



## Fairy tale blends with dark drama in Shakespeare's 'Cymbeline'

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If you've never seen Shakespeare's "Cymbeline," count yourself among the majority. This complex play by the Bard -- part fairy tale, part romantic drama, part muscular history -- is rarely produced, though a spat of recent stagings seems bent on reversing its near theatrical exile.

The Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival in Garrison, New York is tackling "Cymbeline" for the first time in its 22-year history and under the direction of Terrence O'Brien turns it into a rich and rewarding experience.

True, it takes some time to comprehend all of the different threads of the story, and Shakespeare was writing in his most "romantic" style -- with many speeches difficult to absorb without concentration -- but this is chock-a-block theater with plot and characters to spare.

"Cymbeline" has inspired strong feelings for centuries: Lord Alfred Tennyson loved the play, while George Bernard Shaw detested it. Shaw was so critical of it, he decided to write his own final act for the play -- "straightening out" things for the Bard. (Thanks for your help,

George.- W.S.)

Some of the criticism of the play, and conversely why so many people find it fascinating, is the juxtaposition of so many different theatrical themes. Infidelity, seduction, patriotism, betrayal, forgiveness, redemption, fantasy and fatalism are combined with low comedy, grisly humor and stirring military scenes. The final scene alone has so many revelations your head could do a 360-degree turn just following the arrows pointing to solutions of the play's problems.

In brief, the plot is reasonably familiar Shakespeare. Imogen (Katie Hartke), the daughter of Cymbeline, King of Britain (Stephen Paul Johnson) marries Posthumus (Christopher V. Edwards) against the wishes of her father and her wicked stepmother, the Queen (Gabra Zackman).

The Queen, modeled on the wicked one in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" -- right down to her chain mail headpiece -- would rather Imogen had wed Cloten (Michael

Borrelli), her shallow, simpering son from an earlier marriage. Egged on by his wife, Cymbeline banishes his son-in-law from the kingdom.

In Italy, Posthumus is tricked into a wager with the slimy Iachimo (Noel Velez), who bets he can seduce Imogen.

MEANWHILE, Belarius (Richard Ercole) a banished lord now calling himself Morgan, lives in the

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caves of primitive Wales with his two sons, Polydore (Christopher Jacobs) and Cadwall (Rolando Martinez), who are actually the abducted sons of Cymbeline.

MEANWHILE (ALSO) emissaries of Rome, led by General Caius Lucius (Paul Bates) bring threats of war with Britain unless demanded tribute is paid, tribute which the greedy queen urges her husband to resist.

THAT pretty well sets things up for a series of misunderstandings, unexpected encounters, beheadings, battles and ultimately intercession into the tumbled affairs by the god Jupiter himself.

The performances are full bodied and vibrant with Hartke and Edwards providing the romance and conscience of the play, and Borrelli stealing the show with his hilarious interpretation of Cloten -- think Will Ferrell or Kevin Kline and you're on target.

Wesley Mann -- usually the company's top banana -- turns in, instead, a serious and sympathetic portrayal as Pisanio, servant to Posthumus.

Zachman is so thoroughly evil there would have been hisses if it were not for the respectful nature of the Shakespearean audience.

Festival veteran Johnson is limited by the almost incidental part of Cymbeline -- (the play might well have been titled "Imogen") -- but he gets to wear some really way out bat-wing outfits.

Amanda Bujak's costumes for the Brits, Italians, French and cave dwellers are an eclectic mix that suggest either serious research or a wild imagination -- or both -- and the face paint is an intriguing touch. Either way, the production is visually as complex as the plot.

None of this would matter without a steady navigator at the helm and O'Brien has steered his large cast though the maze with skill and clarity.

Try "Cymbeline" -- you'll be properly entertained, and you can say to the less savant that YOU'VE seen it!

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"Cymbeline" plays in repertory with "Twelfth Night" through August 30 at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival, Boscobel Restoration, Route 9-D, Garrison, New York (just south of Cold Spring). Performances are Tuesdays through Thursdays at 7 p.m., Fridays and Saturday at 8, and Sundays at 6. The grounds open two hours before show time for picnicking with snacks and beverages available.

Tickets range from \$28 to \$44 with discounts for groups, students, senior citizens and children 12 and under. Call the box office at (845) 265-9575 or visit the Web site: [www.hvshakespeare.org](http://www.hvshakespeare.org).

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