

Lifestyle

Play review: 'Cymbeline' at Boscobel in Garrison

By [Cynthia O. Topps](#)

For the Times Herald Record

June 18, 2008 6:00 AM

GARRISON — How would you like to see a new play by Shakespeare? Well, of course that's improbable as the Bard of Avon has been dead for almost 400 years. But watching "Cymbeline" performed by the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival makes the impossible seem possible.

Although rarely done and having never been made into a film, this play does possess one of Shakespeare's greatest women, Imogen, King Cymbeline's daughter. Sir Walter Raleigh called her an exquisite being. Other critics have hailed her as most tender and artless of all Shakespeare's heroines.

The play is set in a time when Augustus was caesar of Rome and Cymbeline king of Britain. Cymbeline had three children: two sons, Guiderius and Arviragus, and a daughter, Imogen. Twenty years before the action of the play, two noblemen swore to the king that another nobleman, Belarius, had conspired with Rome. The king banished Belarius, who took Cymbeline's sons in retribution and to deny the king an heir.

Imogen secretly married Posthumus, a man of low birth who was her childhood friend. On finding this out, Cymbeline banished Posthumus from Britain. The queen, Cymbeline's second wife, attempts to convince her husband to force Imogen to wed her son, Cloten. But, in truth, the queen plots Imogen's death by poison.

In the title role, Stephen Paul Johnson frets and rails while being manipulated by his wife. His demeanor and deportment are perfection. Gabra Jackman as the queen is equal parts regal, cunning and downright bitchy.

In the enviable role of Imogen, Katie Hartke is exceptional. The role demands much from its portrayer, and Hartke is up to the task. Her scene with Cloten, played by Michael Borrelli, is a standout. Borrelli's Cloten is a foppish oaf who poses and rolls his eyes with great abandon. Hartke and Borrelli spar well.

Posthumus, portrayed by Chis Edwards, meets a Roman soldier, Iachimo, during his banishment. While singing Imogen's praises at a gathering, Posthumus enters into a wager with Iachimo. Iachimo must tempt the virtuous princess to commit adultery to win the gold. Iachimo returns with false proof of her adultery, which he acquired by sneaking into Imogen's room while she slept. In despair and anger, Posthumus sends a letter to his servant Pisanio instructing him to murder Imogen.

The scenes with Iachimo, adeptly played by Noel Velez, are first-rate. Velez holds the spotlight when sharing the scene with either Hartke or the accomplished Edwards. Velez's Iachimo is almost charming, a bit smarmy but not a total scoundrel.

Pisanio does not believe that Imogen was false, so he tricks her into following him to see Posthumus. During the journey he tells her of her husband's command but refuses to carry it out. Instead, he instructs her to disguise herself as a boy and he will bring Posthumus proof of her faked death. Imogen does not want to return to court to face her father's plan to wed her to Cloten. In the guise of a boy, she, unbeknownst to her, meets her brothers and they forge a friendship.

All parties meet and everything comes to a head during a battle between Rome and Britain. Cymbeline has refused to pay Rome tribute, based on advice from his deceitful queen.

Notable performances are given by Richard Ercole's stoic Belarius, Jason O'Connell's sarcastic physician Cornelius, Paul Bates' proud General Caius Lucius, and Wesley Mann's steadfast Pisanio. Newcomers Christian Jacobs and Rolando Martinez as the missing princes are wonderfully energetic.

"Cymbeline" is full of interesting characters who, through a sequence of events and incidents, are brought together in circumstances that lead to a satisfying conclusion. Director Terrence O'Brien, his cast and designers have with conscious effort and skill affected a Shakespearean experience that crackles and booms like the lightning and thunder that accompanied Saturday's performance under the tent on the beautiful grounds of Boscobel.

IF YOU GO ...

What: "Cymbeline" by William Shakespeare

Where: Boscobel, Route 9D, Garrison

When: Through Aug. 30; call for ticket prices and performance dates at 265-9575