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THEATER REVIEW | 'THE WINTER'S TALE'

Alas, Poor Leontes (That Good King Has Not Been Himself of Late)

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#)
Published: February 23, 2009

Jealousy poisons the light that hangs over the kingdom of Sicilia in the wondrous first acts of "The Winter's Tale," directed by [Sam Mendes](#) at the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#). The country's monarch, Leontes, walks through his palace wrapped in a miasmic, jaundice-colored glow that isolates him from those he loves even as it infects them. As played with shivery brilliance by [Simon Russell Beale](#), Leontes is a cruel and dangerous man — fatally irrational and unjustified in his suspicions that his wife has betrayed him — and yet you keep thinking that it's not his fault, any more than if he had caught the plague.

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Rebecca Hall and Josh Hamilton in the Bridge Company's production of "A Winter's Tale," directed by Sam Mendes. [More Photos »](#)

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Interpreters of [Shakespeare](#) have been trying for centuries to untie the knots in the destructive behavior of this benevolent king turned tyrant. Is it possible that Leontes's queen has given him more cause to distrust her than the text allows? Could it be that his best friend, whom he accuses of cuckolding him, is the one he really loves?

But when you watch Mr. Russell Beale in this production from the Anglo-American Bridge Company, you don't pause to parse motives and complexes. The feelings he generates are too intense, too authentic and — this is the scary part — too familiar for cool on-the-spot analysis.

Even as Leontes rants, condemning his wife and newborn daughter to death, we can see that the king is not himself. Within the nasty bluster exists a small, frightened, good soul who, in quick and brutal moments of illumination, is as horrified by what he's doing as we are. Watching this man, we feel revulsion and maybe anger, but also compassion. The simple words of Othello, another Shakespeare titan undone by sexual jealousy, come to mind: "But yet the pity of it."

I can't think of another actor of Mr. Russell Beale's generation who could bring such transparency to the darkness of Leontes while still honoring the mystery that is so essential to "The

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'The Winter's Tale'

Winter's Tale." Shakespeare's great, troubling late play of loss and redemption — one of those genre-defying works classified as romances — offers us dazzlingly individual characters. Then it sets them loose in a universe where their will is not their own and fate can slip a man a mickey that turns him inside out.

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The first 90 minutes of this "Winter's Tale" — in repertory at the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music with Mr. Mendes's imbalanced but enjoyable version of Chekhov's "Cherry Orchard," which opened last month — have a pure emotional strength that leave you open mouthed and teary eyed. As a filmmaker Mr. Mendes has specialized in bare-knuckled portraits of domestic disharmony ("American Beauty," the current "Revolutionary Road"), and he brings to "The Winter's Tale" an intimate understanding of unhappy households, where the taint of bile stains even the nursery.

At the same time, though, the mise-en-scène conjures up a world of ticking clocks, tolling bells and a pregnant, omnipresent darkness, suggesting that no matter what a character's immediate crises or joys, time will transform everything — for good or for ill. The feelings embodied by Mr. Russell Beale's Leontes and those around him — particularly the splendid Rebecca Hall as Hermione, his ill-used queen, and Sinead Cusack as the fierce Paulina, Hermione's lioness of a friend — scorch with their pain. Yet the show tingles with a subliminal awareness that life goes on and mends itself, even after earthquakes.

The process of mending in this case assumes some highly fanciful forms: an oracle from the temple of Apollo (the occasion for a charming coup de théâtre), a man devoured by a bear, a changeling princess who grows up believing she's a shepherd's daughter, and an inanimate work of art that comes to life. But in the play's opening scenes, and its final one, Mr. Mendes and design team — which includes Anthony Ward (sets) and Paul Pyant, whose lighting becomes a character in itself — use the extraordinary to highlight the wonderful strangeness and harmony of the patterns of life over time.

What happens in between those Himalayan high points isn't so much a disaster as a pedestrian plateau. The scenes in Sicilia — where Leontes turns on his childhood companion, Polixenes (an agreeably natural Josh Hamilton), the king of Bohemia, and imprisons the pregnant Hermione for treason — evoke a nocturnal, candle-lighted, end-of-empire existence, with courtiers in somber Edwardian costumes. The play's second half is largely set 16 years later in Bohemia, which has been envisioned as a sunny frontier land, in the style of the movie musical "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers."

I assume that the contrast between these worlds is meant to make witty contrasting use of the Bridge Project's bi-national cast of British and American performers. But the hee-haw hoedown sensibility registers as a knee-jerk artistic choice, and Mr. Mendes doesn't seem to feel at home here. I've seen Wild, Wild West interpretations of Shakespeare comedies too many times, and they're usually strained in their rustic jollity and bawdiness.

Mr. Mendes's version features sexually sophomoric dances with balloons and gosh-gee yokels overdoing stupidity. It is here we find Leontes's exiled daughter (believed to be dead), the lovely Perdita (Morven Christie), who has been brought up by a kindly shepherd (an excellent Richard Easton) and his dopey son (Tobias Segal). Like finding like, Perdita has fallen in love with the handsome Prince Florizel (Michael Braun), son of Polixenes.

And it is here we find [Ethan Hawke](#) in the role of the rogue-and-minstrel pickpocket Autolycus, portrayed as a jacked-up, guitar strumming [Bob Dylan](#) type. Mr. Hawke has the courage of his

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audacity, and he can be funny in a strident way. But the scenes in Bohemia are a setup for the play's great concluding reconciliation scene.

It's impossible to think of these knee-slapping Bohemians being integrated into Leontes's court, not because they're socially inferior but because they're so silly and superficial. Even Perdita and Florizel come across as the straight romantic relief in a sitcom. Not a fathom of the emotional depths sounded in the play's first half is sounded here, and there has some to be point of connection.

Nonetheless, that final act in Sicilia is absolutely gorgeous. And the ways in which Mr. Beale, Ms. Cusack and Ms. Hall look upon their foreign visitors, finding in them what they had thought was irretrievably lost, is sure to open the sluice gates for anyone with a heart. Mr. Russell Beale's face — which had been so disturbingly contorted with anger and contempt before — now blazes with wonder, bewilderment and a profound, accepting gratitude that sometimes, just sometimes, time brings forgiveness.

THE WINTER'S TALE

By [William Shakespeare](#); directed by [Sam Mendes](#); sets by Anthony Ward; costumes by Catherine Zuber; lighting by Paul Pyant; hair and wig design by [Tom Watson](#); sound by Paul Arditti; music by [Mark Bennett](#); music direction by Dan Lipton; choreography by Josh Prince; production stage manager, Jane Pole. Part of the Bridge Project, produced by the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#), the Old Vic and Neal Street Productions. At the Harvey Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene; (718) 636-4100. Through March 8. Running time: 2 hours 40 minutes.

WITH: [Simon Russell Beale](#) (Leontes), Rebecca Hall (Hermione), Morven Christie (Mamillius/Perdita), Paul Jesson (Camillo), Dakin Matthews (Antigonus), Sinead Cusack (Paulina), Josh Hamilton (Polixenes), Michael Braun (Florizel), Richard Easton (Old Shepherd/Time), Tobias Segal (Young Shepherd) and [Ethan Hawke](#) (Autolycus).


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Reviewer: nicholas088

Sam Mendes comes into his own with this excellent and illuminating production of The Winter's Tale. He clearly is at ease with Shakespeare, understanding every nuance, which makes the evening a sheer delight. There are terrific performances from that wonderful British actor Simon Russell Beale and the obviously rising star of Rebecca Hall, but for me, once again, it was the extraordinary and luminous Sinead Cusack who made this production forever memorable. She is one of those unique actors who knows great subtlety and has amazing range. We are privileged to see her on an American stage. If there is one reason to travel to BAM, it is to see her.

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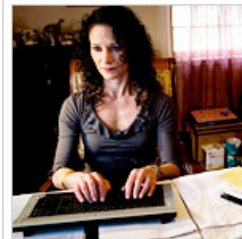


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