



Cymbeline at Shakespeare in the Park

by Matthew Zarnowiecki. Written on 2016-04-25. Published in 2017 Issue 1.

For the production: *Cymbeline* (2015, Free Shakespeare in the Park — Public Theater, USA). See production details at the end of the review.

WHEN POLONIUS ANNOUNCES THAT THE PLAYERS NEWLY ARRIVED AT ELSINORE ARE THE BEST for comedies, histories, tragedies, and also for “tragical-comical-historical-pastoral,” it is a line that gets laughs: what an absurd mixture! But this is precisely the pastiche facing audiences of *Cymbeline*. We watched, at different moments, a comedic love plot, a tragic tale of corruption, a history of the early English struggle against the Roman empire, and a tale of Welsh mountain men far from the English court.

Plenty of purists openly despise *Cymbeline* for this mixture. Samuel Johnson famously objected to “the folly of the fiction, the absurdity of the conduct,” and “the impossibility of the events in any system of life.” This production, directed by Daniel Sullivan, proved that *Cymbeline*’s wide range of emotion and plot could be shaped into a compelling, strange, and at times quite affecting theatrical experience. It was among the best of the Public’s recent offerings, mostly because Sullivan never strayed from the Public’s mission to communicate Shakespeare directly to as many people as possible.

In fact, this production resembled the Public’s Mobile Shakespeare Unit production of *Pericles*, another play with a rangy, unwieldy plot. Mobile Shakespeare Units go to smaller parks throughout the five boroughs, performing Shakespeare plays in small recreation centers. The audiences of these productions sit just outside a small square of action, and often actors speak as though in direct, casual conversation with individual audience members. The Public’s recent production of *Pericles* was a standout example of how effective this kind of theater can be, even with such a strange, multi-generic form.

Sullivan’s *Cymbeline* also conversed directly with the audience from the very first moments by seating several rows right on the stage, and by having audience members ask initial backstory questions like “What’s his name and birth” (of Posthumus) or “Is she sole child to the king” (of Imogen). Despite the remoteness of a play combining England’s pre-history, a story from the *Decameron*, and scenes in the Welsh countryside, these characters continued to speak

directly to their audience throughout the play. Intimacy was achieved mostly by dint of the extraordinarily strong acting of the entire cast, particularly Raúl Esparza (Iachimo), Hamish Linklater (Posthumus and Cloten), Lily Rabe (Imogen), and Kate Burton (Queen and Belarius). Their keen comic timing was counterbalanced by a rarer ability: tragic timing. When Iachimo squared off first with Posthumus, betting he could compromise Imogen's honor, and then with Imogen herself, we were induced alternately to squirm at Iachimo's brazenness, smile at their rebuffs of him, and then squirm again when it was clear that he was winning. Improbably, Esparza managed to convince us of Iachimo's guilt-induced confession at the end of the play. Linklater likewise managed to convince us that his Posthumus, who gives one of the most venomously misogynist speeches in all of Shakespeare (there are, depressingly, several other contenders), became wracked with guilt and ultimately did earn, through intense suffering, the love and forgiveness of Imogen. Even Burton's Queen, perhaps the most one-dimensional fairy-tale villainess of them all, was delightfully expressive, raising her sleeved arms in puppet-like gestures, even while she signaled with her face and voice that she knew exactly what role she was playing.

The music (composed by Tom Kitt and directed by Matt Gallagher) was also wonderfully communicative. Throughout, it worked the way Hollywood music does, by pushing the plot and characters along and reminding us where we are. A rollicking, crowd-pleasing *Chicago*-style number, complete with spangly cocktail waitress's high-kicking, showed us we were in an Italian den of vice. Soft strings somewhat unnecessarily undergirded Imogen's speech in which she imagined what Posthumus looked like as his ship sailed away. By far the best number was Cloten's ridiculous aubade song to Imogen, "hark, hark, the lark." Unfortunately, the worst song of the production was one of Shakespeare's most famous: "Fear no more the heat of the sun," sung by the Welsh boys over Imogen's supposedly lifeless corpse. Somehow this became a big, chorus-laden sing-along rather than a stark song of mourning and sad reassurance that all life's troubles are over. But all is forgiven by the end, with a rousing and appropriate dance number, which recuperated the pent-up tragic energy in a mish-mash explosion of various up-tempo traditional music, accompanied by lusty dancing.

Linklater gave an outstanding performance, doubling as Posthumus and Cloten, the Queen's doltish son, who had just enough boorish ambition to make him a very dangerous suitor to Imogen. His bowl-cut mullet wig was a perfect choice (credit to Charles G. Lapointe). It reminded us of Jim Carrey in *Dumb and Dumber* during the early scenes when Cloten boorishly courted Imogen. But it also had tinges of the same haircut on Javier Bardem in *No Country for Old Men*, especially in the scene when Cloten dully vowed to ravish Imogen and kill Posthumus, all while dressed in Posthumus' clothes. Linklater modulated the timbre of his voice, the cast of

his eyes, and the litheness of his limbs as he changed from one role to the other. But he also managed to signal how depressingly equivalent Imogen's suitors could be. Posthumus, after all, actively tries to kill Imogen once he suspects her infidelity, while Cloten (more sensibly) wants to kill Posthumus. The night I saw the play, the comic and tragic became inextricably mixed, since the audience laughed throughout Posthumus' supremely distasteful, misogynist "woman's part" speech. This speech really ought to have capped our disgust at his change from faithful lover to venomous, revenging, jealous husband, and I don't believe Linklater was playing it for laughs. Yet the audience's confusion might have signaled a greater accomplishment: the tragic-comic elements of Posthumus' story were successfully and believably mixed.

Rabe's Imogen veered far closer to the tragic side, although she did get some respite during the Welsh pastoral scenes, when she encountered the tender care of her unknown adolescent brothers, played lustily by David Furr and Jacob Ming-Trent. Although Imogen is among Shakespeare's more active heroines, Shakespeare still provides her a set of mostly reactive scenes. She reacted to Iachimo's corrupting temptation, to Posthumus' erring condemnation, and to the horrid experience of waking from a deathly stupor to the supposed sight of Posthumus' headless trunk. In this last scene, Rabe's tragic timing was superb. She allowed an excruciating stretch of time to pass while what she was seeing slowly dawned on her, as she first rose from her own shallow grave, then saw the headless trunk of her supposed beloved in its grave, and finally having wet her face with his blood before collapsing. Her early desperation, which had veered toward histrionic when Pisanio revealed Posthumus' plot to kill her, here melted into a deep, slow, but more overwhelming scene, one which counterbalanced the snappy comic dialogue throughout the first half of the play.

Rabe was even convincing in the interminable final recognition scene, when there were so many revelations made by so many characters that the scene almost became its own farcical play. Her forgiveness of Posthumus despite everything he had done (including striking her, thinking she was a page), was a puzzling, human miracle that this play somehow managed to make good. Posthumus never gives her a satisfactory answer to the question "Why did you throw your wedded lady from you?" But Rabe asked the question so tenderly that it melded forgiveness and accusation. It was composed of her own mixture of human miracles: enduring love, recovery from suspicion and recrimination, and fidelity despite mischance and misfortune.

This production's focus on conveying these human miracles was exactly why the acting and direction failed to convey *Cymbeline's* full theatrical range. This play, after all, is historical as well as tragic-comical. It has empiric ambitions and even godly ones, but I did not get the sense that the empire was at stake. In fact, the play's scenic design (by Riccardo Hernandez) directly

refused this element by posing two gigantic red cardboard cut-outs on either side of the main stage. One was of Napoleon on his horse, and the other was of a World War One tank. Although they were lit up by strobe lights during the battle scenes, they also reminded me that the military aspect of this play had been shunted aside; I cared very little about whether or not king Cymbeline freed his people from the Roman yoke.

Even more importantly, this production cut a key element of the larger, wider *Cymbeline*: the dream scene in which the ghosts of Posthumus' father, mother, and brothers all appeal to Jupiter to relieve Posthumus' suffering. Jupiter pronounces that "Whom best I love, I cross," and reassures all the Leonati clan that Posthumus will marry Imogen and take his part in Britain's empire. He leaves Posthumus with a cryptic prophecy, which is eventually interpreted at the end of the play by a soothsayer named Philharmonus.

The soothsayer, absent from this production, has an appropriate name: lover of harmony. Cutting the Jupiter scene and its companion interpretation scene means relinquishing the possibility for a larger, cosmic harmony linking the lives of Posthumus and Imogen, all the events of military clashing and princely struggling, the pastoral world of the unknown princes, and the all-seeing heavenly sphere of Jupiter. It was a perfectly understandable cut, since Jupiter has no place in our world, and interest in the early history of the British empire is perhaps not what it could be. Cutting this scene funneled my attention from the larger empiric and cosmic harmonies to the human dramas of *Cymbeline*, his queen, Imogen, Iachimo, Posthumus, Cloten, and the others. There was so much that this production did beautifully and seamlessly that all can be forgiven for not at all having missed the grander, more chaotic, more complicated, and more absurd *Cymbeline* which Johnson so despised.

Matthew Zarnowiecki is Chair of the Department of Languages and Literature at Touro College's Lander College for Women and Lander College for Men, New York. His research interests are in early modern literary studies, including Shakespeare, print and manuscript history, and lyric poetry. His monograph, Fair Copies: Reproducing the English Lyric from Tottel to Shakespeare (University of Toronto Press, 2014) examines the production and reproduction of poetry in printed collections. His articles have appeared in Critical Survey, Spenser Studies, The Sidney Journal, and EMLS, among other places.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Cymbeline
<i>Year</i>	2015
<i>Theater Company</i>	Free Shakespeare in the Park
<i>Theaters</i>	The Delacorte Theater in Central Park (USA)
<i>Start Date</i>	2016-07-23
<i>End Date</i>	2016-08-23

Cast

CORNELIUS	TEAGLE F. BOUGERE
GENERAL CAIUS LUCIUS	TEAGLE F. BOUGERE
QUEEN	KATE BURTON
LORD BELARIUS	KATE BURTON
IACHIMO	RAUL ESPARZA
PRINCE GUIDERIUS	DAVID FURR
SECOND GENTLEMAN	DAVID FURR
LORD CLOTEN	HAMISH LINKLATER
POSTHUMUS LEONATUS	HAMISH LINKLATER
FIRST GENTLEMAN	JACOB MING-TRENT
PRINCE ARVIRAGUS	JACOB MING-TRENT
KING CYMBELINE	PATRICK PAGE
PHILARIO	PATRICK PAGE
PRINCESS IMOGEN	LILY RABE
FRENCHMAN	STEVEN SKYBELL
PISANIO	STEVEN SKYBELL

Creatives

DIRECTOR	DANIEL SULLIVAN
COSTUME DESIGNER	DAVID ZINN
LIGHTING DESIGNER	DAVID LANDER
SOUND DESIGN	ACME SOUND PARTNERS
MUSIC COMPOSER	TOM KITT
CHOREOGRAPHER	MIMI LIEBER
PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER	JAMES LATUS
MUSIC DIRECTOR	MATT GALLAGHER
MUSIC CONTRACTOR	MICHAEL AARONS

SCENIC DESIGNER

FIGHT DIRECTOR

HAIR AND WIG DESIGNER

FIGHT DIRECTOR

RICCARDO HERNANDEZ

CHRISTIAN KELLY-SORDELET

CHARLES G. LAPOINTE

RICK SORDELET