

'Winter's Tale' weaves blanket of comedy, tragedy

THEATER REVIEW

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IOWA CITY — Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale" is chock full of tragedy and comedy, of kings and peasants, and of raging and rejoicing. The cast of Riverside Theatre's production, under the direction of Mark Hunter, has the required range to successfully traverse the material.

The second play of the ninth annual Shakespeare Festival ("The Comedy of Errors" opened on June 13) was by turns moving and hilarious on opening night Friday at City High School's Opstad Auditorium, where the festival has been relocated because of flooding at the outdoor stage in Lower City Park.

The plot in brief: Leontes, King of Sicilia (Dennis Fox) entreats his friend Polixenes, King of Bohemia (Tim Budd) to extend his visit. Polixenes politely refuses until Leontes asks his wife Hermione (Leigh Williams) to intercede. When she is successful, Leontes concludes his wife and friend are having an affair and that Hermione's forthcoming baby must be Polixenes' rather than his own.

The disputed baby is abandoned in Bohemia and widespread woe ensues until the action jumps ahead 16 years and the trappings of comedy — in both senses of the word — become central.

Festival favorites Fox and Williams are outstanding as Sicilia's royal couple. Fox does an excellent job varying the dynamics as his Leontes is overcome first by his suspicions and then by his regrets. For her part, Williams is at the heart of the play's most powerful scenes and is devastatingly effective throughout.

On the lighter side, Patrick DuLaney delights the audience as Autolycus, a rogue with a gift for songs and swindles. He often practices his conniving arts on Ron Clark and Adam Verner who, in the key roles of a shepherd and his son, are very funny, too.

For longtime festival attendees, it is impossible to consider Paul Sannerud's lighting and sets without wondering how they compare to what might have been seen in the festival's traditional outdoor home. As a result, the projection of botanical images on a screen to represent Bohemia may, for example, seem more out of place than it otherwise would. (Sicilia gets a much darker treatment, although threads of happiness and sorrow wind through both lands during the play.)

In his director's notes, Hunter explains that he has chosen to emphasize the "storyness" of the play by expanding the role of the "Time" character, played by Martin Andrews, who tells the audience of the 16-year jump forward. Hunter imagines the character as the a stand-in for Shakespeare himself, but without the aid of the notes, it would be difficult to glean this. Andrews, armed with a quill and a book, seems much more like a reporter than the creative force behind the action.

"The Winter's Tale" will be performed in rotation with "A Comedy of Errors" through July 13 at City High School, 1900 Morningside Dr., Iowa City. For details, go to www.riversidetheatre.org.