

Hartford Stage, Hartford, CT

The Winter's Tale by William Shakespeare

Directed by Melia Bensussen. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“Address yourself to entertain them sprightly, and let’s be red with mirth.”

Shakespeare’s comedy “The Winter’s Tale” is rarely produced in this country. It is a complex story, “Othello”-like for three acts, then “As You Like It”-like for two acts. Director Mela Bensussen’s production at Hartford Stage takes advantage of the opportunity to present two styles of Shakespeare in one evening. She pulls out the dramatic stops in part one, tearing at our hearts as the king of Sicilia Leontes’ jealousy of his beautiful pregnant wife, Hermione, affects his judgement and his reason. Ordering her newborn to death, and losing Hermione to the same, destroys the man he is. His best friend Polixenes, King of Bohemia, implicated in the illicit romance, is also lost to him. But the baby survives and is adopted by a Bohemian shepherd.



The Act Two cast of The Winter’s Tale; Photo: T. Charles Erickson

Sixteen years go by during intermission and the child is now a beautiful young girl, loved by the king of Bohemia’s son Florizel. In the comedy that ensues songs are sung, dances are danced, magic plays its role in the lives of our humans and a fairy-tale quality ensues. This is the key to the play, a fairy-tale quality. Strong drama brings about high comedy. It is also the reason the play is rarely seen - too many opposing elements in the structure of the play. It is also why Bensussen’s production is so successful. She gives it everything and let’s us enjoy what the

author does best: write a fairytale we can live with because of its basic truths. Life isn't always tragedy or always hilarity; life is both at its best or worst. The Winter's Tale tells us that in no uncertain terms."Entertain them sprightly," says Florizel, and he means it.



Jotham Burrello, Jamie Ann Romero, Nathan Darrow; Photo: T. Charles Erickson

This production's simplicity is its strength. Performing on five levels allows the show to seem immense, yet it is merely theatrical artifice permitting the audience to perceive how less is more. It is the actors who bring to the play the physical complexity this show requires. Hermione, in her beauty, brings belated romance to the picture, and as played by Jamie Ann Romero that quality is in abundance. Sicilian obdurance embodied by Leontes (read pre-Mafia attitude) allows him to accept rumor as fact; this quality is very apparent in Nathan Darrow's excellent performance. Jotham Burrello plays their son, Mamillius, who dies when his father condemns his mother. Part one is truly Shakespearean tragedy.

Best friends and close companions are very meaningful in this play. Hartford's cast plays them well. Carman Lacivita is excellent as Camillo, Leontes' right-hand man. Lana Young as Paulina, Leontes' chief critic and Hermione's best friend, is very strong with her criticism of Leontes' actions and opinions. Omar Robinson's very human and sensitive Polixenes helps keep the show real as we move from high tragedy to low comedy.

Jeremy Webb doubles as Antigonus in part one of the play and as the Shepherd in part two.

He is excellent in both roles, but his shepherd who tries valiantly to understand the world he inhabits is a triumph. John Maddaloni as his son, and the Clown, does a terrific job in his combined roles in Part Two. The musical "Something Rotten" makes light of Shakespeare's use of song on his plays, but in the second half of this play song is inevitable and terrific. With new music by Pornchanok Kanchanabanca, Pearl Rhein has a field day singing Shakespeare's witty lyrics as the character Autolycus.



John Maddaloni, Jeremy Webb;
Photo: T. Charles Erickson

I love Shakespeare's comedy. Bensussen seems to also as her cast's timing so perfectly produces the laughter needed to make Perdita (Hermione's lost daughter), played beautifully by

Delfin Gökhan Meehan, into a near tragic figure in the midst of a laughable set of situations. She is perceived as a commoner, not fit for Florizel, but is ultimately revealed as the girl she really is, a fitting match for a Prince.



Ana Laura Santana, John Maddaloni, Hannah Moore, Pearl Rhein; Photo: T.Charles Erickson

The romantic ending of the play is unanticipated which is great. Bensussen allows the author to take his fairy-tale time in revealing truths, losses and restitutions. She is careful not to tip her hat, but to let the story do its thing. She is aided by a special set, designed by Cameron Anderson and fine costumes created by Whitney Locher; the Sicilian's are especially modern, reinforcing the Mafia connection. Evan Anderson's lighting design brings all the elements together.

This play has too short a run, frankly. For a play not seen too often by a playwright who has basically created all that is modern and contemporary - drama, comedy, musicals - it is a shame to curtail such excellent work. However, that is part of the economic state of the arts. This play, and this company, need to be supported. If you truly love the theatre, this is a play to see while there's still time to get to it.

+ 04/22/2023 +

The Winter's Tale plays at Hartford Stage, 50 Church Street, Hartford, Connecticut, through May 7. For information and tickets call 860-527-5151 or go on line to hartfordstage.org.