Romeo and Juliet, and: The Winter’s Tale (review)

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Romeo and Juliet

The Winter’s Tale
Presented by The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey at the F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre at Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. December 3–28, 2008. Directed by Brian B. Crowe. Set by Brian Ruggaber. Costumes by Anne Kenney. Lighting by Andrew Hungerford. Sound by Richard M. Dionne. Choreography by Paige Blansfield. Stage management by Josiane M. Lemieux. With Robert Gomes (Leontes), Linda Powell (Hermione), Jesse Easterling (Mamillius, Time), Maureen Sebastian (Perdita), Scott Whitehurst (Camillo), Darren Mathias (Antigonus, Time), Jessica Ires Morris (Paulina), Lindsay Smiling (Polixenes), Jonathan Brathwaite (Florizel), David Foubert (Autolycus, Time), Greg Jackson (Archidamus, The Young Shepherd), Jim Mohr (The Old Shepherd), Camille Troy (Emilia), Jon Barker (Cleomenes), Jack Moran (Dion), and others.

Barbara Ann Lukacs

David Kennedy’s interpretation of Romeo and Juliet was a study in contrasts which highlighted the richness of Shakespeare’s text. By examining the influence of fate on the play’s two main characters, Kennedy deftly wove the production into the STNJ’s 2008 season theme of the quest for one’s identity. Though somewhat radical in its design and staging, this production nevertheless remained faithful to Shakespeare’s meaning and intent. It was a poignant and refreshing interpretation that brought new life and insights to a play that, by virtue of its popularity, is all-too-often staid and formulaic.

The production’s emphasis on contrasts was immediately apparent in the design of the set. Tall, blank, white panels edged in gold formed the two sides and the back of the stage, while slit openings allowed for the
characters’ entrances and exits. Within the outer white walls were suspended three dark royal blue walls that seemed to float above a dark blue center square in the flooring which was bordered by a band of white. The blue walls created an inner playing area that served as the inner sanctum of the Capulet’s monument and that opened up to expose the entire stage when the blue panels were lifted into the rafters. The set was sparse. Its modern, neo-Bauhaus character arrested the audience’s vision and drew their attention to the stage but did not interfere with or detract from the action or the story. In keeping with the set’s design, there were few stage properties: two flat benches, two tables, two chairs, a laboratory cart (for Friar Laurence’s plants), and a chaise lounge were all that were used to denote the different locales.

The most important element of the set was an adjustable-height, gray stone bier located center stage within the blue square. When the play commenced, the sounds of religious music filled the theatre as the characters took their places on stage and the bier descended into the floor. Having the bier present at the beginning of the play was a significant directorial choice since it foreshadowed the play’s conclusion and reinforced the idea that Romeo and Juliet’s destinies were sealed even before one word was spoken in the production. The bier, covered with a white sheet and pillows, served as Juliet’s bed and later her final resting place in the Capulets’s monument. With this one symbol, David Kennedy provided a constant visual reminder that, in this story, free will is an illusion and fate is the ultimate arbiter.

Like the set, the costuming served to highlight the contrasts between the different generations in the play and between the feuding families. The clothing styles were vaguely reminiscent of the 1960s, with the younger characters in shirt sleeves, jeans, and short dresses and the older characters in suits, blazers, and tight fitting slinky couture evoking the Eisenhower and Kennedy eras. The Montagues and the Capulets were contrasted by the color of their clothes: the former were in blue, while the latter were in red. Significantly, Paris dressed like the Capulets, thereby visually showing his position and association in this society. The theme of contrasts was evident in the music as well. Alternating between and sometimes even blending modern “techno/funk,” and religious music (including John Rutter’s Requiem), the soundtrack of this production emphasized the two sides of Romeo’s and Juliet’s natures: on the one hand rambunctious, free-spirited and rebellious, defying their parents and the history of their families; and on the other hand desperately embracing the traditions and morals of the Church with their marriage. By interspers-
ing the soundtrack’s modern music with clips from a requiem, Kennedy provided another reminder that each action Romeo and Juliet took was leading inexorably to their tragic end.

Perhaps the most significant contrast in this production had nothing to do with stage design, music, or costuming. Rather it was between the overwhelming sense of impending tragedy and the ebullient enthusiasm of Jordan Coughtry’s and Rebecca Brooksher’s portrayals of Romeo and Juliet. They managed to capture the intoxicating excitement and passion of youthful love while avoiding the downfall of many other Romeos and Juliets—juvenility. Despite its fiery intensity, there was a touching, eternal quality to their love that resonated with the audience. Theirs was the kind of love that one might hazard all to experience—regardless of dangers, portents, or admonitions against it—at least once in life.

Jordan Coughtry’s Romeo was emotional, energetic, and impetuous while Rebecca Brooksher’s Juliet was radiant, determined, and alluring. The handsome and likeable couple were strong characters who controlled and dominated the production. In hair color, skin tone, physique, and behavior they mirrored one another. The balcony scene—perhaps the scene most plagued by pitfalls and noxious stereotypes—managed to be both poignant and exhilarating. Although the play and, especially this scene, are all-too-familiar to audiences, because of careful direction and superb acting it was fresh and vibrant. We were drawn into it and into the lives of this young couple. They ceased merely to be actors on the stage and became people about whom we actually cared.

The same was true of Shawn Fagan’s Mercutio. Like Romeo, Mercutio was energetic and impulsive, but Fagan’s exuberance and flamboyance created an enthralling, “over-the-top” portrayal. With his spiked, bleached white hair, snakeskin shoes, tight shirts (unbuttoned to the waist), and tight pants, he resembled the prototypical punk-rocker, the perfect foil to Romeo’s clean-cut image. While Fagan’s acting was very physical, he remained completely in control of his language and actions, delivering his lines with a precision befitting a skilled swordsman. It was a powerful and memorable portrayal that combined brash bravado with revealing glimpses of the character’s thoughtful and vulnerable nature. At no point was this contrast in Mercutio’s being more apparent than in the Queen Mab speech. His delivery, which alternated between inebriated jocularity and almost hushed reverence, emphasized the shimmering, gossamer essence of the words; it was as light and evanescent as the dreams he described.

The frankness and openness of the performances of Brooksher, Coughtry, and Fagan engendered our sympathies and opened our hearts
to their plight. We cared about Juliet when she cried and cringed on the floor before her abusive father. We cared that she lacked a mother—hers was nothing but a cold fashion plate. We cared that even the Nurse was not her true confidante, not the surrogate mother that she is often portrayed as in other productions. She was nothing more than a servant. We cared when, in 3.5, Juliet faced the audience as she heard the Nurse admonish her to marry Paris and saw her eyes set with the fiery determination of one who has come to the full realization of what she must do. We hearkened to Romeo’s entreaties as he tried to intercede between the warring factions and wept with his cries as he bemoaned his and Juliet’s fate. We were enchanted by Mercutio in 1.4 and horrified at his untimely death at the hand of his friend. The ferocity with which he delivered his dying curse branded it upon the audience’s consciousness: it seemed to resound throughout the theatre and to cast a pall upon the remainder of the play. These were the characters, the people about whom we cared. We did not care that the mothers feebly shook hands and embraced in the tomb, a staging, not demanded by Shakespeare’s text, that has become
popular in recent years. There was no catharsis in this; it was an empty, hollow gesture. At the end of this production, there truly seemed to be no hope for a brighter future, since the sweetest promises of that future—Juliet, Romeo, and Mercutio—were lost forever.

Bonnie J. Monte, the artistic director of STNJ, began a charming holiday season tradition a number of years ago: to present a play at the end of the year that offers hope, renewal, and faith in one’s fellow man. Thus, at the end of 2008, STNJ presented *The Winter’s Tale*, which is, according to its director Brian Crowe, a “dark fairy-tale [that] dexterously navigates the coldest recesses of the human soul—the corrosiveness of jealousy, the volatility of even the most constant relationships, the cowardice of inaction in the face of tyranny—and yet manages to lead us safely to a final destination rich with hope, forgiveness, and personal rejuvenation.”

The setting for this journey into the deepest regions of human nature was appropriately dark, but at the same time retained a sense of elegance and grandeur. The front of the black stage was rounded, and jutted out towards the audience. A black curved arch extended from left to right. Floral stenciling adorned it and several other black vertical panels that framed the raised platforms on either side of the stage. A billowing dark blue-green scrim curtain obscured the upper playing area from the lower stage. Written on the curtain were the words: “There was a King who loved his Queen.” These eight words set the tone and theme for this production.

The curtain was drawn and the play opened with a sumptuous ball. Men and women in late-nineteenth-century formal dress slowly danced about the stage. Leontes looked regal in a cream-colored jacket with a stand-up collar, red sash, and black pants. Hermione sat downstage, looking just as regal in her pure white gown and red cape, which emphasized her very pregnant state. A look of happiness radiated from her face as she watched her husband interact with their son Mamillius, who appeared to be a miniature of his father. The three of them presented a beautiful picture of a loving family. Polixenes was one of the other ten people on stage. Attired in a three-quarter length turquoise coat with a black cape hanging from his left shoulder, a bejeweled black Persian lamb hat, a gold sash across his chest, pantaloons, and black riding boots, he looked like a ruler proudly wearing his country’s national uniform. His behavior toward his hosts was as impeccable as his attire.

Amidst this elegant ballroom scene, we saw jealousy visibly start to overtake Leontes. Even as he played with his son, there were brief looks
that crossed his face as he watched Polixenes and Hermione conversing with one another. In this scene, the genius of Brian Crowe’s direction and staging was readily apparent. Mamillius, a miniature of Leontes, embodied all that was good and bright about Leontes’s nature as a boy when he frolicked with Polixenes; Mamillius was Leontes’s innocence. As we witnessed Mamillius wrestling with Leontes, we witnessed Leontes’ innocence wrestling with the demon of his jealousy, and neither succumbed easily. Some of the most poignant moments in the production were when Leontes grasped for his son as if trying desperately to save himself. But he could not. The center of his world—his love and his innocence—Hermione and Mamillius, was being thrown into disarray and there was nothing onto which he could hold. He succumbed to his demon—to the winter in his nature—and for that he had to pay his dark and torturous penance. Yet all hope was not lost. In a fleeting instant, when his demon loosened his grip, Leontes spared Perdita and therefore, unbeknownst to him, ensured his eventual redemption. She became his new innocence: the promise of the spring thaw to come.

Brian Crowe addressed the play’s often touted problems of plausibility and believability by expanding the role of Time, who in Shakespeare’s text appears only at the beginning of 4.1. Time, as a character and a fixture of the stage, dominated the court scenes in the opening acts. He was an imposing figure in a glimmering blue-silver gown and robe with multiple silver chain necklaces and a silver pillbox hat. As he walked up and down the rear staircase and across the upper balcony area, he wielded a silver staff topped with a wide-edged circle within which was an hourglass. Crowe’s direction portrayed him as a conjurer, a Prospero-like persona who controlled the actions of the characters on the lower stage with subtle gestures of his staff. The music and the motions of the characters were at his command. A particularly powerful effect was when Time arrested all other actions on the stage as Leontes delivered his monologues in 1.2. In this way, the audience was drawn more deeply into the ever-darkening world of Leontes’ mind as he lost control of himself, his emotions, and his reason.

Crowe further extended the role of time through the stage itself. An integral part of the set and the production was the stage floor, which was dominated by a large circle inset into center stage. On it were painted parts of an astrolabe. The circle rotated and tilted, emphasizing the passage of time and suggesting, when its axis was askew, that the world in the play was off balance. At no point was this feeling more potent than when we saw Leontes trudge around the circle, as if in a jealous stupor,
Linda Powell (left) as Hermione, Queen of Sicilia and Robert Gomes (right) as Leontes, King of Sicilia in the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey’s 2008 production of *The Winter's Tale*, directed by Brian B. Crowe. Photo: © Gerry Goodstein.
in 2.3. He had lost the center of his world, and both he and his world were spiraling out of control. Significantly, the circle was flat and flush with the surrounding stage in the opening scenes, and only returned to being almost level at the end of the play when Hermione and Perdita were restored to him. It did not return to completely level: Leontes would always bear the scars of his demon and nothing could ever be the same again, no matter how much the world had changed for the better.

Continuing with his unique interpretation, Crowe took the liberty of creating two new characters: the spirits of Mamillius and of Antigonus. Time's monologue at the beginning of 4.1 was divided equally between Time and these two spirits. While bold and perhaps unconventional, it was nevertheless a stroke of brilliance to create these characters because they represented the critical milestones of the play. Everything was measured relative to their deaths. Sixteen years from their deaths, Perdita was found. Sixteen years from their deaths, Leontes was reunited with his friend. Sixteen years from their deaths, Hermione was restored. In a larger sense, Mamillius marked the loss of Leonte's innocence, while Antigonus marked the safe deliverance of his resurrection: Perdita. Without these two events, there would be no winter and no spring. There would not be a play without them and therefore it was only fitting that these spirits became fixtures of the production. They were not only visible reminders of the passage of time but also of the pain endured by each of the characters at the hands of Leontes and his jealousy.

In a final, masterful piece of directing, Crowe reminded the audience of these sufferings by having the two spirits reappear stage left as Leontes and Hermione were exiting stage right. For an instant, Hermione hesitated and started to turn her head back towards her lost son as he reached out toward her with his right hand. Antigonus held Mamillius's left hand, restraining him from going to his mother. With the turning of her head, it was as if Hermione was trying to reverse the wheels of time, but no one—not even Paulina—could do that. Hermione had no choice but to go on and resignedly turned away from her child's spirit as she and Leontes walked off stage. The lights went down on the figure of Mamillius, still straining his outstretched hand towards them.

With this scene, the redemption of Leontes was complete. It was a bittersweet ending: bitter with the knowledge that nothing could ever be the same again, sweet with the promise of a new life to come. These are the same realizations that each new year and first blossom of spring bring. Thanks to Brian Crowe and the cast of STNJ's 2008 production of *The Winter's Tale*, we were reminded that even in the darkest of winters,
whether seasonal or personal, the spring thaw will come and light will return to the world.

\textit{The Winter's Tale}

Presented by the \textbf{Bridge Project} at the \textbf{Brooklyn Academy of Music}, Brooklyn, New York. February 10–March 8, 2009. Directed by Sam Mendes. Set by Anthony Ward. Costumes by Catherine Zuber. Lighting by Paul Pyant. Sound by Paul Arditti. Music by Mark Bennett. Choreography by Josh Prince. With Simon Russell Beale (Leontes), Rebecca Hall (Hermione), Sínead Cusack (Paulina), Paul Jesson (Camillo), Morven Christie (Mamillius, Perdita), Dakin Matthews (Antigonus), Josh Hamilton (Polixenes), Michael Braun (Florizel), Richard Easton (Old Shepherd/Time), Tobias Segal (Young Shepherd), Ethan Hawke (Autolycus), and others.

\textbf{Michael Basile, New Jersey City University}

Casting, it is often said, is a director’s most important contribution. Early in the theatrical process, matching actors with their roles can be predictive of gaudy success or outright doom. Yet some casting is child’s-play. A six-foot Hermia won’t do, regardless of the player’s intelligence and training; Lear must be old (or oldish), no matter his emotional identification and preparation. More often than not, however, a director must make complicated and difficult choices—call it “adult’s-play”—factoring in (among other considerations) an actor’s age, shape, skills, range and career history \textit{within} the larger context of an entire cast’s biographical and professional attributes. To this, the director’s most difficult and important work, Sam Mendes, famed Oscar and Tony winner, imposed an unnecessary and circumscribing condition: he cast \textit{The Winter’s Tale} with equal parts British and North American actors. Concept-casting, we might call it, or “god’s-play.”

The gods must be crazy. Shakespeare’s strange and wonder-full late romance contains its own complications and inconsistencies and often seems not one play but two, separated by locale (Sicilia and Bohemia) time (sixteen years) and, most significantly, tone (claustrophobic tragedy against open-air pastoral). Mendes and his Bridge Project team suggested that two casts-in-one, each from a different side of the great pond, offered opportunity to explore the play’s bifurcated structure—in effect, to emphasize the inherent dramaturgical dissonance by separating the sections and allowing each to play its particular national music.