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'Winter's Tale' a triumph for Shakespeare troupe

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The current American Shakespeare Center production of "The Winter's Tale," directed by Kathleen Powers, is the finest I have seen at Blackfriars Playhouse.

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It kept me on the edge of my seat through most of the pre-intermission action and through much of the remainder as well. And it's not that I didn't know how it came out -- I did know -- but it was the energy and intensity of the acting and the relationships that kept me so fully engaged.

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This is a "problem play." Half of it is very dark tragedy. Two tragedies, in fact -- one leading to the death of Hermione's son, Mamillius, followed by King Leontes' discovery that he has falsely accused her of adultery. A second tragedy is the death of the honest advisor Antigonus, who is torn to pieces and eaten by a bear while leaving Hermione's infant daughter, as ordered by Leontes, on a deserted and barbarous shore.

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This death, the occasion of Shakespeare's most famous stage direction ("Exit, pursued by a bear") is vividly described by the clown: "The bear tore out his shoulder bone ... (nor has he yet) half dined on the gentleman ... he's at it now."

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Next we find ourselves among shepherds and shepherdesses, the clown and a rogue with a heart of gold.

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Florizel, a prince in disguise, is in love with Perdida, who was raised as a shepherd's daughter but really (unknown to herself or anyone else) is the offspring of Hermione and Leontes. There is also, of course, a princely father, Polixenes, who forbids his son to marry a commoner -- and this prince, as you might expect, is the man whom Leontes had believed seduced his wife.

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This part of the play is comedy, or pastoral romance, or just romance. But then we go back to the tragic realm, as everyone repairs to Sicillia. In the end, it's a comedy. Hermione is still alive, Perdida is recognized and her marriage to Florizel accepted. Everyone is happy, except, of course, Mamillius and Antigonus, who remain dead.

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It's more complicated than that, but thanks to the playhouse's improved acoustics, the plot's every turn and twist is clear.

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I could not speak too highly of the acting. Rene Thornton Jr. is amazing as King Leontes, as is John Harrell as the advisor, Camillo. The scene between them when Camillo tries to persuade Leontes that his wife is faithful first brought me to the edge of my seat. The scene following in which Polyxenes (excellently played by John Paul Scheidler) pulls the truth from Camillo and both decide to flee, kept me there.

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I thought Elisabeth S. Rodgers as Hermione must be the finest actress in the company, but that was before Allison Glenzer got going as Paulina, Hermione's attendant. They both made my hair stand on end as they harangued Leontes. And then there was Jan Knightley as the bear-bait Antigonus, David Loar as the shepherd, Benjamin Curns as the rogue and, well, I'm nearing my word count and must leave room for two remarks.

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I must especially compliment Harrell and Scheidler. When they enter after the intermission they are supposed to be 16 years older than when last seen. We know this because the chorus has just told us so. But we can see it, too, because both men move with just the slightest stiffness, suggesting middle age. It's easy enough to show old age physically, but to mime aging itself by being just a little stiff and slow is a remarkable achievement.

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The program's "Notes from the Director" says that "the women own the world of this play" but only men can back their "caprices" with physical force. That's true but may be misleading. In Shakespeare's plays, women are

generally more sensible than men, can think rings around them and manipulate outcomes; but men monopolize physical force.

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This was not because the Bard was a protofeminist. He used gender as a metaphor for the separation of moral suasion from amoral compulsion. In this play all the king's male advisors defend Hermione but cannot stop their leader from his disastrous course -- certainly there is a message in that for our own day, one that includes but extends far beyond gender issues.

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