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The Winter's Tale (review)

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whether seasonal or personal, the spring thaw will come and light will return to the world.

The Winter's Tale

Presented by the **Bridge Project** at the **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), Si-néad 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.

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 *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 *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.

If the result had been a vivid and disturbing journey of paradise lost and paradise (partially) regained that characterizes this play, no one would have cared—or perhaps even noticed—Mendes’s concept-casting. He admitted that British actors are granted more opportunities to see and perform Shakespeare than their North American brothers and sisters, giving them an apparent edge over their North American counterparts, but incongruously suggested a parity of craftsmanship. “There is no difference in skill” between them, he announced. Putting aside the questionable logic that separates the effects that exposure and practice have on skill, everyone knows that splendid classical actors reside on both sides of the Atlantic. Ironically, and sadly, this production confirmed the traditional and largely outdated caste system it aimed so programmatically to dispel: the British in Leontes’s Sicilia succeeded, setting the bar too high for the Americans in Autolycus’s Bohemia to meet.

Sinead Cusack (Paulina), Rebecca Hall (Hermione), and Simon Russell Beale (Leontes) anchored the production’s mostly British first half with quietly understated confidence born of their extensive professional experience. Paulina first entered carrying a suitcase, assessing the Sicilian court with the weary and knowing glances of an expatriate. Had she emigrated to avoid previous disturbances and was now impressed into service to once again put things right? Throughout her performance, a kind of soulful weariness reigned. She rose to righteous indignation only once in a role with many such opportunities—predictably, after Hermione’s death. As Hermione, Hall, too, underrepresented her despair when first accused of infidelity, and so saved her most demonstrative work for the trial scene. Quite simply, she offered a master-class in the art of filtering action through condition and arriving at a riveting reality. She waged a noble defense of her innocence, accepted her imminent death, professed her still-abiding love for her accuser—and all while in the hormonal swings of a post-partum state that would not let her sit, would not let her stand, could not be entirely controlled. Rising from her chair in defiance and then crumpling into it in despair, Hermione’s choreographed dance of death held us spellbound.

Simon Russell Beale, one of contemporary theatre’s most skilled classical actors, has moved BAM audiences over the years in a series of fine performances, including Malvolio, Benedick, and Hamlet. His gift is finding a role’s bittersweet irony, mining charm and humor where other actors have no compulsion even to prospect. These rare and valuable talents didn’t prove as useful in tackling Leontes. Leontes’s volcanic jealousy erupts, it seems, without any apparent motivation and vanishes just

Morven Christie as Mamillius and Simon Russell Beale as Leontes in the Bridge Project Company's 2009 production of *The Winter's Tale*, directed by Sam Mendes. Photo courtesy of Joan Marcus.

as suddenly. Once he is infected with the green-eyed monster, he neither pauses nor reflects. While he momentarily considers sparing his newborn princess from exile, he *never* doubts Hermione has whored and plotted against him. Yet, oddly, Beale tired of his own attacks before he had found his target. At one moment he entered barefoot and disheveled. He had been awake all night—"Nor night, nor day, no rest"—and immediately slumped in a chair. A snifter of brandy waited for him on a nearby table. If he could not sleep through the nightmare of his own making, perhaps he could wait it out, benumbed by alcohol. In effect, his Leontes lost commitment to his own dangerous fantasies long before the dramaturgical demands of the plot had been fulfilled. Leontes's obsessions drive the first hour of the play. By humanizing a monster, Beale robbed the plot of its necessary forward thrust. He consistently moved as the older, penitent king and father, especially when he was first introduced to Perdita. In a silence pregnant with recognition, he reached out to touch her face—he would not trust his eyes alone to reacquaint him with his exiled daughter. (His eyes, after all, had betrayed him sixteen years ago.) Few actors use silence as well as Simon Russell Beale; the auditorium of eight hundred people was quiet as any stone.

Unfortunately, the Americans in Bohemia disproved Mendes's assertion that they were as skilled as their British colleagues. Ethan Hawke's Autolycus, fashioned as a drugged-out Bob Dylan, scored a few jokes but seemed most concerned with didactically reinforcing his *idea* of the role instead of playing the action. (This was concept-acting in league with concept-casting.) Most disappointing were Josh Hamilton (Polixenes) and Morven Christie (Perdita). Hamilton simply did not care enough; the stakes for him were too low—blank verse is not conversational chit-chat. Christie apparently had shirked her text-study classes, for she played an "aw shucks" farm girl despite the oft repeated Shakespearean conceit that nature trumps nurture. Her Perdita could not justifiably elicit Polixenes's observation, expressed several times in only slightly different phrasing, that "nothing she does or seems / But smacks of something greater than herself / Too noble for this place."

Of course North Americans can play Shakespeare, and play it well. Richard Easton (the Canadian actor who played Old Shepherd and Time) was delightful, charming, and clear as a bell. Just as certain, not everyone born in Britain comes naturally equipped to excel in such challenging work as *The Winter's Tale*; Morven Christie, for instance—British-born and London-trained—still has much to learn. But Sam Mendes and his fellow Bridge Project compatriots are planning another season

The company with Ethan Hawke (Autolycus) in the Bridge Project Company's 2009 production of *The Winter's Tale*, directed by Sam Mendes. Photo courtesy of Joan Marcus.

(From left to right) Garry Powell, Simon Russell Beal (Leontes), and Sinead Cusack (Paulina) in the Bridge Project Company's 2009 production of *The Winter's Tale*, directed by Sam Mendes. Photo courtesy of Joan Marcus.

at BAM and should reconsider their casting policy. “The best actor for the role” remains sound advice, whether one’s accent chimes “theater” or “theatuh.” For this late romance, in particular, dissonance is structurally endemic. Nothing is gained by the addition of harsher discords or more unpleasant sharps.

Twelfth Night

Presented by the **Donmar West End Company** at the **Wyndham’s Theatre**, London. December 5, 2008–March 7, 2009. Directed by Michael Grandage. Set and Costumes by Christopher Oram. Lighting by Neil Austin. Musical Composition by Julian Philips. Sound by Fergus O’Hare. Fights by Terry King. With Mark Bonnar (Orsino), Norman Bowman (Curio), James Howard (Valentine), Victoria Hamilton (Viola), Ian Drysdale (Sea Captain, Priest), Ron Cook (Sir Toby Belch), Samantha Spiro (Maria), Guy Henry (Sir Andrew Aguecheek), Zubin Varla (Feste), Indira Varma (Olivia), Derek Jacobi (Malvolio), Lloyd Hutchinson (Antonio) and Alex Waldman (Sebastian).

CHRISTIAN M. BILLING, *University of Hull*

Alice. I know what men want.

Dan. Really?

Alice. Oh yes.

Dan. Tell me...

Alice. *Considers* Men want a girl who looks like a boy.

Patrick Marber

Closer Act I Scene ii.

This production of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* formed part of the Donmar West End 2008–2009 season, in which Artistic Director Michael Grandage sought to take productions of “great drama at affordable prices to the heart of [London’s] West End.” The season also aimed at taking the company’s work to larger audiences than those possible in the heavily subsidized but relatively small Donmar Warehouse in Covent Garden. As a result of the concomitant need to guarantee good box office receipts for the venture, each of the season’s four plays was cast (and marketed) as a star-driven vehicle, with Kenneth Branagh taking the lead in *Ivanov*, Judi Dench in *Madame de Sade*, Derek Jacobi in *Twelfth Night*, and Jude Law in *Hamlet*. Performances took place in the Wyndham’s Theatre—a 759-seat venue first opened in 1899 and fully refurbished in Louis XVI style in 2008.