

Hazy Shades of "Winter's": "The Winter's Tale," at Lincoln Park through July 29

Written by Mike Schulz

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Saturday's Genesis Guild presentation of *The Winter's Tale* never quite found its tone, but it's hard to be too bothered by that, because I'm not convinced that Shakespeare's play ever finds *its* tone, either. The bard's work is an unusual, somewhat off-putting blend of high and low comedy, aching tragedy, and pastoral romance, and I can only assume that pulling it off in a way that makes *sense* requires an extraordinary amount of finesse. Director Patti Flaherty's production didn't display this sort of acumen, yet to its credit, the show was never less than pleasant. Whether *The Winter's Tale* is *meant* to be pleasant is another matter entirely.

Clearly, the director appeared happy to concede the play's peculiar, make-believe quality from

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the start. During his pre-show announcements, the Guild's executive director, Doug Tschopp, insisted that *The Winter's Tale's* first half was something of a "psychological drama." That description, though, didn't jibe with Flaherty's introduction to the tale, which found a young page (Kylie Jansen) crossing the stage with a banner reading "Once upon a time ... ," trailed by an adorable little girl (Hannah King) who resembled a butterfly.

This lighthearted, fairy-tale opener was quickly followed by a blithely flirtatious exchange between Hermione (Grace Pheiffer, reminiscent of a young Heather Graham) and Polixenes (Gary Atkins), while Hermione's husband, King Leonetes (Bryan Woods), worked himself into a fit of plot-goosing jealousy. But even here, the production appeared to be eschewing a dark side; Pheiffer's and Atkins' badinage felt too insubstantial to be taken as a threat, and Woods seemed less anguished than irrationally pissy.

Subsequent scenes, however, found Woods embracing his character's vehemence full-force, and similarly emotional readings were delivered by Susan Perrin-Sallak, whose steely, bitterly sarcastic turn as Lady Paulina could easily have confused audiences into thinking that *she* was ruler of the kingdom.

The tonal vacillations didn't stop there, as Flaherty and her actors also found room for some rather unanticipated baggy-pants comedy. (Also, perhaps, some *unintentional* comedy: When Paulina brought in Hermione's newborn daughter, we obviously weren't meant to believe that the prop doll was an actual infant, but I still didn't expect it to be heedlessly plopped down - *twice*

- as if the child were a bag of groceries.) The scene of a messenger bolting after delivering bad news was awfully broad, and when audience favorite Earl Strupp made his cameo, the silliness reached a zenith; not one to let a paucity of dialogue stop him, a hunched-over Strupp performed with a limp, a slight speech impediment,

and

an eye-patch. (For a brief moment, the play turned into

Rowan Atkinson's Winter's Tale

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