inspired by a visit to ancient ruins in Greece and a cubist picture of a bear that he saw online. Combined, these elements created a classical world with modernist touches, a Never Never Land as improbable as the seacoast of Bohemia.

The script was abbreviated and altered. Gone, for example, was the exchange between Perdita (Kaitlyn Williams) and Polixenes (Ian Butcher) on "Nature's bastards," the "streaked gillyvors." Camillo (Laara Sadiq) was played by and as a woman, as was Dion (Amber Lewis). Perhaps the biggest change to the script was the enlargement of the role of Paulina.¹ She opened the play, surrounded by a masked chorus, and told the audience to be "resolved for amazement," a variation of the play's "resolve you /For more amazement" (5.3.3290-3291). She was the Chorus of Time, again surrounded by a masked chorus. Finally, she ended the play with a chorus, this time taking Mamillius' line "A sad tale's best for winter" (2.1.618). The biggest change, however, was having her speak most of the Stewart and Rogero's (the 2nd and 3rd Gentlemen in the Folio) lines from 5.2. Pronouns were changed so that she spoke about her *own* employment of Giulio Romano and the time she was spending at her "removed house" several times a day since the death of Hermione. The actor, Lois Anderson, raised her eyebrows and looked at the audience knowingly during these speeches, telegraphing her plot to hide the Queen. Paulina was *not* betrothed to Camillo by Leontes at the end of the play. These changes did two things. First, they made Paulina the central character of the play. She was the chorus, the voice of conscience, and the worker of a redemptive miracle; Ms. Anderson got the final bow at the end of the performance. Second, the changes emphasized the character's power: Paulina was not only pulling strings to manipulate events, she let the audience know she was doing so. It made sense, then, that she was not betrothed to Camillo; this Paulina could stand alone.

There were some imaginative bits of staging. When Antigonus, played with forceful gravity by Andrew Wheeler, arrived in Bohemia with the baby Perdita, his recounting of his dream vision of Hermione was performed amid smoke and a menacing soundscape. The Hermione's "ghost speech" was heard over the sound system in Hermione's own voice while a figure appeared on stage robed and hooded in white. As the speech reached a climax, the figure pulled red streamers from inside the hood, giving the impression of bleeding from the eyes and face. It was a striking if somewhat ambiguous image. It suggested suffering but also menace. It strongly implied that Hermione was no longer in this world.

As for the famous "exit pursued by a bear," this production handled it better than any I've seen.

Antigonus put the baby down, walked away, then, hearing a noise, hid at the edge of the stage. The bear, a stylized life-sized puppet controlled by two actors, lumbered on stage and moved towards the baby. Antigonus, to save the child, began shouting and waving his arms to distract the animal. It reared up and followed him off stage. After a pause, two life-sized sheep puppets, that were both comic and charming, came on stage. The sheep fled when they heard the Shepherd calling for them (they reappeared in the background of the festival scene).

The statue scene is, of course, the litmus test of any production of *The Winter's Tale*. In this production, Hermione was at first hidden behind a gauzy curtain. Paulina pulled it back to reveal Hermione seated, her eyes closed. She was seated in approximately the same spot on stage where she stood, and fainted, during the trial scene. There was a long and suspenseful pause between Paulina's invocation and the statue's first movement. The final reconciliation with Leontes reduced many of the people in the seats around me to tears (and I, an ass, was onion-eyed).

In general, the second half of the production of the play was more successful than the first half. Ben Elliot made for an effortlessly charismatic and funny Autolycus. He donned a false beard for 4.4 which he later pushed up on his head to convince the Shepherd and his son that he was a courtier. An unexpected moment of humor came when he exchanged clothes with Florizel, played by Austin Eckert. Shirtless, Eckert displayed the physique of an athlete; Elliot the actor, not so much. In Autolycus' final scene, while promising to amend his life, he stole the Clown's purse.

The long 4.4 was full of comic business and charming details. David Adams was effective as the Old Shepherd and the actors playing Perdita and Florizel made for an attractive and charismatic couple. There was some nice comic business between Mopsa (Parmiss Sehat, who also played Mamillius) and Dorcus (Amber Lewis), rivals for the Clown's affection. There was no dance of satyrs (4.4.2164), but the entire cast participated in the dance of Shepherds and Shepherdesses (4.4.1989). The disguised Polixenes and Camillo were dragged into that dance and found themselves comically inept at following the movements of the crowd. Perdita and Florizel's dance (4.4.1974) was short but athletic and balletic.

The first half of the play was well done, but relentlessly oppressive. Kevin MacDonald as Leontes handled the demanding and convoluted speeches of that character with admirable clarity. He played Leontes' jealousy with an instrumental rationality that was more disturbing than some performances I have seen in which Leontes is clearly unhinged. The staging helped him: Hermione and Polixenes moved in slow motion during his first soliloquies of jealousy, symbolizing his growing obsession. Sereana Malani was a dignified Hermione and Parmiss Sehat was believable as a charming if somewhat petulant Mamillius. Lois Anderson, as Paulina,

was convincing, but her denunciation of Leontes in 2.3 lacked the power that her speeches in that scene can carry. On the other hand, when she brought news of Hermione's death in 3.2, she was ferocious, standing over Leontes, who was curling into a weeping ball on the ground, and cursing him.

All in all, this was a stylish and entertaining production of the play, but it demonstrates the central difficulty of staging *The Winter's Tale*: the first half of the play, when done well, is relentlessly oppressive, while the second half is delightful and moving. The first half is a bear, the second a lamb.

Notes

1. ^ Paulina is played by Lois Anderson until August 12 and Jennifer Lines from August 16.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	The Winter's Tale
<i>Year</i>	2017
<i>Theater Company</i>	Bard on the Beach
<i>Theaters</i>	BMO Mainstage (Canada)
<i>Start Date</i>	2017-06-22
<i>End Date</i>	2017-09-22

Cast

KING LEONTES	KEVIN MACDONALD
LORD ANTIGONUS	ANDREW WHEELER
KING POLIXENES	IAN BUTCHER
PRINCE FLORIZEL	AUSTIN ECKERT
QUEEN HERMIONE	SEREANA MALANI
PRINCESS PERDITA	KAITLIN WILLIAMS

Creatives

PUPPET DESIGNER	HEIDI WILKINSON
DIRECTOR	DEAN PAUL GIBSON
COSTUME DESIGNER	CARMEN ALATORRE
SET DESIGNER	PAM JOHNSON
LIGHTING DESIGNER	GERALD KING
SOUND DESIGNER	MALCOLM DOW

CHOREOGRAPHY
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WENDY GORLING
TRACY POWERS