The Winter's Tale
By William Shakespeare
MIT Shakespeare Ensemble
Kresge Little Theatre, Oct. 20-22 & 27-29 at 8 pm.

By MARK ROBERTS

O n the back of the program for this production, the Shakespeare Ensemble state that their aim is "to bridge the gap between academic and theatrical approaches to Shakespeare's art." Given this, The Winter's Tale seems a perfectly appropriate choice of play, underperformed, and with a reputation for being "difficult" which tends to consign it to the obscurity of literature courses. And Alan Boyd's intelligent production certainly succeeded in giving life to the story, while drawing out some of the thematic threads that run through the play.

As in so many of his plays, Shakespeare is concerned in The Winter's Tale with the importance of the natural order of things, and the disruption that can result from a person's failure to fill or attempt to occupy their proper role. The more important the person, the greater their responsibility to their proper role. The more important the place in a play, the greater its active source of life at the start of the play rather than too passive. In later scenes, in particular during her trial, she delivered some powerfully emotional speeches with considerable power.

The peace of the opening scene is soon marred, however. Leontes, the King of Sicilia, Hermione's husband, becomes poignantly suspicious of the relationship between Hermione and his brother, Polixenes, King of Bohemia and a guest in their court. The King was played by Sasha Zubatov '88, who brought out well the tentative self-insubordination underlying his refusal to see beyond his own imaginings. Zubatov brought almost a touch of caricature to his part that suited this noisy man. He almost seemed most content when, towards the end of the play, he is shown a statue of his wife, in which none of the complicating responses of a real, living person need trouble him. It was fitting that when the "raven" came to life, Leontes appeared almost nonplussed, and the play ended with disquieting rapidity after this.

By contrast with Leontes' concern with his own distress, Paulina, Hermione's one-time companion, is relentless in her devotion to the memory of her mistress, and unforgiving in her bitter reproach of the king for his misdeeds. Linda Susan Ulrich '91 was well cast and was able to bring the right hectoring tone to the lines. Cheryl Casquejo '91 was also noteworthy in a small part as Mamillius, the son of Leontes and Hermione, an important symbol of the marriage in the early scenes.

Children in Shakespeare's plays are by no means easy parts, and she both spoke well, avoiding wininess, and moved convincingly like a boy.

The middle section of the play takes place in Bohemia, and centers around the bosculic simplicity of peasant life and the love that blossoms in its midst between Florizel, the Prince (Greg Swieringa '91), and Perdita (Wendy Cothran '89), the daughter of Leontes and Hermione who was abandoned at birth and discovered and raised by the shepherd with whom she now lives. John Wells O as the shepherd provided a jovial foil to the other comical characters, his son (Harry Tylitzki '91), and the roguish conman Autolycus (Joseph Vanderway '89), setting the tone for the lighter scenes of country life.

Also effective in setting mood, here and throughout the play was Randy Hertz's skillful lighting, making good use of the cyclorama backdrop and a limited palette of colors. It made the most of the simple set with its two suspended taut ropes, whose shapes echoed the stone circle on the stage. Unfortunately the costumes were less successful, an uninspired array of muddy coarse tabards and dresses that suggested a rather heavy approach to the play not really suited to the small scale of the theatre. This was perhaps the most severe criticism of the direction as well, that at times it had the feel of a big production done in a small place, rather than one designed to fit the proportions of its venue.

It's always hard being the good guys, and some of Shakespeare's young heroes and heroines are really very hard to stomach, so Swirings and Coltravas had a difficult task. Coltravas spoke her lines sensibly, and it was pleasing to see the way her vivacity animated the harvest festival just as her mother's had the court in the first scene, with the other characters revolving around her in the same way. Swirings brought less variation to her lines, but conveyed something of the gawkiness of the adolescent prince, who must count to learn the proper way to bear himself as a future ruler.

The Ensemble's production plays until the 29th. They deserve to be seen by more than the few who came to the opening night, for this is a stimulating production of a moving play. And of course, it's your chance to see on stage the theatre's most famous stage direction: "Exit, pursued by a bear," a creature of ferocious aspect who made a brief but splendid appearance to much satisfaction on the audience's part.