

British Theatre Guide

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Cymbeline

William Shakespeare and Carl Grose

Kneehigh Theatre

Rufford Abbey, Nottinghamshire, and touring
(2006)

The Bard's late "problem" play *Cymbeline* is such a mishmash of themes, schemes and dreams that it's no wonder so few companies tackle it. The Royal Shakespeare Company has performed it only 20-odd times in its history and for the Complete Works Festival is entrusting it to Kneehigh, considered one of the most innovative theatre companies in Britain.

The Cornwall-based organisation are getting to grips with Shakespeare for the first time - and they've come up with an adaptation that's so modern it hardly retains a word of the original language.

Kneehigh's artistic director Emma Rice says she reckons *Cymbeline* is a fairy tale that's about families "in all their wondrous, cracked, comforting glory" and she wants the production to "celebrate the child in all of us". That's pretty difficult when you're surrounded by war, evil, squalor, revenge and beheading, although there's hope at the end that everyone will live happily ever after.

The play starts with dark, hooded figures writing in red spray paint the word "remember" on cardboard which is clipped to scaffolding that resembles an enclosed cage.

Then a "woman" who introduces herself as Joan appears and chats to the servant Pisanio about how it's the 20th anniversary of the disappearance of Cymbeline's two sons. They quickly encapsulate the plot - it's a convenient, clever way of helping the audience to understand the background. Joan even asserts, "It's all very complicated, isn't it? Like a Shakespeare play!"

The production quickly settles into an ensemble piece - eight actors and four musicians take on all the roles between them - which is funny, racy, clever and, during the war scenes, startlingly realistic.

Hayley Carmichael is a strong, gritty Imogen, Cymbeline's disobedient daughter who authentically captures the character's sense of loyalty which turns to grief when she is informed of her husband Posthumus's alleged infidelity.

Robert Luckay earns laughter and applause for his depiction of Iachimo as a brash, Italian playboy and works extremely well with Carl Grose (Posthumus) in their comedic scenes. Grose is especially funny in the surreal moment when Posthumus gives English lessons to a group of Italians and teaches them to sing "The Wheels On The Bus"!

Craig Johnson is an oafish Cloten whose high opinion of himself contrasts with the way the character is usually played as someone lacking intellect; Kirsty Woodward gives an engaging performance as Pisanio, the servant who is normally played by a man; and director Emma Rice appears as a vampish, suspender-clad Queen who knows how to put her husband in his place.

As the king, Mike Shepherd is often in a state of undress and because of this appears sufficiently regal only towards the end.

Occasionally some of the voices are lost in the open air but the actors revel in their freedom to ad lib, particularly about the heavy showers which drenched both cast and audience on press night.

Sections of the play, especially at the beginning of each half, drag slightly and some of the songs are mournfully dull. On the whole, though, the jazz, rock, blues and rap styles try to cater for all tastes, with a strong leaning towards younger members of the audience who might be experiencing the play for the first time.

It will be interesting to see whether *Cymbeline* works at the Swan in Stratford when it moves there next month. It's a fascinating adaptation which won't appeal to everyone. The purists will absolutely hate it. Stratford won't know what's hit it.

"Cymbeline" tours until October 28th and runs at the Swan, Stratford from September 20th to 30th

This production was reviewed by Allison Vale at [Bristol Old Vic](#) and by Philip Fisher at the [Lyric, Hammersmith](#)

Reviewer: [Steve Orme](#)