

# *Early Modern Literary Studies*

***Cymbeline*, presented by the Orlando Shakespeare Theater at the Margeson Theater,  
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Directed by Jim Helsinger. Scenic Design by Bob Philips. Music composed by Michael Moricz. Sound Design by Matthew Given. Costume Design by Denise Warner. Lighting Design by Bert Scott. Fight Direction by Geoffrey Kent. With Wynn Harmon (*Cymbeline*), Johnny Lee Davenport (*Philario/Belarius/Jupiter*), Carey Urban (*Imogen*), Michael Raver (*Pisano*), David Hardie (*Posthumous*), Brandon Roberts (*Cloten*), Megan Pickrell (*Doctor Cornelius*), Anne Hering (*Queen*), Michael Shenefelt (*Guiderius*), Geoffrey Kent (*Iachimo*), Sam Little (*Caius Lucius*), Bradford B. Frost (*Arviragus*), Amanda Leakey (*Helen*), Ryan Czerwonko, Stella Heath, Kraig Kelsey, Rudy Roushdi (*Ensemble*).

How does a theater company approach Shakespeare in a city that boasts Walt Disney World, Sea World, Universal Studios, and a raft of additional competitors for leisure dollars? Collaboratively. Since its inception in 1989, the Orlando Shakespeare Theater has successfully presented a variety of plays while relying on the range of resources that the area's exceptional level of theme park (and education) density provides. A partnership with the University of Central Florida has been foundational. In the mid-1970s, faculty from UCF began a series of Shakespeare workshops for local teachers. By 1989, after receiving several National Endowment for the Humanities grants, these workshops evolved into a festival, which presented its debut season in the Walt Disney Bandshell - a venue created with donations from Walt Disney World. The relationship with Disney has continued via the corporation's support of the arts patronage organization, the United Arts of Central Florida, which in turn provides money for the OST and other local cultural groups.

The OST's first season featured *The Tempest* and *Taming of the Shrew* with costumes rented from the Royal Shakespeare Company (the first time the RSC had allowed such an

arrangement). Subsequent seasons included as few as two and as many as five Shakespeare plays, while adding other classical and contemporary dramas, works by local playwrights, and children's and seasonal plays. The Shakespeare productions were often augmented with regular productions of related works such as *Shylock*, *I Hate Hamlet*, and *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*.

The relationship with UCF has become mutually beneficial. The Theatre program at UCF, in part because of its proximity to so many theme parks, offers MFA tracks in musical theatre, theatre for young audiences as well as acting and design. Its faculty perform and contribute design expertise while alumni from the MFA acting program have been hired into the company. In return, OST staff have taught undergraduate classes and provided internship opportunities.

The OST's production of *Cymbeline* exemplified this educational and professional integration. The cast featured alumni and faculty from UCF and nearby Rollins College as well as former performers from Walt Disney World. The production itself drew out the fairy tale elements of the play and drew on Disney traditions of filmic storytelling.

The stage in the Margeson Theater is a modified thrust with room for about three hundred twenty-five spectators on sharply raked risers on three sides of the stage. Behind the stage a long balcony hung over a large cave opening and a small door at stage left. At stage right, an enormous tree branched and rose up into the flies. Ivy ran up the trunk and across the balcony, its canopy hung out over the center of the stage, and its roots stretched across the stage floor. A circular fountain occupied center stage with a throne behind it, several benches around it, and animal skins on the floor. A lectern near the fountain held a large book entitled *The Tale of Cymbeline*. The overall effect was of an ancient, somewhat decayed castle that had been partially consumed by lush vegetation and age.

The costumes were a rich Arthurian / Roman mixture and distinguished the three groups of characters. The British men wore tunics and cloaks in dark browns and reds, with leather straps, belts, and boots and had small, circular sunburst tattoos on their hands or arms. These were difficult to make out, but appeared to be some kind of British or Celtic symbol. The women were similarly attired in long dresses with knotwork borders, though Imogen's dress was plain white and the Queen's was an embroidered deep red and green. The Roman costumes were largely togas and sandals with cloaks and breastplates during the later scenes. The banished Britons' costumes were coarse, somewhat ragged versions of those

worn at Cymbeline's court. The biggest distinction was the use of blue paint on their hands, arms, and faces to evoke a popular conception of ancient Britons.

The stage design and costumes articulated well. The dark colors of the Britons matched the greens and browns of the tree and ivy such that the characters seemed to be part of the landscape. The fine detail in the vegetation and the costumes' embroidery along with the elaborate props and furnishings testified to a high level of professionalism and organization.

The play began when the house lights went down and all the characters entered, encircled the fountain and turned to face the audience. Rather than having two gentlemen provide the conversational opening exposition, a chorus figure stood at the lectern and from the book read the description of each character, based on the opening scene. As each character was introduced, a spotlight picked him or her out of the group. After the opening, the play proceeded quickly. The Queen was charmingly insincere in her promises to Imogen and Posthumous. In return, Posthumous was optimistic and Imogen was petulant and childish, stamping her foot in frustration. Cymbeline was aged and fragile and appeared to have a mild heart attack or stroke when he shouted "Thou'rt poison to my blood" (1.1.129) at Posthumous. As he staggered back, the Queen produced a small bottle, and when he had drunk its contents, appeared to feel better.

The tension generated by the scene was quickly dissipated when Cloten and his colleagues entered. As Cloten, Brandon Roberts was short, skinny, and balding. He wore courtly clothing, but elicited no respect from anyone. Much was made of his body odor – everyone on stage held their noses behind his back when the First Lord announced "the violence of action hath made you reek as a [corpse]" (1.2.2). When he spoke, Cloten sounded indecisive and peevish, stammering on his bs and ps. This tic, along with his constant confusion as to which door he should be using to exit reduced his character from genuine threat to a comic relief

Physically opposite of Cloten, hirsute, tall and stocky, Geoffrey Kent's Iachimo strove to be the center of attention and did not miss an opportunity to put himself in the spotlight. In 1.6, he delivered his asides directly to the audience while Imogen stood frozen in a spotlight. As he worked to persuade Imogen to bed he yanked open his shirt and eventually threw himself at her feet and began kissing them. These exertions, along with Imogen's giggles and eventual alarm generated waves of laughter from the audience, just as had

Cloten's clumsy boasting earlier in the act.

Matching Iachimo for treachery, Anne Hering's Queen was the epitome of the evil stepmother. A former actor at Walt Disney World and director of education at the OST, she dominated nearly every scene. Using only smirks and body language, Hering made it apparent from her first scene that she had no love, much less sympathy for Imogen. Her workshop (1.5) was replete with bottles of potions and books of spells. All that was missing was a talking mirror.

Thanks to the cuts and the dynamic acting and direction, the play moved quickly until the interval after 3.2. This placement made sense in terms of setting, but in terms of narrative pace, it required the audience to sit through more exposition (3.3) from the exiles, Imogen, and Lucius once the play resumed. The pace picked up again when Cloten, Posthumous' clothes hanging on him comically, blustered his way onto the balcony above the stage. Unseen below him, Belarius mocked him repeating "those runagates" (4.2.65) with an exaggerated stammer. His final encounter with Guiderius was predictable and disappointed the audience, as Cloten had been a regular source of laughter.

The battle scene in 5.2 was the production's most spectacular and clearly choreographed so as to eliminate some of the later lines of description. It began with the ranks of the Romans and Britons marching rhythmically on stage with poles, tapping out a tempo and creating a sense of a much larger number of soldiers. The battle itself occurred under red lights in simulated slow motion with liberal quantities of smoke and shouting. Rather than have Cymbeline actually be captured and freed, his crown was knocked off his head and rescued by Posthumous.

The following scene was probably the second most spectacular. The ghost of Posthumous' father (without his mother or brothers) rose in clouds of smoke from the trap in the center of stage. Soon after, Jupiter appeared on the balcony in a gold mask carrying golden bolts of lightning. His voice boomed through the auditorium thanks to amplification and echo effects. Compared to the battle scene, the visit of Jupiter was less noisy, but no less impressive. Posthumous' status as favored by the gods as well as his ancestors was clearly conveyed.

The play concluded quickly thanks to liberal cutting in the final scenes. Free of his wife's debilitating potions and flush with victory, Cymbeline was energetic and ready to forgive.

Many lines were played for laughs, such as Imogen's reaction to the news that the Queen had died, "I am sorry for't, my lord" (5.6.270). As the cast exited, *The Tale of Cymbeline* again rose on its podium from the trap door.

The production made good use of Shakespeare's text, which already contained familiar fairy tale elements, scenes of villainy, redemption, and supernatural intervention. The stage design and costuming amplified these aspects to the point that the echoes of Disney's *Snow White*, were impossible to ignore. Like the film, for example, the play's opening featured an elaborate storybook, suggesting that the narrative is just that: a story from a book of tales. While not exactly dwarfs, Belarius, Arviragus, and Guiderius had created a homosocial utopia where they labored only to serve themselves and behaved honorably rescuing the innocent and punishing the guilty.

The Orlando Shakespeare Theater played to its strengths and local resources in casting, costume and stage design, and play selection. The spectacle, humor, and intertextual nods to film and popular culture were well-received by the audience. If the OST is able to employ a similar, cooperative approach to its other Shakespeare offerings, it should be able to exist comfortably along with the theme parks in the competition for audience dollars.

### **Work Cited**

Shakespeare, William. *Cymbeline*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).



**Anne Hering as the Queen.**

**Photo courtesy of Orlando Shakespeare Theater**



**Michael Shenefelt as Guiderius, Bradford B. Frost as Arviragus, Carey Urban as Imogen, Wynn Harmon as Cymbeline  
Photo courtesy of Orlando Shakespeare Theater**