Written by Mike Schulz
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Roughly 10 minutes before the Prenzie Players' presentation of *The Winter's Tale* gets underway, there's a brief, improvisational scene between the Bohemian king Polixenes (David Furness) and Prince Mamillius (Stephanie Moeller), the young son of the king and queen of Sicily.

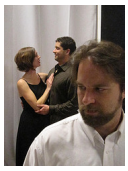
Speaking with great warmth, Polixenes tells of his previous travels with the boy's father, which Mamillius responds to with wide-eyed alertness and curiosity. ("Did my dad shoot this bear?" he asks, referring to the bearskin bedspread behind him.) After a couple of minutes, Polixenes makes his exit, and the child is left alone. But not *quite* alone. Removing a handful of animal figurines from under his bed, Mamillius sits and quietly acts out a life-and-death struggle between a lion, a tiger, and a gazelle, just as, in the play's first act, he'll act out (
less
quietly) a life-and-death sword fight, complete with hilariously protracted death scene.

Though relatively unimportant in the scheme of things, these images of Mamillius' play-acting lovingly capture the spirit of a child who, left to his own devices and imagination, will cheerfully, and with seemingly effortless ease, make his own magic. And when they're working at peak creativity -- as they are throughout this altogether stunning *Winter's Tale* -- the Prenzie Players seem to me to be just like that child. When attending any show, you should always consider yourself fortunate if it provides even one indelible performance or exchange or example of stagecraft ingenuity. But graced with a splendid ensemble and production team, director J.C. Luxton's take on Shakespeare's somewhat notorious "problem play" offers so many that it leaves you nearly dizzy with happiness. It's a magical piece of theatre.

Even given my enormous fondness for the Prenzies, I'll admit this was something of a surprise, because *The Winter's Tale* has never been one of my favorites in the Bard's canon; truth be told, before Saturday's performance, it would barely crack the top 20. The play is, of course, filled with emotionally wrenching, blissfully romantic, and terrifically funny moments. But that's also been a major factor in my resistance toward it; this particular work has always seemed to me an uneasy blend of styles, featuring abrupt changes in character and tenor that I've never quite bought or understood. (And I've never really been crazy, as I'm
still
not, about so many of the climax's most dramatic resolutions taking place off-stage.) Yet I completely bought -- and, more importantly, understood -- the tonal vacillations in

this
Winter's Tale
, which stemmed from Luxton and his cast not playing individual scenes of tragedy, romance, and comedy, but by accepting and revealing how all three genres, here, are in constant, continuous play.

Nowhere is this more pronounced than in Adam Lewis' impassioned, intensely well-calibrated performance as the Sicilian king, Leontes. Expounding on the soul-crushing jealousy that sets Shakespeare's plot in motion, the actor shakes with fury and resentment, and his words come tumbling out in breathless, frenzied bursts; Leontes' devastating agony, it appears, is being released even faster than the king can process it. (Anyone concerned about this production's two-and-a-half hour running length should at least know that, thanks to Lewis' readings, the show is probably a good 15 minutes shorter than any other *Winter's Tale* you'll likely encounter.)



Yet Lewis doesn't ever let you forget the romanticism at the heart of Leontes' anguish; watching him react to the playful, though harmless, flirtations of his queen, Hermione (Beth Woolley), you instantly recognize that, like Othello's, Leontes' madness is the product of deep, deep love. And, blessedly, Lewis is also a clever enough actor to make the king's jealousy *comedic*, at least before it turns monstrous. A master at exposing Shakespearean character intent through inflection and emphasis, he earns laughs not only through his speed but through his carefully considered throwaways and pauses -- like
The Winter's Tale
itself, Lewis' portrayal is rich, complex, and gloriously textured.

In this production, it's also not an aberration, and a batch of remarkably gifted Prenzie veterans give performances here that are as fine as, or better than, any I've yet seen them give. Woolley, who never seems to *stop* topping herself, delivers a sublimely nuanced, heartrending turn, and Denise Yoder -- enjoying one of the most prolific and stylistically varied years a local performer could possibly hope for -- makes for a fiercely powerful, funny, and rational Lady Paulina. (The moment when she wards off prison guards with her hand quickly raised into a claw is a fast, giddy shock -- for understandable reason, they back off.)

Moeller complements her captivating work as a pre-teen boy in the production's Act I with her

robustly sensual and contented Perdita in Act II, which proves to be a truly wise and *necessary* bit of double-casting on Luxton's part, as you're not at all ready to say goodbye to Moeller after Mamillius' demise. That marvelous character actor Andy Lord, who I hope snares a Prenzie lead in the not-too-distant future, is a wonderfully empathetic Camillo and a grizzled, sweetly silly Antigonus; like Lewis, Lord adds much-needed levity to *The Winter's Tale* 's first half.

Speaking of levity, the astounding Jeremy Mahr, who almost *never* gets the chance to embrace his inner goofball on-stage, is so hysterical as the charlatan Autolycus -- a literal baggy-pants comic frequently swapping accents and outfits -- that your mind instantly flashes to all the Shakespearean fools you're now dying to see him take on. (As an added perk here, you also get to hear Mahr play guitar and sing, both in character, and both with fearless abandon.)

And amongst a cast that features the committed, actively present Kate Farence, Dani Helmich, Molly McLaughlin, and John R. Turner, three Prenzie newcomers are particularly noteworthy: Cole McFarren, partnering Moeller flawlessly as the deeply romantic, sexually charged Florizel; Jarrod DeRooi, offering joyous hayseed comedy as slow-on-the-uptake shepherd Dorastus; and David Furness, whose outer relaxedness as Polixenes occasionally gives way to quick-witted alertness and vociferous anger. (Furness is the possessor of one of area theatre's great baritone voices; he elicits shivers when Camillo reveals that he's been instructed to kill Polixenes, and Furness, with measured calm, rumbles, "By *whom*?")

These are ravishingly strong, supple performances, matched by the simple, understated elegance of the design -- costumes by Anne Javaherian, lights by Jennifer Kingry -- and the breathtaking inventiveness of Luxton's staging . I wouldn't dream of giving away the Prenzies' handling of Shakespeare's most famous stage direction, but I will say that the "exit, pursued by a bear" moment was so spectacularly clever that it achieved a kind of stage perfection; Saturday's audience laughed in anticipation of the bit and applauded its resolution. (The accompanying thunderstorm, by the way, was *seriously* good.) Meanwhile, Hermione's climactic transformation, which can be one of the play's more troublesome challenges, was not only underscored by Arvo Pärt's hauntingly beautiful "Spiegel im Spiegel" but featured one of the most exquisitely subtle, evocative, and heart-melting lighting cues I've seen in all my years of theatre-going. (Like many in the cast, I was left teary-eyed by the effect, and by Woolley's portrayal *within* the effect.) The Prenzie Players' *The Winter's Tale* is better than great; it's true stage wizardry. Catch it before it disappears.

For information, visit PrenziePlayers.com .