

# British Theatre Guide

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## Cymbeline

William Shakespeare

Lincoln Center Theater at the Vivian Beaumont Theater, New York

(2007)

What is Shakespeare's most popular play? Most surprisingly, in 2007, for your critic it is not *Hamlet* or *Twelfth Night*. This is the third outing in a year for the supposedly rarely produced late play beating all-comers.

One could reasonably ask why? *Cymbeline* is a difficult play for directors and audiences with a fantastical plot that Lincoln Center regular Mark Lamos clearly finds it difficult to take seriously.

Where [Kneehigh](#) took the basic story and updated it to something very different and [Cheek by Jowl](#) opted for minimalism and clever dual casting, Lamos' interpretation is lavish. In fact, if one saw it with the sound turned down, this *Cymbeline* would look like an opera staged next door at the Met.

Michael Yeargan's set is based on a design like a Turner storm with massive golden pillars coming in and out to create palaces and Welsh woods. The effect is enhanced by Jess Goldstein's colourful costumes, seemingly from different historical periods?

This fits in with a three-hour production that uses varied acting styles, once again suggesting that the director is not entirely comfortable with his play.

Amongst a cast of locals, English actor Jonathan Cake might well be the pick, ironically playing a truly charming Italian, Iachimo. Cake must struggle to fit in rehearsals around a bodybuilding programme, which is proving so successful that one wonders why Imogen didn't fall for him and chuck up her relatively weedy, childhood love, Posthumus, played by former Sweeney Todd, Michael Cerveris.

Martha Plimpton is a tiny, blonde Imogen who early on seems like a Hollywood star of the fifties. However, as things get really tough for her character, the actress who has won awards on stage and screen does increasingly well, making a convincing, if rather pretty, boy.

These Britons are involved in a story that can beggar belief. John Cullum's Cymbeline, an under-powered king if ever there was one, is ruled by his evil second wife, Phylicia Rashad's Queen.

This evil woman's main goal in life is getting the Princess Imogen to wed her son Cloten so that he can become the next king. Viewers will love or hate Adam Dannheiser in this role, as he is over-played as the kind of camp comedian who always proves so popular in limp sitcoms.

The main plot-line is driven by the girl's love for Posthumus, to whom she is secretly married. After he is banished, her honour is tested and apparently proved wanting by the handsome Italian interloper into her bedroom.

Several major players then head for Wales where war is raging and Cloten loses his head, before Jupiter descends on a massive golden eagle, the Romans are beaten in a spectacular battle, the

King's lost sons are discovered and all comes right in the end.

Of the supporting actors, John Pankow playing Posthumus' servant Pisanio acts extremely well in linking scenes and explicating.

This sounds breathless and, indeed, the final scenes that could have been so moving are played here as broad comedy, arguably negating the audience's goodwill in sitting for three hours watching the build-up to what might have been a poignant romance.

There is much to commend Mark Lamos production but also a great deal to question. It always looks good and the director allows no gaps in the action. The acting is mixed, with some performers having minimal presence while others go too far in the other direction. Perhaps ultimately the fault is with a play that does not show Shakespeare at his best and possibly might not be entirely by his hand.

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)