



Theatre in Review: *The Winter's Tale*

By David Barbour

Published: August 1, 2016



Mairin Lee as Hermione and Brad Fraizer as Leontes

How thoughtful of the folks at New York Classical Theatre, which performs free Shakespeare in various city parks during the summer, to select the Battery for its current production, *The Winter's Tale*. During the hottest week of the summer, it was a pleasure to be down by the water, savoring the coolest breeze in town. And there was something undeniably magical about hearing Shakespeare's text delivered by a technically skilled cast in such a sylvan setting—during one sequence, with Ellis Island in the background framed by a magnificent sunset.

As I've noted before, this company's version of Shakespeare in the parks is a movable feast. The opening scenes of *The Winter's Tale*, set in Sicilia, unfold inside Castle Clinton, the circular sandstone fort where immigrants arrived in the days before Ellis Island. The director, **Stephen Burdman** (also the company's artistic director), makes excellent use of this large interior space, having different groups of characters observe each other at some distance, a strategy that visually evokes the reality of a court about to be destroyed by suspicion and jealousy. Later, when the action shifts to the pastures of Bohemia, the audience moves to a couple of nearby grassy areas, ultimately returning to the castle's courtyard for the finale. These final scenes are lit by three pairs of flashlights, to oddly entrancing effect; with the actors' shadows looming large on the wall behind them, the play's preposterous finale takes on an eerie reality.

The Winter's Tale is never going to make anyone's list of Bard favorites. It begins in a burst of melodrama, as Leontes, the king of Sicilia, maddened by jealousy, destroys his happy family, sending most of his loved ones into exile or early graves. After that, there is a sharp left turn into knockabout comedy as the action moves to Bohemia, where, many years later, we are introduced to the young lovers, Perdita and Florizel, and the roving musical con man Autolycus—to my mind, one of the less amusing Shakespearean clowns. Then everyone gets shipped back to Sicilia for a laughably implausible set of reunions and the resurrection of a character believed dead for 16 years. I've yet to see a production that knits all of these oddities into a coherent whole.

Burdman doesn't really try; he has his cast play each scene for what it is worth, gambling that the audience will get caught up in the plot, held by the language and their eagerness to see how it all turns out. It helps that there are several striking performances. **Brad Fraizer**'s Leontes, possessed by jealousy, grows ever-more-eerily rational even as he twists logic into a pretzel to justify his insane belief that his wife and brother are cuckolding him. As his wronged spouse, Hermione, **Mairin Lee** gains in stature in the face of each new outrage perpetrated against her. **Lisa Tharps** is a towering moral presence as Paulina, the gentlewoman who stands up to Leontes and later paves the way for the happy ending. **John Michalski** is an urbane presence as Camillo, one of the

more put-upon courtiers in the Shakespeare canon. **Mark August** is the most appealing Autolycus I've seen, downplaying the shtick and deploying his lute for some attractive songs. In a rather charming touch, **Peyton Lusk**, who plays Mamillius, Leontes' unhappy, untimely dispatched offspring, returns as Time, armed with an hourglass to guide us through the decade-and-a-half pause in the action.

Sarita Fellows is credited as production designer; I'm guessing that part of her task involves finding the right location for each sequence. If so, she has done very well here. Her costumes meld details from at least three time frames—ancient Rome, the Renaissance, and the Victorian era—into a distinct and largely attractive vision. Once again, there is no sound design, so you must listen very, very closely to actors who must compete with traffic, ship's whistles, helicopters, and other facts of urban life. Then again, one doesn't attend this company's productions for deep nuance or novel insights; one experiences Shakespeare, the spinner of yarns rendered in exquisite verse.

I can't say that Burdman's production solves the problems inherent in *The Winter's Tale*; I still find that its middle section drags a bit. But this is a lovely reading of the play in a charming setting, and, as was true of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the audience at my performance attended to every word. To paraphrase Mamillius, it appears that a sad tale's best for summer.