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Cal Shakes Pushes the Parameters in 'A Winter's Tale'

By Lou Fancher



Tristan Cunningham, L. Peter Callender, Aldo Billingslea, and Margo Hall in Cal Shakes' production of "A Winter's Tale", directed by Patricia McGregor
Photo mellopix.com

California Shakespeare Theater prepares for fall with director Patricia McGregor's ambitious take on William Shakespeare's labyrinthian "A Winter's Tale." Like the intricate structure of a human inner ear – tiny bones surrounding sensitive, vacuous spaces filled with fluid, or not – the two act play provides dizzying turns.

McGregor has a fondness – and often, a knack – for interactive productions like last season's "Spunk." With a keen eye for casting (five of the "Spunk" cast return to form the core of this show), "A Winter's Tale" is saturated with genuinely charming actors who know how to work a crowd into a delightful frenzy. This they do, in the play's bold, aggressive moments. Sadly, their comedic talents, especially in pre-show "fortune telling" and a later audience "sing-along," are partially misused. What should feel like a romp instead feels like too much reaching, despite the company's best intentions.

But you can't fault Cal Shakes for pushing the parameters and if the embrace is labeled too broad, it's not so much a criticism as it is recognition of Cal Shakes' relentless self-propulsion towards increased audience engagement. Importantly, there is no let down in the casts' terrific, terrifying portrayals. Say what you will about bringing an audience member onstage to introduce Act Two (it happens, and the gentleman on Sunday, Sept. 29 did a fine, if distracting, job): the production value at the outdoor amphitheater remains high.

The plot itself, of course, is topsy-turvy. Leontes, the sporadically crazed king of Sicily, suffers sudden mental madness and accuses his wife, Hermione, of improprieties with his best king friend, Polixenes. Leontes refuses the reasonable de-

fenses presented by his loyal and nine-month pregnant wife; her servant, Paulina; his servant, Camillo – and he fatally ignores the fading health of his son, Mamillius. His rash, royal fury sears reasonableness to a char and before the end of the first act, Hermione and their newborn daughter are sentenced to death. Even a declaration of Hermione's innocence by an Apollonian oracle does not sway Leontes' conviction that his wife is "slippery."

An announcement, that his beloved son has succumbed to stress due to the loss of his mother and has died, jolts Leontes from his monstrous mindset. A flood of regret overwhelms: "Tears shed at her grave will be my recreation," he mourns. Minstrels from the play's opening return and a surreal scene shows the newborn infant, Perdita, secreted away and now in the care of a kindly shepherd. She's been saved by Pauline's husband, Antigones, who is famously chased from the stage by a bear, the animal named in Shakespeare oft-noted stage direction.

If that's not enough of a bizarre journey, Shakespeare places a 16-year span between the first and second acts. Act Two sprints from the union of the two kings' offspring, Florizel and Perdita, to the back-thumping reconciliation of Leontes and Polixenes to the miraculous "awakening" of Hermione, who is not dead after all. Or perhaps she was, but she's reborn and all is forgiven by the play's end.

L. Peter Callender (Leontes) is stunning. Tufts of humor ruffle out from under the skirt of his daunting rage to deepen his fascinating, prone-to-wild-excess portrayal of monarchy gone mad. The lightness serves him well as the kindly shepherd in his double-duty casting. Omoze Ide-

henre (Hermione) commands the show's most convincing moment: dressed in orange prison garb, facing the executioner, even her gasping pauses speak volumes. And multi-taskers Christopher Michael Rivera and Margo Hall are impeccable; capturing the peculiar quirks and poignant quandaries of their dual roles with equal fervor. Aldo Billingslea's (Polixenes) and Tristan Cunningham's (Perdita, Emilia) gentler presence – and a promising appearance by young Akili Moree – add needed dimension.

Set Designer Michael Locher's gypsy blue trailer and imposing "magic box" (containing a fiery red spiral staircase whose design was nicely echoed by "very not yellow brick road" spirals on the blackened stage deck), fails to align, despite being artfully rendered. Costumes by Katherine Nowacki are energetic, even groovy, but suffer the same misfire, adding to the "trying too hard" impression of the audience interactions.

Despite the impression that McGregor's usual vivacious direction is muted by devoting attention to too many disparate components, her ambitious vision is admirable. After all, thick theatricality, hysterical joviality, comedic cavorting and supernatural shamanism are an armful. If the production's reach sometimes fails to grasp, the fine actors – many of whom deserve to be seen more often on Bay Area stages – are to be applauded.

"A Winter's Tale," presented by California Shakespeare Theater, runs through Oct. 20 at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (off Highway 24), Orinda. For information, call (510) 548-9666 or visit www.calshakes.org.

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And the Winner is ...



From left, teacher Susan Lane, Miles Hoeser, and Jay Lifson, Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce. Photo C. Tyson

We have a winner and the Lafayette Reservoir Run hasn't even started yet. Acalanes student Miles Hoeser beat out 150 other creative classmates in teacher Susan Lane's art classes and was chosen by members of the Lafayette Chamber of

Commerce to have his image grace the front of 2,000 T-shirts, and countless posters in shop windows across town. If you look closely at the year in the lower left corner, the Reservoir tower is deftly incorporated into the date. When asked about his inspira-

tion Hoeser replied he was thinking of a way to illustrate fun while running to come up with his very unique image. He will be wearing the T-shirt, along with roughly 1,999 others while participating in the annual Res Run on the morning of Oct. 27. C. Tyson