

This review appeared in both print and online in the Philadelphia Inquirer on August 1, 2015

'Winter's Tale' in Clark Park: Good performances tame the unruly text

By Jim Rutter, For The Inquirer

At one point in Shakespeare's play *The Winter's Tale*, the royal adviser Camillo remarks that " 'Tis safer to avoid what's grown than question how 'tis born." The line refers directly to the king's raging, irrational jealousy - but it also applies on many levels to Shakespeare in Clark Park's production of *The Winter's Tale*.

The play itself starts straightforwardly enough: King Leontes (Kevin Bergen) suspects his pregnant wife Hermione (Bi Jean Ngo) of cheating on him with his best friend, King Polixenes (J. Paul Nicholas). Well, not so much *suspects* as immediately lashes out in a terrible rage that imprisons Hermione, banishes Polixenes and the newborn daughter, and renders Leontes a tyrant in his own kingdom.

This production treats this plot with the care usually accorded Shakespeare's best political thrillers, pitting Bergen's near-sympathetic portrayal of fury against the impassioned yet logical pleading of trusted advisers Paulina (the excellent Nicole Godino) and Camillo (Wendy Staton).

Shakespeare's second half flashes forward 16 years. Despite her low station, the now-grown Perdita (Gracie Martin) indulges in a secret romance with Polixenes' adult son, Prince Florizel (Brandon Pierce). Comedy replaces intrigue, new love erases past animosity, and a thieving con artist, Autolycus (Ngo), provides commentary while preying on the countryside.

As a text, it's a wild enough ride; in some performances, it can get out of hand. In this production, director Kittson O'Neill does her best to unify Shakespeare's halves with an overarching musical approach that often electrifies, sometimes annoys, and entertains as much as it distracts. Robert Kaplowitz's synth-driven original music falls into the entertainment category, and, - as much as I'm likely to be pilloried for saying this - the children's chorus winds up among the distractions.

Ngo best masters the dichotomy of the script and characters, delivering her lines as Hermione with poetic eloquence, igniting the stage by screaming like a rock star when she first appears as Autolycus.

Sam Sherburne fills Act Two with comedy as the Shepherd's son, cowering before threats or screeching out insults (with a big assist from Jillian Keys' costume).

Such performances - and the happy fact that the company's 10th anniversary production now teems with professional talent and promising newcomers (particularly Martin) - ensured that, even when the action was craziest, it was still entertaining.