

REVIEW: 'THE WINTER'S TALE'

06-27-2008 | Fine Arts

By Loren Keller

Corridor Buzz.Com

Shakespeare may well have diagnosed the disorder some 400 years ago.

King Leontes of "The Winter's Tale" is "in rebellion with himself" and seems to be suffering from a madness not unlike what's known today as Seasonal Affective Disorder. "There is a sickness which puts some of us in distemper," says the king's Lord Camillo, "but I cannot name the disease."

In the Riverside Theatre Shakespeare Festival production of the play at City High School's Opstad Auditorium last night, actor Dennis Fox inhabited the role with a twitchy paranoia just this side of physical violence.

With pitch-perfect speech inflected by tones of wounded jealousy and accusatory pettiness, Fox delivered a commanding, edgy performance of the lead role in one of last plays Shakespeare composed.

After a visit by his childhood friend Polixenes, King of Bohemia (played by Tim Budd) Leontes suddenly goes insane, convinced that his pregnant wife Hermione (Leigh Williams) has been having an affair with Polixenes and that the child is illegitimate. Leontes orders Camillo (Bradley Mott) to poison Polixenes, has his wife arrested on charges of adultery and later orders the child banished to the wilderness. By the fifth and final act, 16 years later, Leontes has shed his ill suspicions and has mellowed considerably, as does Fox's performance, which gives way from agitated sputtering and pacing to heavy-limbed regret for "all my own folly."

Fox and the rest of the two dozen-plus cast members directed by Mark Hunter were forced to hastily relocate the play earlier this month after the City Park stage was inundated by floodwaters. But apart from the play being performed indoors, audiences would be hard-pressed to find any outward sign of the upheaval as the actors seemed to be right at home, making effective use of not just the auditorium's stage but also the aisles, ledges and even the space below the front of the stage. The multilevel set transferred well to the confines of the City High stage and the production's keenly-detailed costumes were well-fitting to an actor.

Other standout performances included those of Budd as King Polixenes, who along with the rest of the cast brought the King's English to conversational life, and Riverside Theatre resident artist and production manager Ron Clark, who lent an adroitly comic touch to his role as the shepherd and foster father to Perdita, the forsaken daughter of Leontes.

"The Winter's Tale" is one of Shakespeare's lesser-performed works but contains one of his most famous stage directions: "Exit, pursued by a bear." Obviously played by an actor

but with a very real-looking head, the bear made a brief but convincing appearance before bounding offstage, having been spooked away before getting the chance to consume the infant Perdita.

All was not lost on the outdoor front; a helpful (and comically over-the-top) 20-minute "plain English" version of the play was staged under a large magnolia tree in front of Opstad Auditorium an hour before curtain time. Be sure to arrive early for this performance, especially if you too were an English major (like me) who regrettably dropped out of his Shakespeare course halfway through and have been catching up on the bard's work ever since.

After the nearly three-hour performance attended by well over a hundred people, Clark pleaded for warehouse space to store Riverside Theatre's costumes and sets after flooding has displaced their usual storage spot.

"We love a challenge," he said. "We know we live in a community that will help us overcome them."

Added Jody Hovland, Riverside Theatre's artistic director who played the role of Paulina in the play: "You've been a wonderful crowd but we need twice as many of you here. We may not have the moon but we have two great plays... Next summer we do promise you the moon."

Performances of "The Winter's Tale" will run in rotation with "The Comedy of Errors" through July 13; be sure to catch at least one of them before summer slips away.