

# Cymbeline' entertaining, accessible at Notre Dame

THEATER REVIEW

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**SOUTH BEND** — For the Notre Dame Shakespeare Festival's 11th season, director Jay Paul Skelton crafts an entertaining and accessible production out of one of Shakespeare's least-known plays, "Cymbeline."

Written sometime between 1609 and 1611, "Cymbeline" contains a convoluted and, at times, ridiculous plot that combines elements of all three of Shakespeare's main genres, the tragedy, the romantic comedy and the history/court play.

Skelton highlights each of these genres, almost to the point of creating an erratic tone with this much variety. An undercurrent of humor that blossoms in the final scene into a screwball celebration of the play's improbabilities, however, tips his hand and intentions to hold the production together and give it a quick but not rushed pace.

The play takes place in the British court of Cymbeline. Raised together following the deaths of both of Posthumous' parents, he and Cymbeline's daughter, Imogen, fall in love and marry in secret, but Cymbeline exiles Posthumous to Italy because he has promised Imogen to Cloten, the son from a previous marriage of his second wife, the current queen.

In Italy, the Roman soldier Iachimo tricks Posthumous into believing Imogen has been unfaithful with him, and Posthumous orders his servant, Pisanio, to murder Imogen.

In addition, two decades earlier, Cymbeline's two sons were kidnapped as infants and raised by a banished noblewoman in Wales as her sons.

Margie Janiczek shines as Imogen, her portrayal youthful, energetic, romantic and rooted deeply in the character's belief in her own decisions. At different times, she pines for, mourns and rails against Posthumous with conviction, while her denunciations of Cloten are smart, mature and confident. Janiczek is humorous in her weariness and wariness while disguised as a male.

Wardell Julius Clark also brings youth to his portrayal of Posthumous, but it's of a brash kind. Clark looks injured when Iachimo "proves" he's slept with Imogen, and his denunciation of her is hurt, bitterness and anger at once. Note, however, how Clark savors praising Imogen and her virtue to his hosts when he arrives in Italy and the remorse he shows when Posthumous believes Pisanio has killed Imogen.

John Neisler's Cymbeline shows anger and pain as Imogen's father and courtly manners as the king when he receives a Roman delegation, and he nearly unravels in the second act with Imogen missing, the queen ill and the kingdom on the verge of war.

Neisler really comes to life, however, in the final scene, where Skelton alternates between serious confessions and revelations and joyous celebrations and humorous double-takes. His

Cymbeline is expansive in victory, thrown off balance by news of the queen's treachery and humorously impatient with Iachimo and his slow confession.

Sometimes coy, sometimes cunning, Siiri Scott avoids a cartoonish depiction of the evil stepmother queen with her serious approach to the character. The queen is malicious, but Scott doesn't define the queen by that and instead makes her confident, competent and easily adaptable in her attempts to manipulate others.

Kevin Asselin's Iachimo has a calculated coolness to him — the nonchalant way he lies about Posthumous to Imogen, for example, or the understated, unhurried way he tries to seduce Imogen — that makes his lustful appreciation of Imogen's sleeping body effective by contrast and creepy in its intimacy.

Ian Paul Custer pushes the humor the most in this production with his portrayal of Cloten, who comes off as a dullard, a fool and, most of all, an immature brat for whom entitlement is a way of life.

Maureen Gallagher's Morgana displays more sadness than bitterness at the betrayal that got her banished from the court and guilt mixed with affection for the king's two sons whom she kidnapped and has raised as her own.

As Pisanio, Christopher McLinden does more with his silences than his dialogue to communicate through his expressions the servant's distress and serious approach to his position.

Scot Shepley is confident as the Roman ambassador Caius Lucius, and Ashley Fox stands out in the ensemble as Cloten's acerbic, undeceived servant who offers humorous critical commentary about Cloten to the audience.

Marcus Stephens' scenic design ties thematically with the state of Cymbeline and his kingdom with the sets' downward tilt into the right side of the audience and its extreme minimalism — two high, ornate walls with a total of five sets of doors in them and the almost exclusive use of hand-held props.

Taken together, the tilt and the emptiness of the set, create a visual reminder that not only is the kingdom unbalanced, it's barren as well until Cymbeline blesses the marriage of Imogen and Posthumous and Skelton fills the stage with most of the cast for the final, redemptive scene.

"Cymbeline" continues through Aug. 29 at the University of Notre Dame's DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts.