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Theater review: 'The Winter's Tale' at Theater 150

July 20, 2010 | 5:30 pm

If ever there was a Shakespeare play afflicted with multiple personality disorder, it is surely "The Winter's Tale." Richly layered but maddeningly erratic, this seldom-performed piece abruptly shifts midstream from dark psychological drama to comic romp, abandons its supposedly principal characters and setting, and tosses a 16-year gap into the story for good measure — a grand slam violation of all the classical unities.

Meeting the challenge few theater companies dare attempt, director

Jessica Kubzansky's audacious outdoor staging for Ojai's [Theater 150](#) ingeniously solves many of this play's problems without violating its core themes or plot. "Winter's Tale" purists stand warned, however — tinkering is involved.

Take the temporal gap, which Shakespeare arbitrarily bridged with a Greek chorus-style soliloquy by Time himself, invoking his power to "slide o'er sixteen years." Kubzansky turns this one-scene cameo into a recurring role, inserting Time (the eloquent Matt Foyer) to introduce segments with thematically relevant passages from Shakespeare's sonnets. The march of Time is echoed by the relentless ticking in Randy Tico's musical soundscape and reinforced in Susan Gratch's set, which incorporates the design of Prague's famed medieval astronomical clock.



The play's central puzzle is the sudden transformation of Sicilian King Leontes from adoring husband to jealous monster for no apparent reason — there is no Iago here to stoke his "diseased opinion" about his faithful wife and his lifelong friend. Pivoting on

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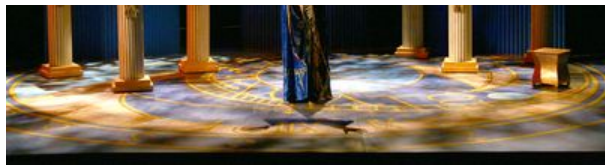
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many an emotional dime, the superb Robert Mammana brings clarity and precision to every step of Leontes' descent through suspicion, rage, desolation, repentance and hard-won

redemption.

Rather than softening the play's jarring transition from tragedy to comedy, Kubzansky punches the contrast. The horrific mauling of Foyer's Antigonus by a towering bear puppet is immediately followed by a brilliant bit of clowning by the shepherd (Andrew Ross Wynn), who adopts and raises Leontes' abandoned daughter Perdita (winsome Mary Kate Wiles). As Bohemian King Polixenes, Tim Cummings fearlessly straddles hilarious and scary elements in a single mercurial character, while Susan Denaker turns the traditionally imperious and omniscient court advisor Paulina into a delightfully ditty wildcard.

Kubzansky's gutsiest innovation lies with Leontes' abused wife, Hermione (versatile Carolyn Ratteray). Instead of languishing offstage between her apparent death in Act 3 and resurrection at the play's end, she goes undercover as another character who figures prominently in the intervening locale shift to Bohemia. This bit of dramaturgical legerdemain required only five altered words and a few judicious cuts to create a unifying narrative through-line for both Hermione and the play. It's also grounded in the Shakespearean tradition of women-in-disguise, and the payoff illustrates the difference between the all-too-common arbitrary conceits imposed on a text and an inspired choice organically derived from a smart reading. But then, as Shakespeare observed, words without thoughts never to heaven go.

– Philip Brandes

"The Winter's Tale," Chaparral High School inner field, 414 E. Ojai Ave., Ojai. 8 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays. Ends Aug. 1. \$17 to \$34. (805) 646-4300 or www.theater150.org. Running time: Three hours.

Photos: Top: Carolyn Ratteray, Tim Cummings, Robert Mammana. Credit: Andrew Gilman. Bottom: Matt Foyer. Credit: Jeremy Pivnick.

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