



## 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](http://Shakespearenj.org), 973-408-5600

**By GWEN OREL**

[orel@montclairlocal.news](mailto:orel@montclairlocal.news)

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*



# Montclair theater review: a 'Midsummer' checklist



*Moth (Austin Blunk, left) and Peaseblossom (Courtney McGowan) heed the commands of their queen, Titania (Vanessa Morosco). Courtesy Jerry Dalia.*

*'A Midsummer Night's Dream'*

By William Shakespeare

Through July 30 at Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, 2 Convent Road, Morris Township.

Outdoor Stage: The Greek Theatre (at Convent Station)

[shakespearenj.org](http://shakespearenj.org), 973-408-5600

By GWEN OREL

[orel@montclairlocal.news](mailto:orel@montclairlocal.news)

"Lord, what fools these mortals be."

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" is one of Shakespeare's happiest, most pastoral and most magical comedies.

Fairies exist in this world the way kings and trees do. Their reality is never questioned. They are mischievous, not evil like the witches in "Macbeth." Their verse is gorgeous (Mendelssohn, Benjamin Britten, Groovellily and The Millburnaires have all set some to music).

"Midsummer" is often one of the first Shakespeare plays people read. Children can easily follow it, and the play lends itself easily to all levels of production.

In fact, there's a "community theater" troupe, made up of "rude mechanicals," or blue-collar workers.

A quick recap:

Fairy queen Titania (Vanessa Morosco, who also plays Hippolyta) is quarreling with her husband, Oberon (Earl Baker Jr., who also plays Theseus). So he asks Puck (Felix Mayes) to enchant her eyes to fall in love with the first being she sees. It's an ass: Nick Bottom (Ian Hersey), recently transformed.

Puck also bewitches Athenian lovers, so that both men believe they love the same girl.

Everything ends happily.

So much of the play takes place in the forest of Arden, outside of Athens, that Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's choice to present it in their outdoor Greek theater seems inspired.

But.

We made up a little checklist for the play. Bottom line: even a so-so "Midsummer" is fun.

Magical, however, this "Midsummer" is not.

## **MAGIC**

Well, yes, there are fairies and enchantments. But the fairies are costumed, according to the press release, in items that would go to a landfill: subway cards, blank CDs. The stage of Athens is gray and urban looking and one pillar even says "junkyard" in it. There's an empty bathtub in the forest. Director Bonnie J. Monte's double and triple casting doesn't always work.

Overall: earthbound.

## **PASTORAL**

See above. The costumes and sets (both by director Monte) make the least of the outdoor setting, so much so that at first Athens appeared to be a Greek restaurant. Nobody in Athens looks stately, just nonspecifically urban: Helena (Nike Kadri) first appears dressed for badminton. Hermia (Courtney McGowan) brings bug spray and a yoga mat to her forest elopement. This isn't funny or illuminating.

Overall: opportunity missed.

## **MUSIC**

Weirdly, Beethoven comes in during Athenian portions, including Philostrate (Mayes again) conducting "Beethoven's Fifth" to a recording, at the top. This is never explained. There's Latin music for the fairies.

Overall: muddy.



*Demetrius (Austin Blunk, left), Helena (Nike Kadri), Lysander (Jonathan Finnegan), and Hermia (Courtney McGowan) are torn between their lovers as Puck (Felix Mayes) looks on. Courtesy Jerry Dalia.*

## **LOVERS**

The male half of the lovers are weak. Lysander's devotion (Jonathan Finnegan) seems so flimsy we figure Hermia's well rid of him. Demetrius' (Austin Blunk), who once loved Helena, seems now to loathe her, so his renewed love is about as convincing as the love Voldemort's potion-stricken dad had for his mother (which is

to say, not at all).

Kadri plays the same hurt note over and over. As Hermia, however, McGowan channels Reese Witherspoon, with comical feisty rage. She's also adorable as mechanical Snug, who plays their lion, with a humble roar.

Overall: one out of three. Unromantic.

### **FAIRY KING AND QUEEN: check!**

Ah. Here the play succeeds. Oberon and Titania rise above their ugly costumes to play clearly loving spouses just at odds for the moment. Morosco in particular shines as Titania and Hippolyta, speaking verse gorgeously in a gorgeous voice. Baker Jr. shows his fundamental decency as Theseus as well.

Overall: excellent.

### **FARCE: check!**

The lovers' enchantment falls flat. But when Bottom is changed into an ass, the play soars. Hersey kicks his leg with pleasure when Titania strokes his ears. Her love is hilarious and pitiful. As director of the mechanicals, Bruce Cromer kills it with Peter Quince's exasperation. "DEVoured," he shouts, when Bottom says a lion deflowered Thisbe.

Overall: very good.

### **MECHANICAL COMEDY: check!**

Sparkling! The mechanicals steal the show. Bottom may be an ass but he also has talent: when he speaks of losing Thisbe, you may agree with Hippolyta when she says "Beshrew my heart, but I pity the man." Blunk is dull as Demetrius, but his "la la la"-singing Thisbe delights.

Overall: outstanding.

### **DIRECTION AND THEME**

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" really isn't about tension between two worlds, but about the seen and the unseen living in harmony. The theme doesn't work. In fact, so in harmony are the worlds that Titania threatens to upset the human world with her show of temper. The theme of tension doesn't work.

Monte, as usual, stages comedy brilliantly. The rest seems half-hearted.

Overall: not a magical "Midsummer."

But it's still "Midsummer," and a night outside watching the scampering and listening to the verse has its own magic.