



June 19, 2008

'Cymbeline' hits its marks

*Bob Heisler
The Journal News*

Shakespeare threw the kitchen sink of theatrical twists and turns into his "Cymbeline" and on opening night at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival, nature did the same thing.

The result: A special evening of thunder and thunderous applause at Boscobel in Garrison. The thought that at any moment, the whole enterprise might be swept across the Hudson Highlands in a cloudburst seemed to heighten the concentration of both players and audience.

Nature is always in the cast at Boscobel. The sturdy tent that gives players a plain plot of ground as their intimate, thrust-style stage opens on the fourth side into an infinity of space for armies and hunters, schemers and exiles.

Set in a Briton not yet over its pagan, painted-face period, "Cymbeline" is a tale of love won, tested, thrown away, recovered and always faithful. Bits and pieces of familiar Shakespearean business stuff the plot - mistaken identity, stolen babies, servants smarter than masters, ghosts and gods, commoners more noble than royals, exiles returned to triumph and a headless body in a topless grave.

All's well that ends well, of course, but that's another play.

The HVSF production, directed by the wonderful Terrence O'Brien, makes all this theatrical cacophony easy to follow. For that relief, the company is owed much thanks. We know who to root for from the beginning, and that makes all the difference.

It can get complicated: Imogen, the daughter of King Cymbeline, is married to Posthumus, who is exiled by the King and his Queen, who wants Imogen to marry Cloten, her son by a former marriage.

With me so far?

OK. While in Roman exile, Posthumus is drawn into a wager by Iachimo, who believes he can woo and win Imogen. Off Iachimo goes to Briton and though rebuffed by the virtuous Imogen, he returns to Posthumus with proof enough that his wife has been unfaithful.

Now Posthumus overreacts, telling his servant Pisanio to kill Imogen and rushing back home to see it done. Instead, Pisanio disguises Imogen as a boy and sends Posthumus proof of her death. Imogen the boy is taken in by a band of mountain men but takes a powder from the Queen that causes her to appear dead.

Meanwhile - skip ahead, if you want - Cloten rushes off in Posthumus' clothes to kill his rival, but he is beheaded by Polydore - a mountain man - and dumped alongside Imogen, who wakes up and believes the body to be that of her Posthumus.

Easy mistake, no?

Did I mention the Roman legions, including Iachimo, have invaded Briton on orders of Augustus Caesar because the silly Britons have stopped paying the tribute Julius arranged back in the day?

The mountain men and Posthumus save the day for the overmatched Brits. The Queen dies in grief over her lost son, among other things. The King gathers all the principals on stage. The confessions begin and love and family returns to the court.

For "Cymbeline" to work, actors must change emotional direction in the time it takes to read a note from an ally-turned-enemy. As Imogen and Posthumus, Katie Hartke and Christopher V. Edwards carry the night from love-struck and unfairly separated to shocked and betrayed to vengeful and resigned to death.

Gabra Zackman's purely evil Queen - imagine Cruella de Vil turning from Dalmatians to larger prey - is captivating. She often holds her expression for a beat at the end of her lines, sweeping her sharp profile around the stage. It is a wicked touch.

Cloten is played to great comic effect by Michael Borrelli as a fey, overdressed, oblivious fool - too limp-wristed to affect much harm with his overdrawn sword and hilarious jetes.

Wesley Mann's Pisanio also anchors the evening as the servant who honors his master's wishes even when not carrying them out. Mann's hangdog appearance is put to good use here and he offers many of the play's best lines.

Noel Velez could have been slightly more unctuous and proudly Roman as the preening Iachimo, but his character is a punk at heart and his guilt finally overcomes him appropriately.

In truth, Cymbeline is more acted upon than acted, but Stephen Paul Johnson balances his kingly tribal responsibilities with his fatherly concerns. He is our master of ceremonies as the plot is unravelled.

The mountain men - in fact, Cymbeline's two stolen sons and the general he drove to exile and theft - live in nature and in nature the masterly Richard Ercole and feral-yet-proud Christian Jacobs and Rolando Martinez use the great beyond of Boscobel to great effect. When they go running off to hunt, they really go running off to hunt.

What other production would have the trio camped in the rain for long minutes of the second act? Or use distant lighting to have them stand out against the gloomy night?

The use of nature as backdrop puts a premium on costumes, lighting and props - and a confident set of minor characters - to focus attention on the actors.

Amanda Bujak's remarkable costumes give us status and command in an instant. Cymbeline is introduced with a cape that frames his face. Turbans and tunics over pants mark the courtiers. The Italians are no more cultured than pirates in their scarves, jewels and headbands. Cloten's metrosexual style matches his flowing coat and patterned vest.

This attention to detail marks "Cymbeline" as worth confronting the furies to see.
