

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Winter's Fairy Tale

Sylvie · Wednesday, March 11th, 2020

You'll notice that the headline above has added a word to the title of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. It's there because a fairy tale is really what this play is all about. Considering Shakespeare's laziness when it comes to inventing plots, it shouldn't be much of a surprise. For this tale of jealous love, fury and tragedy that somehow finds its way to a happy ending, calling it a fable is the only thing that works.

At least for the most part. The production resumes playing tonight at A Noise Within, in rotating rep with *Alice in Wonderland*, the Eva Le Gallienne and Florida Friebus confection based on the original by Lewis Carroll. That makes it a pair of fairy tales for Spring, with more similarities than you'd think possible. But let's put *Alice* aside for another day. For now, the Shakespeare is enough.

While none of *The Winter's Tale* is close to believable, let's accept that life itself is riddled with stranger-than-fictional contradictions. So when the pregnant Queen Hermione (Trisha Miller) is guilty of nothing more than being the perfect hostess to Leontes' childhood friend Polixenes, King of Bohemia (Brian Ibsen) who is visiting, why would Leontes (Frederick Stuart) be seized by such an enigmatic paroxysm of jealousy?



Trisha Miller as Hermione greets a friend, while Frederick Stuart, as King Leontes, broods in the foreground in *The Winter's Tale* at A Noise Within.

He, King of Sicilia, and Hermione have been happily married for many years. They have a son together, Mamillius (Jayce Evans), and are expecting another child. Why would Leontes suddenly want his best friend killed by his *consigliere* Camillo (Jeremy Rabb) or his pregnant wife imprisoned?

Shakespeare doesn't say. It's a play. Action is the name of that game. Ah, but Camillo, who reluctantly agreed to killing Polixenes, can't go through with it; he spills the beans to his baffled target and the two of them flee together to the safety of neighboring Bohemia.

Their flight only convinces Leontes that his suspicions are correct and, more frustrated than ever, he has Hermione thrown in jail. There she delivers a daughter, Perdita. When her good friend Paulina (Deborah Strang) takes the newborn to Leontes hoping to soften his heart, Leontes declares the child illegitimate and orders Paulina's husband, Antigonus (Alan Blumenfeld), to personally see the infant is left to die on the seashore — of Bohemia, no less.



l-r, Jeremy Rabb & Frederick Stuart in *The Winter's Tale* at A Noise Within.

One could go on, but the plot only grows less believable as improbabilities and deaths pile up, most notably that of the tragic Hermione, who dies of a broken heart. It takes her death, plus a judgment from Apollo's Oracle at Delphi that contradicts Leontes' baseless conclusions, to make him finally face the madness of his accusations.

The second half of the play is no less improbable, but it is all about remorse and redemption. Its surprises are no less dramatic, but a lot more palatable — and they are left for you to discover if you attend.

A standout element of this production is Frederica Nascimento's set consisting of monumental ebony columns topped by cross pieces, that can be moved about the stage to create varied formations and environments. They are impressively sleek and, in their unadorned massive size, vaguely suggestive of the architecture of Ancient Rome or Greece. Ken Booth's lighting transforms their moods accordingly, and Jeff Gardner's and Ellen Mandel's sound design and musical compositions underscore the entire experience.

Geoff Elliott's staging of the first half of the play is so overwrought, however, that it leaves no room for Stuart's Leontes to grow into his state of heightened anger and despair. The scenes are oversaturated with agitation almost from the start. Miller's classy Hermione offers a pleasant display of wifely graciousness in the opening scene, until the tide turns and she's blamed for a crime she didn't commit, left to vainly plead her case in a hall filled with baffled retainers and one intractable husband.

In contrast, the play's sunny second half, once Leontes is aroused to the tragic absurdity of his actions, is all regret, repentance and forgiveness, with friendships renewed in benevolent reunions — and enough magic to reconfirm the story's fabulist origins.



l-r, foreground, Angela Gulner, Frederick Stuart & Alexander de Vasconcelos Matos in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* at A Noise Within.

Perhaps the sweetest thing Elliott's staging provides is a clever little game he plays with one of Shakespeare's most baffling stage directions. At the end of Act Three (*Winter's Tale* is a five-act play halved here by a single intermission), after Antigonus has abandoned the infant Perdita on the beach as instructed, he also is directed to exit "pursued by a bear." It is one of those inexplicable commands you can't forget because it comes from nowhere and adds nothing — unless you find a way to make it mean something, which is what Elliott does. It adds a sly trickle of humor that snakes through the rest of the play by turning that line, and the action it provokes, into an added bit of magic of his own.

The company, as is often the case A Noise Within, is both capable and cohesive. Were it not for the the excessive churning and turmoil of the first half, the second half which occurs, the playwright tells us, some 16 years later, is filled with contrition and contemplative relief.

By then, the players have aged, the mood has mellowed, forgiveness and forbearance open the door to a joyful pair of very large miracles. And there you have it: a modestly tender, sweet *andante gioioso* to usher in a hard-won happy ending.

Top image: The cast of Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale in a happy ending at A Noise Within.

Photos by Craig Schwartz

WHAT: *The Winter's Tale*

WHERE: A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91107.

HOW: Tickets, \$25-\$93, online at www.anoisewithin.org, by phone 626.356.3121 or in person at the box office. Student Rush w/ID, an hour before show time, \$20. Groups (10 or more): \$25-\$50 a ticket, up to 35% off; Student groups from \$18. For more information call 626-356-3121 & ask for Subscriber Services Manager Deborah Strang.

PERFORMANCES:

Thursday, Mar. 12, 7:30 pm

Saturday, Mar. 14, 2 & 8pm

Wednesday, Mar. 18, 7:30pm (Wine Down Wednesday)

Sunday, Mar. 22, 2 & 7pm (evening only, Sunday Rush)

Friday, Mar. 27, 8pm (Post-Show Conversation)

Saturday, Mar. 28, 2 & 8pm

Thursday, Apr. 2, 7:30pm

Sunday, Apr. 5, 2 & 7pm (evening only, Sunday Rush)

Friday, Apr. 10, 8pm (Post-Show Conversation)

Saturday, Apr. 11, 2 & 8pm. Ends Apr. 11.

PARKING: In adjacent Metro Rail parking structure.

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