

The Winter's Tale at ASC 2007



The new season at **American Shakespeare Center's** Blackfriars Playhouse has begun. The four shows in the repertoire for Summer and Fall are *Romeo and Juliet*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* (which doesn't open until late August), and they all run through the first week of December.

Last night I saw the opening night performance of **The Winter's Tale**. This production is a huge success, and the new resident company (larger than usual, including several new faces but several "old friends" as well) is very strong, although some of the departed actors will be missed.

As Leontes, René Thornton, Jr. is a powerful force at the center of the play. The King of Sicilia, Leontes goes crazy with jealousy banishing his infant daughter and setting the plot in motion. Thornton is not only a big man, he's a big actor – his gestures, his expressions, his emotions are all exaggerated. Don't get me wrong, I think he does a fine job in this role, but in this small space, where the actors are practically in the audience's lap (sometimes literally), he could afford to tone down his big-stage presence. (Or not. Leontes's affliction needs to be big; I'm just not sure how big is too big.) Hermione, the king's wife who bears the brunt of his rage, is played by one of the new members of the company, Elisabeth Rodgers. She's fantastic, controlled, completely convincing as the loving wife turned innocent victim. (Looking ahead to her other roles this season, I am already picturing her as Cleopatra.) Allison Glenzer, whom we've seen before at Blackfriars, is powerful as Paulina, Hermione's protector, and commands the stage (although her performance, or her voice at least, sometimes also seems a bit too big for this space); John Harrell, as always, delights as Camillo; Susan Heyward is both Mamillius and Perdita, children of Leontes, and seems to have fun with both, or least it is fun to watch her; Gregory Jon Phelps also returns, here as an excellent Florizel; David Loar is terrific as the Shepherd; John Paul Scheidler, returning to the company after a time in other functions, is wonderful as Polixenes; and so on – everyone does a wonderful job.

From the Director's program notes:

Shakespeare weaves threads of magic and loss throughout *The Winter's Tale*. We often want to say that a terrible thing has not happened in vain, that good comes out of it. But some losses cannot be made good. I want to forgive Leontes by the end of the play, but I don't want to let him off the hook for his outrageous behavior. Forgiving is not the same thing as forgetting, and tragic events often happen for no discernible reason. Alice Trillin, reflecting on her own illness and writing to a young friend who was recovering from rape, wrote, "No one would ever choose to have cancer or to be raped. But you don't get to choose, and it is possible . . . to begin to understand the line in *King Lear* — 'the ripeness is all.' You might have chosen to become ripe less dramatically or dangerously, but you can still savor ripeness." This is yet another rewarding night of theater at the Blackfriars Playhouse, and I highly recommend it. (The pre-show and interlude musical performances alone are worth the price of admission.)

A last note: ASC has been hosting the Young Company Theater Camp, which seems like a wonderful opportunity for teens to experience real theater, and last night before the show the audience was entertained by the campers -- skits, dance, music. It was great to see the kids onstage and some of their work was terrific, with real promise. Congratulations to ASC for creating the YCTC.

Perpetual Folly

Clifford Garstang 2007

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