

Tom Wilson in  
*A Winter's Tale*



## Fast and Loose, A Play for All Seasons

Leebrick gives modern life to *A Winter's Tale*

**L**ine for line and play upon play, no artist awes and intimidates like Shakespeare — such supple poetry, such wry and pungent humor, such humanity, powers of empathy and understanding, all that deep, soulful psychology and gritty politicking, the cosmic wisdom. Timeless stuff. I suspect the man may have been God.

And for that reason, I've never attended a Shakespeare play without first, at the very least, reading the *Cliff's Notes* to get an idea of what to expect. I like to warm up before a Shakespeare play, lest I sprain my cerebral cortex trying to keep pace.

Alas, I failed to do this for *A Winter's Tale*, with which I am completely, and embarrassingly, unfamiliar. Oops. As I slouched in my seat anticipating the dimming of the lights, my best guess was that I was in for some sort of comedy, maybe with a spruce of sprites and a wily warlock or two. Intimations of hoarfrost, fair maidens, Elizabethan banjo, a double marriage, country matters. I'm a poor player. What I'm trying to say is: I was up yon shit creek, verily lacking a paddle.

But serendipity is a funny thing; you can't plan it, and you sure as hell don't see it coming. Not five minutes into Lord Leebrick's wonderful new production of *A Winter's Tale* — and having nary a clue what to expect — I was completely swept up in the here-and-now of the story. My own ignorance of the play brought it to

stunning life, turned it from a rarefied fossil demanding my respect into a living, breathing piece of great theater. The language sang. The suspense was intense. The humor was visceral. Rather than viewing Shakespeare from behind museum glass and nodding with acquired intellectual approval (AIA), I was defenseless — because unprepared and unprejudiced — against the immediacy of Shakespeare's genius. The play beat with red blood in its veins, raw, human, alive, whatever the opposite of academic is. Modern. Now.

Considered one of the Bard's later works (though published in the *First Folio*), *A Winter's Tale* is an odd beast: It begins ominously, moving toward tragedy, then switches gears with all the genre-bending irreverence of a Korean horror film. Many critics call it one of Shakespeare's "problem plays," because it opens with a disturbingly thorough examination of jealousy's evolution, from the almost accidental moment the insidious seed is planted in the brain to the full, destructive blossoming of green-eyed insanity. As the audience watches the venomous hold jealousy takes on King Leontes (William Campbell) — destroying his friendship with King Polixenes (Timothy McIntosh) and laying waste to his wife Hermione (M. Francine), son Mamillius (Dimitri Bong) and newborn daughter (Perdita, played in the second act by Rose Proctor) — the

atmosphere of doom becomes palpable. The tension is almost too much. Director John Schmor, abetted by an exquisitely minimalist set by designer Jonathon Taylor and the tick-tock sound design of Matthew Romein, does an expert job in stripping Shakespeare's language to the bone, giving it the room and slithery pace it needs to unwind effectively on stage.

And then, whammo: The second act opens 16 years later in Bohemia, where the orphaned Perdita, unaware of her royal heritage and raised by an Old Shepherd (David Stuart Bull) and his son, Clown (Tom Wilson), has fallen in love with Polixenes' son, Florizel (Andrew Poletto, a dead ringer for Cillian Murphy). Here the play drastically changes tones, becoming a rollicking romantic comedy.

As with *The Tempest*, thought by most to be Shakespeare's final play, *A Winter's Tale* plays fast and loose with the rules — of narrative, of genre, of faith and disbelief, of Shakespeare's own dramatic paradigms. A kind of Anglicized magical realism reigns. There is a feeling of controlled chaos, of Shakespeare tipping his hand and both revealing and reveling in his artistry. The director tinkers brilliantly with this Elizabethan deconstruction; Schmor breaks down the third wall, drawing the audience directly into the story, and he sprinkles the action with deftly modern touches (at one point, Dan Pegoda, playing the ne'er-do-well pickpocket Autolycus, does an uproarious Bob Dylan impersonation).

I've always preferred the constricted, constricting dread of plays like *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* to the wonky, kitchen-sink atmosphere and *deus ex machina* magic of *The Tempest*, which feels at once cheap and self-regarding. In *A Winter's Tale*, however, Shakespeare's dramatic sleight of hand is more naturally employed; the play is no less loosely stitched than *The Tempest*, but its humanist gaze and playfulness are unforced and therefore engaging. Hand it to Lord Leebrick's crackerjack production, which teases out the play's subtleties and humor with limber charm and a knowing wink. Schmor's directorial touch is spot-on, the cast is fantastic and, despite its two and a half hours, the production moves at a gleeful clip — even in its temporary gloom. All in all, *A Winter's Tale* feels just right for right now, like a spring thaw before summer's breeze. **EW**

## Big. Sexy.

With those confident, competitive, glamorous women strutting the catwalk in evening gowns, the drama of a beauty pageant is etched deep in the American psyche. *Pretty Faces* works the time-honored theme with one tweak: These women are big.

Examining self-worth and self-loathing in five rubenesque women, Robert W. Campbell's script is half creative genius, half cliché. A Eugene native now residing in New York, Campbell worked with the masterminds of Actors Cabaret, originally writing the play for women he preformed with in Eugene. H.H. Prince Mario-Max zu Schaumburg-Lippe teams up with Director Joe Zingo for the show's revival. The German prince is in town to play the male lead before he takes it home for a staging in Germany.

This production feels like a warm up. The female leads are gorgeously ample in size and voice, but could have used an extra two weeks of rehearsal. The show is spotty, and overall there is an air of hesitation. Augmenting the ladies are Mark VanBeever (adorable Cater) and Schaumburg-Lippe, appropriately cast as comely might-be rogue.

Despite its rough edges, there are a few compelling reasons to see this show. First off, Michelle Sellers' (Monique) impassioned voice and strong connection with her audience are stunning. Even if she is a little slim for the role, she sings "Woman that I Am" with heart-moving conviction.


Then there's Prince Mario-Max. He's royal, cute and charmingly goofy. For those young women still nursing heartache over the recent nuptials of Prince William, here's a second chance. Go get 'em.

Finally, it deals with an important issue: Does a woman's weight affect how attractive she is? *Pretty Faces* is written by a man and directed by a man. The message from these men is loud and clear: *You may be fat, but you're totally hot!* Still, it's a beauty contest, a competition among women obsessed with their looks. Lip service is given to the camaraderie of the women, but songs like "I Need It" belie this message. A plus-sized Barbie doll would be a step forward, but it's still a Barbie doll.

A long time leader in the BBW (Big Beautiful Women) community, actor Chelyce Chambers (Deloris Jackson) says she sees the show as an important commentary. "Beauty is something you find in yourself," Chambers says. "For people to see us as beautiful, we must first see it ourselves," adding that it's important "keep putting things like (*Pretty Faces*) out there" because an ample figure should be seen as simply one among many ways to be sexy.

*Pretty Faces* plays at Actors' Cabaret of Eugene through May 15. — Anna Grace

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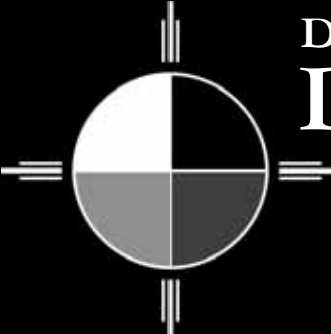
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