SCENE

From Rigid Regency Sicilia to Musical Bohemia: Cincinnati Shakespeare Company's *The Winter's Tale*

by Niamh O'Leary. Published in 2019 Issue 1.

For the production: *The Winter's Tale* (2019, Cincinnati Shakespeare Company). Dates performances attended: 2019-03-01 and 2019-03-07. See production details at the end of the review.

THE CINCINNATI SHAKESPEARE COMPANY'S (CSC'S) RECENT PRODUCTION OF *THE WINTER'S TALE* WAS surprisingly compelling in retrospect, but ran the risk of alienating its audience in real time. Crafted by Scenic Designer Shannon Moore, the set for the production comprised seven white columns on a raised platform upstage, their ranks evoking a Regency ballroom for a Sicilian court populated by actors "dressed to the nines." The columns were painted green at the base, which not only suggested a marble finish but also, with a stretch of the imagination, subtly hinted at forestry when the play moved to Bohemia. Forking at the top, these gothic-style columns formed branching archways high above the stage.

Not changing over the course of the production, Moore's design limited the visual spectacle this play traditionally offers in performance, a factor matched by the "park and bark" style imposed on the actors by their guest director, Christopher Luscombe, from the UK's Royal Shakespeare Company. Directed in an uncharacteristically static way, especially for those used to other offerings by Cincy Shakes (as this company is known locally), Luscombe's *The Winter's Tale* seemed at odds with the CSC's usual dynamic performance style. In this production, the actors drastically reduced their interaction with the audience and, at least in the Sicilia scenes, tended to stand still and declaim the text more formally (and over-dramatically) than Cincy Shakes followers might expect. At such moments, other onstage actors listened, sometimes appearing frozen and sometimes in actual tableaux. Ultimately, superior acting and the burst of life when the play shifted to Bohemia countered the production's less engaging aspects. Luscombe and CSC may have crafted a cold, rigid Sicilia, and a warm, bustling Bohemia—primarily through costume, direction, and sound and lighting design—but the production shone best when elements of one nation bled into the other.

Since Moore's Regency-era set remained relatively static, and while Luscombe's direction kept the actors primarily still in the first half of the play, the most impressive mood changes and emotional shifts were registered through the lighting and sound designs of S. Watson and Douglas J. Borntrager. Watson's overall vision for the Sicilian court was one of formal, cool

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lighting tones. A stark contrast to this lighting choice emerged, therefore, when Leontes (Brent Vimtrup) first became jealous and pondered, "Too hot, too hot!" As the lights dimmed and a spot focused squarely on the jealous Leontes, an amplified heartbeat percussively added its own subliminal menace to the scene. This sequence (dark stage, spot-lit Leontes, heartbeat audio) returned again and again, giving the audience the sense of being trapped inside Leontes's mind, vicariously feeling the blood pulse in their own temples as the character's emotional stability unraveled. Later, when Paulina spoke with Emilia (Candice Handy) in the prison about Hermione, a pattern of light filtering through bars was projected onto the stage floor, while their voices were treated with an echo effect suggesting a cold cellar-like jail. Even the famous bear existed only as part of a sound montage: as a storm tore through Bohemia, a roar rose organically out of the thunder and mounted to a terrifying pitch as lightning flashed. Combined with the physical stillness of the actors and the unchanging set, these lighting and sound choices were crucial to establishing and amplifying dramatic tension in the first half of the play.

Figure 1. The Regency-era Sicilian court was rigid and proper, in cool tones and often with the ensemble in tableaux. Here, Polixenes (Josh Katawick) and Leontes (Brent Vimtrup) tease Mamillius (Hoyt Noble). Photo credit: Mikki Schaffner.

The only Sicilian who didn't seem beholden to Luscombe's stylistically imposed first-half stillness was Leslie Brott's stunning Paulina. Brott, a guest artist joining CSC from the Utah Shakespeare Festival, was a commanding presence onstage, and one of the primary engines building drama in a rigid Sicilia. That said, the stillness of the other characters at times crafted (and successfully

held) tension in a subtle, even strangling fashion. In 1.2, as Leontes revealed his suspicions about Hermione to Camillo (Geoffrey Warren Barnes II) and ordered him to kill Polixenes, Camillo remained utterly still, as if listening intently. Meanwhile, Leontes ranted and paced, shouting his accusations. Camillo's stillness focused our attention on the king, whose emotional outbursts sucked the oxygen out of the theater.

A few scenes later, when Leontes accused Hermione (Kelly Mengelkoch) to her face and ordered her imprisonment, I found myself straining in my seat, wanting one of the two onstage witnesses, Emilia or Antigonus (Barry Mulholland), to step forward and intervene. The power of these moments of non-intervention highlighted the underlying #MeToo-era potential, and likely intention, of the production, most evident in the abuse of Hermione by her jealous husband. As Hermione stated "I never wished to see you sorry; now / I trust I shall" (2.1.123-24), she knelt and extended her hand for Leontes to take. Instead of accepting this plaintive gesture, Leontes stood still and stared down at his wife. Reacting silently to her husband's rejection, Hermione looked horrified and humiliated. As she struggled to heave her heavily pregnant form to her feet—with no help either from Leontes or her loyal attendants—the queen's wounded dignity became heartbreaking to witness. Hermione's physical discomfort and loneliness provided a subtle moment of extreme vulnerability that worked powerfully in this staid, subdued court.

Figure 2. Hermione (Kelly Mengelkoch) confronts Leontes (Brent Vimtrup) at the trial. Photo credit: Mikki Schaffner.

Other #MeToo reference points in Luscombe's direction were most evident in the crescendoing intensity of the trial scene, blocked as though the audience were the court. Unable to intervene, we became complicit frozen witnesses to Leontes's false accusations. Hermione entered in a ripped shift, stained with what appeared to be blood and dirt. Her haggard face was madeup to emphasize deep, bruising circles under her eyes. Her beautifully coifed wig was gone, and her short hair hung damp and limp. Slow and painful movements emphasized how recently Hermione had delivered Perdita. While the choices here were not unusual—Hermione often

appears in shocking state at the trial—they contrasted sharply with the rest of the buttoned-up and proper court, and with her own prior appearance. She delivered her first two speeches from a raised platform center stage, unmoving and clearly holding onto the tattered shreds of her dignity with tragic strength. Beginning her third speech—"Sir, / You speak a language that I understand not" (3.2.78-79)—Hermione walked toward Leontes in a truly menacing fashion: awkward, halting, yet continually advancing. As she approached, Leontes shrank back, afraid of the terrible strength of a woman wronged. At the phrase, "before I have got strength of limit," she appeared suddenly weak, grasping at her abdomen, powerfully reminding the audience how recently she was postpartum.

In the text, the horror of this "strength of limit" moment resides in part in contemporary understanding of how great a violation of decorum it would be to deny Hermione "the childbed privilege [. . .] which 'longs / To women of all fashion" (3.2.101-2). Luscombe's production beautifully conveyed the dreadfulness to a historically removed audience through Hermione's costume, movement, and delivery. Hermione's physical weakness was underscored when Mamillius's death was announced and she collapsed, screaming. Paulina, Emilia, Dion, Cleomenes, and the messenger who reported Mamillius's death dragged her offstage while she continued to scream and wail. This sudden bustle of activity and noise was startling after the predominantly static first act and Hermione's own rigidity throughout the trial. A second burst of noise shocked again when, while the lone onstage Leontes begged forgiveness from Apollo and grappled with the realization that he had been so very wrong, we heard a second round of screams from offstage (presumably in response to Hermione's own "death").

The Winter's Tale could, it can be argued, be considered a "hard sell" before any #MeToo-sensitized audience: we watch the loving husband become abusive and dangerous, and then are expected to forgive him at the play's end, despite the death of a prince and sixteen years of sorrow and separation. CSC seemed to turn up the volume on this socially and politically topical subject, rather than trying to ease it away, by regendering Dion (Maggie Lou Rader) and Cleomenes (Tess Talbot) as women. When these two court officials entered with the oracle's statement, Leontes's rejection of the oracle and their testimony played out not only as blasphemous and baseless, but also sexist. Even for audience members who might not know the play, the representation of a maddened king shouting down two reasonable women—who brought clear confirmation of Hermione's innocence according to their own particular faith system—communicated powerfully the danger of unrestricted male authority.

Luscombe even reminded us of Cleomenes's and Dion's relevance to the drama by bringing them back toward the play's conclusion, with the two characters reporting the reunion of Leontes, Perdita, Camillo, and Polixenes to Autolycus in 5.2 (replacing the text's First, Second, and Third

Gentlemen). The courtiers' report implied that their authority and privilege within Sicilia had been restored, since they could witness such a private moment. The reinstatement of these two women spoke volumes about the changes wrought in Leontes's court over the intervening years and helped set up the conclusion to be less distressing, making Leontes's repentance more genuine and forgiveness for his wrongs better earned.

If Sicilia was a cold and rigid realm, Bohemia was decidedly different. With the play's intermission placed directly after 3.3, its resumption after the interval saw a sound and lighting design, combined with costume and direction, that brought the audience to a vastly changed stylistic world. The stage was lit no longer in cool blues and whites, but in warm yellows and pinks. Burlap sacks and sheepskins were scattered around the edges of the thrust stage, serving as cushions where shepherds and maids would recline during their sheep-shearing festival. The primary transition from Sicilia to Bohemia happened, however, not at the level of set design, but of performance. Taking our seats, waiting for the lights to go down to indicate the second act was about to begin, we were startled to hear a burst of chatter and laughter from the wings. Simultaneously, the shepherds and maids flooded the stage, shortly followed by musicians who broke into song ("When daffodils begin to peer" from 4.3) as the house lights dimmed. Strumming a guitar, the production's Composer Cary Davenport (who also played the Clown) provided the music, accompanied by Sara Clark playing the mandolin and Linsey Rogers the violin. The relaxed joy of this musical informality was a drastic change from Act 1: we were clearly in a different world, even if the set was the same. That worldly difference was also wonderfully embodied in the character of Autolycus, played by Billy Chace. A CSC ensemble member known locally for his comedic abilities, Chace created a delightfully protean and devious Autolycus, his quickly shifting characters manipulating and stealing from the Clown, as well as the various gathered shepherds. Autolycus, who could easily become a dark menace in Bohemia, was presented as a joyful, self-congratulatory lout and obvious audience favorite.

The different world of Bohemia also appeared in a difference in acting style. Unlike in the Sicilian court, where actors regularly froze in tableaux, in Bohemia there was constant motion, with singing, dancing, laughing, and physical reaction to speeches and actions. It came as a shock, therefore, when the stylized stillness of earlier scenes manifested in Bohemia. This jarring moment occurred when Polixenes (Josh Katawick) revealed his identity and threatened Florizel (Crystian Wiltshire) and Perdita (Courtney Lucien). Camillo, the exile from Sicilia, froze still as he witnessed the unfolding drama. Through Camillo's rigidity, the tension of Sicilia began to invade the exuberance of Bohemia. Polixenes's rejection of Florizel's choice and the king's intention to punish the Shepherd were violent and shocking in performance. Drastically distinct from how things had been just moments earlier, Polixenes's actions were also eerily reminiscent

of what we'd seen in Sicilia. We became aware of how close Polixenes comes to repeating Leontes's errors, as his shouting resembled nothing so much as his best friend's unraveling in the first half of the play. The appearance of a shocked, motionless onlooker also called attention to a forced reinstatement of social hierarchies. Disguised as a shepherd, Camillo could relax and joke with Polixenes and the others; when Polixenes revealed his identity and claimed his authority, the movement and expression of others onstage became limited, as did Camillo's. With Polixenes's threats becoming increasingly violent, the production offered for a second time a sharp critique of absolute power.

Figure 3. The second act began with a musical introduction to Bohemia. L to R, Sara Clark, Candice Handy, Billy Chace, Cary Davenport, Maggie Lou Rader, Tess Talbot, Linsey Rogers. Photo credit: Mikki Schaffner.

This critique of absolute power was borne out in the production's concluding act. Perdita and Florizel fled to Sicilia, bringing with them the energy and music of Bohemia. The Clown, Shepherd, and Autolycus followed. Dressed in their new finery, the Clown and Shepherd aped nobility to great humorous effect, pointing out the absurdity of class distinction. The music of Bohemia was even the soundtrack for Hermione's awakening, as the staidly costumed Sicilians and brightly costumed Bohemians gathered around her statue. Linsey Rogers, still dressed as a Bohemian shepherdess, played the violin as Paulina drew diaphanous drapes strung from the white columns of the set to reveal the statue, veiled and clothed in a white gown. The stage setting,

transformed into a sculpture garden by the presence of Hermione and a few other statues, seemed an intersection between court and country, Sicilia and Bohemia, with music provided by a shepherdess as the princess in rags looked on.

Leontes stood far downstage, staring from a distance at the statue of his wife. Leontes's reverential remoteness suggested his repentance, made his inability to realize it wasn't a statue more believable, and recreated that frozen, motionless sobriety of the Sicilian court. When Hermione awakened, she slowly turned, looking first at Paulina, who helped her down from the pedestal she was standing on, and then at Polixenes and Camillo. Finally, Hermione moved toward Leontes. Because of her white dress and veil, Hermione appeared like a ghostly bride, making this dramatic reunion reminiscent of a second wedding rather than a resigned and contrived reconciliation. With judicious cutting of the text, Luscombe managed to eliminate some of the conclusion's more frustrating elements. Consequently, Leontes never expressed a troubling desire to wed the beautiful young princess or needed reminding by Paulina of the loyalty he owed still to Hermione. Leontes likewise never critiqued the statue for appearing too old and didn't attempt to forge a last-minute marriage between Camillo and Paulina. Finally, Paulina did not remind the gathered, joyous court of her own sorrow at Antigonus's death. Without these disconcerting moments, the play's denouement felt less troubled, more solemn, and more satisfying. At the same time, the commingling of classes implied by the contrasting costumes and the presence of Bohemian music in the Sicilian court acted as a counter to the play's most dangerous, tense moments. Absolute, unchecked male authority might have threatened women and children in the past. Now, at the play's conclusion, the various characters appeared allied, on equal footing, and restored to healthy community.

As a joyous afterthought, if any audience members felt the urge to remind those onstage of Mamillius and Antigonus's deaths or the sadness of sixteen lost years, CSC had an answer for that, too. This *The Winter's Tale* ended with an enthusiastic jig, danced by the entire cast, as they sang Autolycus's song from the sheep-shearing festival, "Come buy" (4.4.220-31).The result was a foot-thumping rendition, with the cast—Sicilians and Bohemians alike—whipping out spoons to punctuate their dancing with folksy percussion. The jig added to the impression that Hermione's and Leontes's reunion was indeed a second wedding of sorts, ultimately celebrated by the assembled guests breaking out into joyous dance. This musical celebration injected the energy and happiness of Bohemia into a healed Sicilia, and returned the magnified Clown and Shepherd, dressed in their eye-wateringly bright interpretation of court finery, to their humble roots, with the Clown strumming his guitar and leading the singing. Even the dead Mamillius and Autolycus joined in, their presence preventing our possible mourning over their absence.

Figure 4. The rousing closing jig, danced by the whole ensemble. Photo credit: Mikki Schaffner.

The end-of-show jig had the traditional effect of smoothing over awkward feelings the ending might have inspired, sending the audience out into the night pleased by the celebration, rather than perturbed by a too-hasty reconciliation. Mixing princes and shepherds (the full cast of Bohemia joined in the dancing as well), the closing jig underscored the communal feel of the final scene, again erasing class distinction and celebrating the kind of joyous, miraculous reunion romances are known for. While I've yet to see a production that fully persuades me to forgive Leontes, this one came close, especially in offering the audience the chance to see the Sicilian king so willing to join in the dance and celebration. Leontes, so far from his first-act rigidity and jealous frenzy, now danced a jig that healed a number of the play's #MeToo wounds, while ensuring the play's implied happy ending could be enjoyed by all.

Links

Cincinnati Shakespeare Company: https://cincyshakes.com/

#MeToo: https://metoomvmt.org/

Utah Shakespeare Festival: https://www.bard.org/

UK's Royal Shakespeare Company: https://www.rsc.org.uk/

Production Details

General

Title	*The Winter's Tale*
Year	2019
Theater Company	Cincinnati Shakespeare Company
Theater	The Otto M. Budig Theater
Start Date	2019-03-01
End Date	2019-03-23

Cast

Camillo	Geoffrey Warren Barnes II
Paulina	Leslie Brott
Autolycus/Officer	Billy Chace
Musician/First Shepherdess	Sara Clark
Clown	Cary Davenport
First Lord/First Shepherd	Kenny Hamilton
Emilia/Second Shepherdess	Candice Handy
Polixenes	Josh Katawick
Perdita	Courtney Lucien
Hermione	Kelly Mengelkoch
Old Shepherd/Archidamus	Marc Moritz
Antigonus/Time	Barry Mulholland
Mamillius	Hoyt Noble
Dion/Dorcus	Maggie Lou Rader
Musician	Linsey Rogers
Cleomenes/Mopsa	Tess Talbot
Leontes	Brent Vimtrup
Florizel	Crystian Wiltshire

Creatives

Director	Christopher Luscombe
Scenic Designer	Shannon Moore
Costume Designer	Rainy Edwards
Lighting Designer	S. Watson
Sound Designer	Douglas J. Borntrager
Choreographer	Darnell Pierre Benjamin
Composer	Cary Davenport