

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Cymbeline*, presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Royal
Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2016**

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Directed by Melly Still. With Gillian Bevan (*Cymbeline*), Bethan Cullinane (*Innogen*), Hiran Abeysekera (*Posthumus*), Kelly Williams (*Pisania*), James Clyde (*Duke*), Marcus Griffiths (*Cloten*), Romaine Andrews (*First Lord*), Theo Ogundipe (*Second Lord*), Jenny Fennessy (*Gentlewoman*), Temi Wilkey (*Philharmonia*), Doreene Blackstock (*Cornelia*), Marième Diouf (*Helen*), Kevin N. Goulding (*Messenger*), Oliver Johnstone (*Iachimo*), Byron Mondahl (*Philario*), Eke Chukwu (*Caius Lucius*), Graham Turner (*Belarius*), Natalie Simpson (*Guideria*), and James Cooney (*Arviragus*).

Melly Still's intelligent, fully thought-through production caused consternation in some audience members because of its several changes to the gender of characters, but these did no damage to the overall shape and structure of the play and pointed up the topicality of Still's vision of a post-Brexit Britain in which London has become an urban wasteland and a significant section of the population is living in caves in Wales. In particular, the decision to make *Cymbeline* a queen turned her consort into a duke, in an obvious echo of the home life of our own dear queen, though the changes to *Pisania*, *Cornelia* and *Guideria* were less far-reaching in their effect. In this imagined future, Britain had lost its place in the world: in *Philario's* house in Rome, where whole passages have been translated into Latin, Italian and French, Hiran Abeysekera's excellent *Posthumus* was the only character who couldn't keep up. The Romans, by contrast, may have lost the battle but did so in style, with natty Italian-looking uniforms and shades.

Extradiegetically, *Posthumus* might not have been the only one struggling to follow what was happening, for *Cymbeline* is a difficult play. This production, though, found some clever ways of making it less so. When the dialogue switched out of English, screens at

the back carried subtitles; when Iachimo observed that Innogen had been reading the tale of Tereus, an excerpt, which included the rape, appeared there; when Cymbeline said there were revolts in Dacia and Pannonia, a helpful map pinpointed where these are. Another significant change had Posthumus himself appear as Jupiter, implying a psychological rather than a supernatural explanation for the scene in which his dead family members appear. The only decision I questioned was the casting of an exceptionally handsome and dynamic actor as Cloten, a character whom we are supposed to dislike. Otherwise, I don't know when I've enjoyed a production more.