



Cymbeline (Stratford Shakespeare Festival)

by Sarah Neville. Written on 2012-10-13. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Cymbeline (2012, Stratford Festival of Canada, Canada).

CYMBELINE IS ANTONI CIMOLINO'S FIRST PRODUCTION SINCE IT WAS ANNOUNCED THIS SPRING that he was to become the Stratford Festival's next artistic director. Cimolino, a 25 year Stratford veteran, offers audiences a refreshingly clear Cymbeline that belies its reputation as a complex, difficult-to-stage play, offering a narrative of thwarted lovers, jealous kings, evil queens, pompous rivals, sinister Italians, honourable servants and noble shepherds that should be relatively straightforward to those familiar with the greatest hits of the Shakespeare canon, bringing together plot strands from plays as various as *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*, *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. By allowing the play's sombre notes of infidelity, violence and political submission to be regularly punctured by a juxtaposing intelligent humour, Cimolino somehow manages to unify the sprawling and uneven script for a modern audience unfamiliar with the idiosyncrasies of Jacobean style.

A significant portion of Cymbeline's pleasures result from sophisticated, thoughtful casting: comic touches like a lurid, gleefully moronic Cloten (Mike Shara), a shrewd but nonetheless doddering Doctor Cornelius (Peter Hutt) and a liquid-smooth Iachimo (Tom McCamus) serve to balance the audience's unease at Posthumus' (Graham Abbey) wagering on his wife's fidelity, or Cymbeline's (Geraint Wyn Davies) imprisonment of his daughter once he discovers Innogen (Cara Ricketts) and Posthumus' surreptitious marriage. As the title character, the barrel-chested Davies spends the first half of the play barefoot, his kingly duds reminiscent of nothing to much as a bathrobe, while his evil, nameless Queen (Yanna McIntosh), dressed to the nines in familiar Elizabethan ruff collars and cuffs, plots to poison Innogen and engineer her son Cloten's rise to power.

As Posthumus' loyal servant Pisanio, Brian Tree serves as the play's conscience, weary and warily conveying Shakespeare's endorsement of just disobedience to a master's commands: left with Innogen upon Posthumus' exile, Pisanio is fully aware that that Posthumus' "proof" of her infidelity is in error, and rather than murder her as instructed, he convinces his mistress to disguise herself as a boy and seek service with Caius Lucius (Nigel Bennett), leader of the

invading Roman army. Tree's gentle, uncle-like demeanor comforted Innogen and audience alike, as he alone conveyed the sense that in this world of lewdness, duplicity, and misapprehension, goodness eventually wins out, paving the way for the miraculous affinity Fidele (the disguised Innogen) experiences upon unknowingly meeting her lost brothers. (After all, as Jupiter makes explicit to a disbelieving human populace, "whom best I love I cross; to make my gift / The more delay'd, delighted".) Of the cast, the only misstep was John Vickery as Belarius, here directed so ambiguously that it is difficult to keep in mind that his kidnapping of two royal princes was a revenge against Cymbeline's mistaken justice. Vickery's Belarius is weak and wishy-washy, old enough that it remains unclear how he and his sons could stave off the better part of a Roman army with nothing more than clubs and arrows. While Belarius' redemption in the play's concluding moments is easily believable, less so is the rationale for his needing forgiveness in the first place.

As always, the Tom Patterson Theatre with its narrow thrust stage provided an intimate playing space. Properties and set pieces were ornate and coordinated — designer Scott Penner saw to it that all the furniture, for example, from Innogen's bed to the Queen's desk to the lush Italian banqueting table featured turned posts of dark wood, and the roots of an ancient, overgrown tree deep upstage served to delineate both a second upstage entry point and the shepherds' cave. Jupiter's arrival upon a beastly mechanized black eagle, accompanied by flapping wings and glowing ember eyes, was expertly handled, with just enough smoke to disguise the ingenious arched base that created the illusion of a descent from above. Stage Manager Ann Stuart's ability to direct the actors and extras in moving such pieces into and out of position was facilitated by the gifts of lighting designer Robert Thomson, who consistently succeeds in pinpointing the audience's attention on a single actor or gesture, enabling the joys of this late tragedy to shine no matter how subtle.