The Winter’s Tale

Perhaps it’s the first mellifluous notes of a half-remembered lullaby? Or the acrid scent of your Grandpa’s cigar? Maybe the thwack of rubber thongs on sticky bitumen in summer? Or filaments of dust dancing in the dappled afternoon sunshine? Hazy, lazy memories of childhood. They jostle and tease. Sepia-toned and rose-tinted.

Our early experiences shape us long after they are over. But what if, instead, we could shape them?

Mamillius, the boy prince, will attempt to influence the direction of his childhood in John Bell’s 2014 production of The Winter’s Tale. It’s Mamillius who will pull the strings throughout Shakespeare’s fable, attempting to right the wrongs of a royal household turned bad, and to reunite his family after his father almost destroys it. A tug of a string here, a sleight of hand there, and Mamillius will guide the action armed with nothing but his own make-believe.

This approach couldn’t be more suited to The Winter’s Tale. Just as children view the world through extremes of tears and laughter, so too does Shakespeare in this play. Few of his plays, if any, feature such a rich tapestry of emotional highs and lows. The story begins with dark tragedy, as King Leontes sabotages his family, friendships and happiness. Later, it veers off into another time and place, with bucolic fantasy, songs and laughter. Then, as if by magic, we end with a merciful redemption for Leontes. It’s precisely the sort of trajectory that a child’s imagination would follow.

This is an audacious play in many ways, which could only have been written by someone at the height of their powers. By 1610, Shakespeare had already perfected tragedy, sussed out comedy and mined history. Now he was ready to push himself even further. So he spiced elements, themes and forms from throughout his career to form The Winter’s Tale. There were shades of mistaken jealousy from Othello and echoes of pastoral wit from As You Like It, all neatly interwoven within a single tale. The end result was a tautly structured play and a brilliant mastery of different forms. Intellectually speaking, it’s the ultimate Shakespeare play. And emotionally speaking, it’s also the ultimate Shakespeare play. The Winter’s Tale is a thoughtful take on how we progress through life; at times it is satirical, other times whimsical, but always genuinely moving. (Nobody watches the final scene without a lump in their throat.)

This elaborated blend of styles has confounded experts for years. Critics and academics have fumbled about trying to categorise the play and all with scant success. The family trauma in the first three acts has the play pegged as Shakespeare’s darkest ever tragedy. But later, when the play blooms into quick humour and song, it bears all the hallmarks of a comedy.

It isn’t exactly a tragedy and it isn’t exactly a comedy; so what is The Winter’s Tale? Like so many of life’s difficult questions, the answer is actually remarkably simple – in Elizabethan terminology, a ‘winter’s tale’ was a fairy story or tall tale. So the answer to the conundrum is that this play is a fantasy.

This answer does more than just satisfy the academic craving for categorisation; it’s actually the key that unlocks the play for audiences to enjoy it. Once you surrender yourself to the fact that this is a fairytale, then you’re free to suspend your disbelief. Amazing things do happen in children’s stories. Statues come to life. Princes fall in love with paupers (who turn out to be princesses).

Of course, Shakespeare would never offer up a saccharine Disney-style fairy story (where goodies beat baddies and everything comes up roses). Children’s stories in the Bard’s day would have been much darker and more realistic, where bad things happen to good people. So in The Winter’s Tale, the innocent young prince Mamillius dies of a broken heart, while the loyal, brave Antigonus is eaten by a bear. And even at the end, when Leontes is reunited with his wife and daughter, he remains haunted by 18 lost years of gnawing regret.

The tradition of children’s storytelling will inform John Bell’s reinterpretation of The Winter’s Tale in 2014. That’s why Mamillius will take centre stage and dream up the plot before your eyes. It will be a rare chance to ‘awake your faith’ and embrace the make-believe that sits at the heart of all great theatre.

And like every classic fairy story, The Winter’s Tale is much more than a flight of fancy. The underlying themes of the play still slap audiences just as hard as they did in Shakespeare’s day.

On the one hand, this is a yarn about leaders and the values that guide them. Leontes might be King of Sicily but his behaviour is anything but regal. He repays loyalty (his wife’s, his friends’ and his subjects’) with suspicion and reckless anger. In the face of moral dilemmas, he lashes out and abuses his power.

From another perspective, this is a yarn about family. About how the wrong word said here or there can easily derail relationships between husband and wife, or between parent and child. In Australia today, one in three marriages end in divorce. The Winter’s Tale lays bare all of the devastating effects that family estrangement can have upon parents and their children.

Then there is the big question mark that Shakespeare hangs over the end of his fairy tale. Sure, Leontes might be reunited with his wife and daughter but this is no simple ‘happy ever after’. The king has been damaged by his previous actions, and so have his friends and family (fatally in some cases). The Winter’s Tale shows that you can never completely repair the past. You may be older, you may be wiser, but whatever you did in your past, you are stuck with that – you can’t airbrush it out. And when we commit great wrongs, it can prove impossible to forgive ourselves.

All that said, there are more optimistic messages shining out of the conclusion of The Winter’s Tale. In Perdita’s and Hermione’s forgiveness of Leontes, we see the incredible human capacity for mercy. We are also reminded of something that, as children, we intrinsically know – no matter how foolish and cruel we can be in our lives, the bond of family love can be unbreakable.

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