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ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## A Timeless Stage Backdrop

By [ANITA GATES](#)

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Go to Boscobel for theater, and you never know what you're going to get. Theseus and Hippolyta may enter accompanied by space aliens with ray guns. Hermia may use kung fu moves against Helena. Characters in "As You Like It" may do the Texas two-step.

Everyone talks about the view. The Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's theater tent sits on the grand green lawn of Boscobel Restoration, the 1808 neo-Classical house museum, on a tall bluff on the east bank of the Hudson River.

Theatergoers picnic on the lawn, admiring the river and the mountains beyond. And when the performance begins, much more often than not, the cast makes its entrance, in resplendent or witty costumes, striding across that lawn. The characters, seen against an expanse of seemingly untouched nature, create a powerful illusion of transport back to the play's historical period, just as much as (maybe even more than) big-budget movie scenes.

This season, it has been exactly 20 years since the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival first performed at Boscobel. (The company itself is a year older, but its first production was staged at a private home.)

There is considerable cast continuity. There are actors doing their third, fifth or even tenth seasons with the festival. You may see familiar faces, even if this is your first season in the audience.

This year, for instance, Wesley Mann plays Malvolio, the conceited yellow-stockinged fool in "Twelfth Night," and Pisanio, a loyal, milder-mannered servant, in "Cymbeline." Paul Bates is the slow-witted, frequently intoxicated Sir Andrew Aguecheek in the first play and the imposing, deadly serious Roman general Caius Lucius in the second. Both men are comic standouts in "Twelfth Night."

Slapstick is a festival trademark. Drunks are raucously drunk. Gender confusion is played for laughs (e.g., a woman dressed as a man horrified by another woman's advances).

Music is a hallmark too, sometimes serving the humor. At other times it slows down Shakespeare's language just enough to clarify the dialogue's meaning in a way that only [Kenneth Branagh](#), among living human beings, appears to be able to do with the spoken word. And when a comedy is on the bill, the festival's stage radiates a collective good will.

## 'Twelfth Night'

"Twelfth Night" has always had a lot going for it. Written around 1600, when Shakespeare was in his mid-40s, it has tried-and-true plot lines (cross-dressing, mistaken identity, unrequited love and separated twins), memorable characters and notable quotes.

Those aspects are well played in the festival's production, but I was also entranced by Charlotte Palmer-Lane's handsome costumes. They are emotionally color-coordinated, in a way that reflects and reiterates plot development. In the final scene, and I say this with unqualified admiration, the actors look like models in a [Ralph Lauren](#) ad for British colonialism.

Which, of course, has nothing to do with the setting, Illyria.

That's where our heroine, Viola (Katie Hartke), washes up after a shipwreck. She promptly puts on men's clothing, changes her name to Cesario and gets a job with the local ruler, Orsino (Michael Borrelli), with whom she immediately falls in love.

But Orsino loves Olivia (the striking Gabra Zackman) and sends Cesario to woo her on his behalf. Sadly, Olivia likes Cesario instead. So nobody is happy.

Meanwhile, Malvolio (Mr. Mann), Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Mr. Bates) and Sir Toby Belch (Richard Ercole) are up to all kinds of antics, including the occasional blatant double-entendre.

At one point, Viola/Cesario joins in the physical comedy. He/she and Sir Andrew participate in a very tentative duel. When the points of their swords finally touch, lightly, they both run away screaming.

As Feste the white-faced clown, Maia Guest is an anchoring presence, both comic and wise. Asked whether Olivia keeps a jester, Feste says no: "She will keep no fool till she be married."

"If music be the food of love, play on" is more than just the play's most famous line. It also captures the tone of this production, which begins with a band including guitarists, drummers and an accordion player. These Shakespeareans rock.

## 'Cymbeline'

The audience last Sunday just kept laughing throughout "Cymbeline," even when the heroine accidentally used a bloody headless corpse as a pillow.

Aha, you may think, that's what happens when a company makes its name with comedy, then tries to turn serious. But this dissonance is mostly Shakespeare's doing. No one has ever established definitively whether "Cymbeline" is a comedy, a tragedy, a romance or a combination of the three. Straddling genres is tricky, and this production doesn't always succeed.

"Cymbeline" is certainly a combination in other ways, a *mélange* of the author's old plots. There's a young heroine's potion-induced deathlike sleep, like the one in "Romeo and Juliet." And a villain bringing supposed proof of a good woman's adultery, like the setup in "Othello." A little mistaken identity and a little cross-

dressings, borrowed from earlier comedies. A few deaths, as in earlier tragedies. And what has to be one of the longest, most complicated confession-and-reunion scenes ever put on a stage.

Cymbeline (Stephen Paul Johnson) is the King of Britain, but he doesn't make much of an impression. In this production, the real standout is Mr. Borrelli as Cloten, the king's spoiled, dimwitted, loutish stepson. An extremely low-key Orsino in "Twelfth Night," he plays Cloten as the feyest guy in town, a choice that works quite well.

The central character is Imogen (Ms. Hartke), the king's daughter, whose good husband, Posthumus (Christopher V. Edwards), has been banished to Italy. Trying to stay busy in exile, Posthumus meets some flashy locals and makes a bet with Iachimo (Noel Vélez), who claims he can travel to Britain, seduce Imogen and bring back proof of his deed. Instead, Iachimo sneaks into her bedroom, takes notes about the furnishings and Imogen's body and steals her bracelet while she sleeps.

There are also three cavemen types, some Ancient Romans and various attendants, friends and ghosts. Did I mention that Britain and Rome are at war? In fact, Imogen, dressed as a man, ends up following Caius (Mr. Bates) into battle.

The evil queen (Ms. Zackman again) seems like a runaway from a Disney cartoon, but that characterization turns out to be just right.

*"Twelfth Night" and "Cymbeline," by William Shakespeare, are playing in repertory at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival at Boscobel, Route 9D, Garrison, through Aug. 31. Information: (845) 265-9575 or [www.hvshakespeare.org](http://www.hvshakespeare.org).*

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