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Cal Shakes returns with 'The Winter's Tale'

By Lou Fancher



Photo Kevin Berne

"Infuriating, hideous, comfortable, cooperative, divisive, dystopic, transformative, technological, popcorn, lost, frustrating, light, dark, isolating."

These words were spoken at a Sept. 5 preview performance as California Shakespeare Theater (Cal Shakes) triumphantly returned after a nearly two-year absence - live! In-person! - to the Bruns Amphitheater in Orinda, but they were not shout-aloud critiques of the company's presentation of Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale" in an adaptation by Artistic Director Eric Ting and Resident Dramaturg Philippa Kelly.

The wordlist quoted above arrived from the audience in response to Ting's "curtain warmer" introduction (there is no actual curtain at the outdoor venue, but immeasurable warmth both human and environmental). With a "welcome back" greeting and a question, Ting

asked, "What words would you use to describe the last year?"

The company instead of offering its customary four-production summer schedule in 2021 has offered artists, nonprofits and other cultural organizations the use of the venue during a special Season of Shared Light; reserving the fall months for the singular 2021 premiere.

Receiving the dichotomies descriptors, Ting said stories of deep loss, the long shadow of the Black Plague in history and COVID's-still-active dark forces, and profound, human resilience to find the way back to light out of darkness are threads directly connecting the play written in the early 1600s to contemporary experiences of 2020 and 2021. Heralding the theater company's 30th anniversary, he underscored the enduring nature of theater as had Kelly in her popular pre-show Grove Talk.

When the audience asked why present this play at this time, Kelly replied, "It is old folklore. It is coming back around to origins. Antithesis happens."

"The Winter's Tale" is a play written in two acts as antithetic as are winter and summer. Act I has King Leontes and his wife Hermione hosting Polixenes - King of far away Bohemia and Leontes' childhood friend. Only after the urging of Hermione to remain in their home and company for longer does Polixenes agree to stay. Leontes suddenly is consumed with jealous rage and accuses them of having an affair. His jealousy and suspicion drive him to brutal decisions that result in the loss of everything he once held dear to his heart. Act II soars on entirely different wings, with Leontes 16 years later repenting, mourning lost love and friendship and finding his way to redemptive reunions. Second chances - even rising to jovial, rambunctious merrymaking - he discovers through truth and reconciliation with himself, his family and friends.

The play without question presents ideas worthy of contemplation: What is the result in society of allegiance to domination and extreme power? How is honorable grief recognized and what actions can be described as acting with "better grace." Is a heretic the one who burns in the fire, or the fire-setter? In what season other than during a pandemic is it suitable to search for "the time of the season for loving," to paraphrase the titling and lyrics of a well-known 1960's pop song included in Act II.

Again, this article leaves each person who comes to Cal Shakes and sits in the socially distanced seats to determine individual response and reaction to the performance. But turning to quotes selected from the classic theater canon by Cal Shakes supporters and imprinted on an entry vestibule at the Bruns Amphitheater; the graphic display offers intriguing application to the overall experience of attending the company's first live performances in 2021.

From "Venus and Adonis" - "Love comfort like sunshine after rain." Drawing from "The Tempest" - "You have cause (so have we all) of joy." Or the mutuality of a line from "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" - "One feast, one house, one mutual happiness."

So it is at Cal Shakes a house; with actors - jubilant and fierce upon their return - joined by artists whose magic is woven in lights, sets, sounds, movement and the delivery of language and made complete with live participants/the audiences arriving fresh and invigorated each and every night. Obvious in it all is that every person is kin to neighbors, all have hearts pounding blood of the same hue and draw breath from a common need for air, for art, for communion in the presence of other, loved and live bodies.

Cal Shakes' "The Winter's Tale" runs through Sept. 26. (Note to ticket holders: Be sure to review Cal

Shake's thorough COVID Safety Precautions online at calshakes.org or in ticket confirmation emails and texts.)

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