



Theater Review: It's Paulina's Tale



Leontes (Jon Barker) is sick, as Paulina (Marion Adler), First Lord (Robert S. Gregory) and a Guard (Joseph Leitess) look on. COURTESY JERRY DALIA

The Winter's Tale

By William Shakespeare

Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

36 Madison Ave., Madison

Through Dec. 30

Symposium Series post-show talks: Saturday, Dec. 15, 2 p.m., and Saturday, Dec. 22, 2 p.m.

Know the Show pre-show talk tonight, 7 p.m.

Audio Described performance Sunday, Dec. 16, 7:30 p.m.

Shakespearenj.org, 973-408-5600

By GWEN OREL

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A little bit of (welcome) #metoo has crept into Shakespeare.

In "The Winter's Tale" at Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey a woman gives a jealous man a drubbing down, and the audience broke into applause.

Marion Adler's Paulina, a noblewoman, is fierce and clear. All the actors speak well; Adler speaks right to the soul.

Shakespeare's late play (1623) is often called a romance or a fantasy. Staged by STNJ's Artistic Director Bonnie J. Monte, with a flexible, icy-looking set by Brittany Vasta, it feels like YA High Fantasy.

Think “The Selection.” Think “The Red Queen.”

Take your teen, or your formerly teen self. Shakespeare’s tale, a sad tale for winter, to paraphrase young Prince Mammillius, whose mother asks him to tell him a story, has magic.

There’s even a Father Time (Raphael Nash Thompson) to help us follow along.

This is also the play with Shakespeare’s most famous stage direction: “Exit, pursued by a bear.” (Sadly, there’s no bear or person in a bear suit in this production.)

But then, as Mammillius defines sad, a sad tale is one with goblins and sprites, or magic in it.

It has a simple plot, a kind of “Othello”-like jealousy, in which a man accuses an innocent woman. The first half of the play is dark, like the velvet.

Leontes of Sicily (Jon Barker) imagines his pregnant wife, Queen Hermione (Erin Partin) has been having an affair with his long-time friend Polixenes (John Keabler). The excuse for his jealousy is that after he asked his wife to plead with his friend to stay longer, the friend agreed. Men.

Leontes goes wildly overboard, putting Hermione on trial. He threatens to burn her new baby girl (then agreeing to let the child be exposed, Roman style, somewhere far away).

But then the Oracle comes from Apollo clearing her and Polixenes, declaring it Shakespearean “fake news” (or, as Shakespeare has it, “There is no truth at all i’t’h’Oracle/The sessions shall proceed: this is mere falsehood).” Then his son (who had been sick) dies, and his wife dies, presumably of grief. And he instantly snaps out of it.



Pictured (left to right): Archidamus (Lambert Tamin), Old Shepherd, (Ames Adamson), Perdita (Courtney McGowan) and Polinenes in disguise (John Keabler), with Camillo (Patrick Toon). aCOURTESY JERRY DALIA

Time turns the clock ahead 16 years. Leontes’ daughter, called Perdita (Courtney McGowan), a name that means “lost,” has been adopted by a kindly shepherd (the common fate of Shakespearean foundlings). She’s being courted by Polixenes’ son Florizel (strapping, boyish Ryan Woods). There’s a subplot involving a funny pick-pocketing Autolychus (hilarious, hammy William Sturdivant). Angered at his son’s behavior, Florizel and Perdita flee: to a penitent Leontes.

And then, finally, there’s a magical scene involving a statue of poor Queen Hermione. Or is it? The statue looks aged. Paulina says that’s the skill of the sculptor.

And then she comes to life.

The music (gorgeous sound design by director Monte) as she comes to life, and stars come out behind her. It's redemptive, even holy, even if it was a long con (we're never sure).

It's a stylish production, thanks to Monte's smart use of music, subtlety and contrast. Nikki Delhomme's lush dark velvet for the nobles in Sicilia and light costumes for the peasant charm. Dance, from dance consultant Danielle Liccardo and one presumes the director, charms: waltzes in Sicilia, polkas that turn into reels in Bohemia. Couples dancing? Why not?

Barker's Leontes descends terrifyingly into madness. His return to sanity is not shown to the same degree, and one almost waits for a shoe to drop. Partin's dignified Hermione expresses emotion with her fingers as well as her voice. As Camillo, Patrick Toon has commanding energy. Keabler's handsome Polixenes displays strength.

The clowns in Bohemia, particularly Seamus Mulcahy, as the Old Shepherd's son (Ames Adamson hits the right gruff, comic notes as Old Shepherd) amuse.

Monte beautifully stages the shepherds and shepherdesses so that we can see for ourselves that petite Perdita is the flower of them all.

But it's Adler's Paulina who commands this tale. This sad (and lovely) tale is good for winter, and Adler's performance makes it unmissable.



Polixenes (John Keabler) dances with Hermione (Erin Partin). COURTESY JERRY DALIA