

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## The Winter's Tale

William Shakespeare  
Royal Shakespeare Company  
Theatre Royal, Newcastle  
(2009)

Although often applied rather more loosely, the term "problem play" in relation to Shakespeare refers to those plays which, clearly not histories, do not fit easily into either tragedy or comedy but have elements of both. Usually it is *All's Well*, *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida* which are so described but I would argue that *The Winter's Tale* is a perfect example.

Acts I to III, set in Sicilia (yes, Act III Scene 3 is actually set in Bohemia but it belongs in every other sense in Sicilia), have all the elements of tragedy, whilst Act IV, set in Bohemia, has all the elements of pastoral comedy including shepherds and shepherdesses, folksy dancing and singing and even an antimasque of Satyrs, and Act V (back to Sicilia) brings in the typically Shakespeare comedy resolution of the happy-ever-after kind.

As an aside, it is worth pointing out that, even in bucolic, happy Bohemia, destructive anger rears its ugly head in the form of Polixenes' rejection of his son. Given his Sicilian experience, one would have thought he might have known better, but perhaps Shakespeare is telling us that human beings don't learn from their experiences but emotion overrules intellect every time.

Except that it isn't a genuinely happy outcome, of course, because, like the marriages which bring *Measure for Measure* to a close, its ending is somewhat forced and, if we are honest, unsatisfying. Florizel and Perdita may well live happily ever after, but can we really imagine Leontes and Hermione will settle down to wedded bliss or that the union between Camillo and Paulina is a marriage made in heaven? And what are we to make of the fact that Hermione has been hidden away for sixteen years? A touch of the *deus ex machina*, perhaps? Which, given the classical *milieu* in which the play is set (Greek names, the Delpic Oracle and so on), should perhaps not be unexpected.

The "problem plays", along with *Merchant* and *Timon*, are experiments on Shakespeare's part, attempts to break out of the straitjacket of established categories and yoke together very disparate elements.

What director David Farr has tried to do is to make these disparate elements into a coherent (if not entirely cohesive) whole. The palace in Sicilia, lit very coldly (Jon Clark), is dominated by huge bookcases (an impressive set by Jon Bausor) which come crashing down in Act II, scattering books and hundreds of sheets of loose paper all over the stage where they stay to the end. The bucolic Bohemia is superimposed on this. First (Act III, scene 3), the bear which pursues Antigonus is a life-sized puppet made entirely of shreds of paper and then, after the intervention of Time to indicate the passing of sixteen years, three trees are flown in, trees whose leaves are also paper (shades of *As You Like It*!). The lighting changes to warm gold but the cold of the Sicilian palace remains always in the background. The costumes of the twelve priapic dancers in the antimasque

are also made of shreds of paper. Then, of course, when we return to Sicilia, the change is easily effected by flying out the trees and the resumption of cold lighting.

It's a brave attempt, if a tad heavy-handed, but it can't really disguise the essential discontinuity of the play.

As one would expect, the performances are excellent. Greg Hicks gives reality to the jealousy-crazed Leontes and even manages to garner some sympathy for him, although nothing could ever make him a truly sympathetic character. Darrell D'Silva is a bemused and shattered Polixenes, unable to understand what is going on in the mind of his oldest and dearest friend, but is done no favours by his Act IV disguise which makes him look like a comic David Bellamy. But given that the disguise of John Mackay's Camillo in the same scene put me in mind of Andrew Aguecheek playing Sherlock Holmes, perhaps that was the point.

But of course it is the two women, Hermione and Paulina, who have all the best lines and the really sympathetic characters, and Kelly Hunter and Noma Dumezweni respectively grab all their opportunities with both hands and really insinuate themselves into the audience's hearts.

It is, as one would expect from the RSC, a strong cast with not a weakness anywhere. And I loved the bear!

Kevin Quarmby [reviewed](#) the production in Stratford. It was [reviewed](#) at the Roundhouse in 2010 by Philip Fisher.

**Reviewer:** [Peter Lathan](#)