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The Winter's Tale

William Shakespeare

RSC at the Roundhouse

(2002)

A visit to the Roundhouse for the start of the RSC's new season is quite a stunning experience. Once you have negotiated the scaffolding and Portaloos which are quite a contrast with the company's previous London home at the Barbican, you come to Matthew Warchus' inaugural production there.

There is much talk about the way in which the plays of William Shakespeare should be presented. There are some purists who believe that every word of the text must be used and period clothing is compulsory. The RSC has often gone for modern-dress productions with great success. Matthew Warchus has taken things a stage further with not only 1930s costumes but a resetting of the play in the United States. The purists must already be up in arms and even those less traditional may be a little querulous.

The play is set in the round and Vicki Mortimer's design, together with Hugh Vanstone's lighting and Gary Yershon's music, come into play immediately. The silent prologue consists of a magician's vanishing act which nicely encapsulates the action that will take place. This leads into a fascinating evening packed with fresh ideas, many of which give new insights into the play.

After the prologue comes a real shock as first, Rolf Saxon as the King of Bohemia, Polixenes, speaks with an American accent, and then the main character in the play, Leontes, utters a speech sounding suspiciously like President George W. Bush. This has various consequences, the least favourable of which is a loss of the poetic feel to some of Shakespeare's language.

Matthew Warchus has generally asked his actors to forgo subtlety in favour of action. Therefore, the flirting between Leontes' Queen Hermione and the Bohemian King, Polixenes, is far more overt than is usually shown and perhaps a little inappropriate. Similarly, Leontes' anger and madness are very dramatic and excellently acted by a shaven-headed Douglas Hodge. This does though, alter the nature of the play quite considerably.

In most productions, the assumption is that the good Queen Hermione is above reproach and her husband has a momentary lapse of sanity during which he wrecks his own life and those of his whole court. In this case, there is a real question as to whether the Queen has taken liberties with her husband's friend and therefore if Leontes' reaction is acceptable, if excessive.

Generally, this production is constantly trying to make a big impression and thereby often brings new insights into the play. It also puts onstage elements that are normally not seen. The bear that chases Antigonus is a rather scary grizzly and a live falcon has a similar impact on some members of the audience. Add in a flying princess and you have a rare tale.

The great expanse of the Roundhouse is also used to great effect. A massive cast-iron staircase creates interesting angles and the use of promenaders in uncomfortable cheaper seats replicates

some of the effects more normally seen at the Globe.

This version does not completely forsake the poignancy and sadness of Shakespeare's original. Two scenes involving Anastasia Hille as the Queen - her indictment in a court and the famous statue scene - are very terrifying and very beautiful respectively.

The American setting does not always work but for the rural idyll scenes in Bohemia, the country and western music and the opportunity to allow the promenaders to join in a barn dance greatly adds to the fun. More questionable is the idea of having a radio newsreader replace some of the most important and revelatory scenes of the play. Possibly, it was decided that at three and three quarter hours this is a long enough production (especially when the programme suggests that the play should end an hour earlier than it does).

In addition to the wonderful visual and auditory qualities, the director draws great performances from Douglas Hodge as the madly jealous then contrite Leontes, Anastasia Hille as Hermione and in smaller roles, Myra Lucretia Taylor as Paulina and Felix Dexter as Autolycus.

There will be many who are offended by the idea of an American setting for Shakespeare. For those who can live with that, this is an exhilarating evening.

The Winter's Tale is playing in repertory until 19th June.

This review originally appeared on Theatreworld in a slightly different version.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)