Ensemble’s Winter’s Tale a lively show

Shakespeare’s Winter’s Tale is one of Shakespeare’s last plays, and it demonstrates not only his wonderful skill for creating beautiful language but also his theatrical genius. For, above all, Shakespeare is a dramatic craftsman without equal. While he has hardly conceived a single original play, he can make even the most hackneyed plot devices come alive as never before, and he peoples his plays with some of the most memorable characters in all literature.

The Shakespeare Ensemble’s production of The Winter’s Tale is true to the play’s energetic spirit and joyful playfulness. Shakespeare production often suffer from too much reverence for the works or from too little acknowledgment of the theatrical aspect of them, but the Ensemble’s conception has neither of these problems. While the play abounds in beautiful dialogue and soliloquies, the Ensemble approaches the language as it should be approached—not separate from the content of the play, appreciated only for the beauty of the words, but as part of the work as a whole, as words that mean something beyond simply being pleasant occupations of the ear.

At the same time, the enjoyment of the players comes across quite well, and it is in a production like this that we get to see what real theatre is like. It is not people reading poetry, groping through a few hours of dialogue to come to the end—theatre is much more our enjoyment of Shakespeare’s last plays, and it is his special touch that makes Critic Kane such a fun film is the playfulness we perceive in Orson Wells’ characterization of Kane. Wells is enjoying it immensely, and we can’t help but be swept up in energetic high spirits. In the same way, the Ensemble’s production was marked by as much simple enjoyment of Shakespeare’s play for its artistry, and the effect is to make the play a lively one as well as a lovely one.

Especially evident in this respect are the playing of the Shepherd and his son the Clown by Stuart Rumney (80) and Z Smith (81), who nearly burst with enthusiasm in their scenes as sweet bumbling country-folk who yet taken more frequently than they could possibly know. Without suspending our appreciation of the action, we can feel the underlying energy and playfulness of the actors, and this kind of communicative pleasure even at intense moments is what live theatre is all about. Other performances demonstrating similar high spirits are given by Jonathan Ivester (78) as King Leontes (Ivester seems to delight in playing the sharp, sour jealousy of the King, and we can feel the sense of power he invests his performance with), Anne Frates (80W) as Paulina (this is the kind of character who bursts in on the King when he is in his foulest mood and starts talking on and on with her demands—Miss Frates seems at her best in parts along this line, as her lively bantering in last season’s Much Ado About Nothing attests, and “her best” is very good), Stephen McNamara (80) as Camillo, Joel Luna (81W) as Antigonus, and of course, Ignazio Belafonte (81) as Autolycus, the rogue who swindles everybody (Bellaire, like the Shepherd and Clown, revels in the part with unrelieved enthusiasm, and is generally quite good, though the performance seems a little uneven at times). Even the small parts are played with a gusto surprising for a college production, and, even the plays might be said about the energy levels of each of the players, it cannot be said that any poor performances are given, a fact no doubt due to the length and

Rebecca Henderson as Perdita, and Jim Magrrett as Florizel. (Photo by John Lepingswell, courtesy of Technique) intensity of the Ensemble’s production schedule.

As for the action itself, not much need be said. The first half of the play is about Leontes’ passionate jealousy against his wife and the “tragedy” that leads to. The second half tells about Leontes’ lost daughter being found and falling in love with a prince. It sounds rather trite, and so it is, but it is Shakespeare’s genius that he can write with the most hackneyed plot elements and yet make them seem fresh and alive. Shakespeare was writing for the theatre, adapting freely from romances of the time, and he succeeds. The Shakespeare Ensemble seeks to be true to this spirit, and their production is successful as well.

- Kevin Cunningham

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