

A Russian Winter's Tale

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William Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale performed at the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, England by the Maly Drama Theatre of St. Petersburg. Directed by Declan Donnellan. Designed by Nick Ormerod. Translated by Pyotr Gnedich.

The St. Petersburg's Maly Drama Theatre has mounted a wonderful new production of Shakespeare's penultimate play, *The Winter's Tale*. Directed by Declan Donnellan, the Maly actors give a breathtaking performance. Anyone who has the possibility of seeing this production should do so. It is a rare treat.

In *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare explores the destructive capacities of jealousy and revenge, and the long and hard struggle for understanding, forgiveness and reconciliation. These are themes that are dealt with in all of Shakespeare's later plays, especially *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, and to a lesser degree, *The Tempest*.

Leontes, King of Sicilia and Polixenes, King of Bohemia are good friends with a deep regard for each other. But in Leontes' mind an unwarranted suspicion has grown at the closeness between his wife, Queen Hermione, and Polixenes. Leontes entrusts his suspicions to his closest lord and "cup-bearer", Camillo, and orders him to poison Polixenes. But Camillo, although seeming to acquiesce, confesses the secret to Polixenes and they both flee to Bohemia.

This sudden flight confirms for Leontes the guilt of Polixenes and Hermione. He arrests the Queen as an adulteress. While in prison, the heavily pregnant Queen gives birth to a girl who is duly banished from the kingdom. Meanwhile, the young son of Hermione and Leontes, Mamillius, who is already very ill, dies from the shock of his mother being thus accused. On hearing this Hermione dies of grief. Leontes, struck by these deaths into realisation of his error, falls into repentance and self-approbation.

Sixteen years later the banished baby girl, Perdita, has grown into a young woman. She chances to meet and fall in love with, Florizel, son of Polixenes. The young couple travel to Sicilia and meet with Leontes. He recognises Perdita from her likeness to her mother. A statue of Hermione is unveiled. Leontes is entranced. The statue comes to life and the ghost of Mamillius is seen. The denouement sees reunion and reconciliation.

The central character, Leontes, is a king of fairly average standing. There is nothing in particular to recommend him to greatness, apart from his position. He is lacking in graces and even, it could be said, a level of dignity befitting his rank. He could be described as an insecure individual, but the love and esteem in which he is held by the other characters confirm that he is at least kind and caring.

The primary interest we have in this King is not his past valour or present virtues, but the workings of his jealous mind. For it is through this that the malevolent element enters the story. In a break with orthodoxy, there is not a single character in the whole play to which we can attribute a malicious intent. Leontes' misguided jealousy reminds us of the equally groundless suspicions of the moor Othello,

but here there is no Iago to first place the false idea and then exploit it. In his actions, Leontes has created as big a blunder as Lear, but we have no scheming Goneril and Reagan to set it off. How Leontes' mind was poisoned we are never told, but we watch as it drives events to an inevitable catastrophe.

Hermione offers a sharp contrast to her husband. She is a strong, confident and vivacious woman who can be both witty and abruptly frank. Her warm and charming personality is evident from her first appearance. It is easy to see why Polixenes is enchanted by her—in an innocent fashion—as any man would be. Like all of Shakespeare's finest female characters, Hermione demonstrates a resoluteness and dignity when under pressure. When Leontes confronts her with the false accusation, she does not see how her husband could think this thing. But upon realising that Leontes is indeed voicing a conviction, she has the noble generosity to feel sympathy for his condition, as well as the integrity to rebuke him. There is a passion for justice about the figure of Hermione that comes out most clearly in her attempt to clear her own name, but is also discernible in the wider context to which her "death" and "revival" can be seen as symbolic.

In order to illustrate the dramatic tension at the beginning of the play, Shakespeare created an array of memorable characters. When Leontes publicly accuses Hermione of infidelity, far from enjoying the complete and uncritical support of his court, he confronts disquiet and open opposition. The most courageous stand taken is that of Antigonus. He opposes the King, even after it is made clear he risks his life in doing so. And when the baby Perdita is banished, it is he who goes with her to protect her. Antigonus's wife Paulina is even more brazen. She protests to Leontes' face that he is doing wrong, and later, after the death of the young prince and the Queen, damns him in no uncertain terms: "A thousand knees ten thousand years together, naked, fasting, upon a barren mountain, and still winter in storm perpetual, could not move the gods to look that way thou wert."

Then there is Autolycus, the merry-hearted rogue who is introduced to us in the pastoral part of the play. Autolycus is a compulsive pickpocket whose central philosophy is to look after himself. His self-seeking and opportunistic character runs counter to the nobler sentiments animating many of the other characters. But Autolycus does not just provide light relief after the preceding dark and tumultuous events. Like Shakespeare's other "wise" fools, Autolycus shows something deeper about the story. His crimes are seen as petty when considered next to the much larger crime perpetrated by Leontes. The idea suggests itself that if the ruler of a kingdom is flawed, what virtue can be expected of the lowest subjects? For his realism, as well as for his clever witticisms and scheming, Autolycus provokes not only laughter but a certain admiration.

The Maly Drama Theatre was founded in 1944—when most other theatre companies had been evacuated during the siege of Leningrad—and began presenting a wide range of plays. After the war,

in its small theatre in Leningrad and in the surrounding towns and villages, the Maly gave up to 500 performances a year. In 1983, the company was appointed a new artistic director, Lev Dodin, who brought a stimulus and repertoire that soon won international acclaim as it toured the world following the perestroika period. Their two-part production *Brothers and Sisters* was awarded the 1986 State Prize of the USSR. In 1988 the Maly took its production of Alexandre Galin's *Stars in the Morning Sky* to Glasgow and London, where it won the Laurence Olivier award. The company has since participated in many festivals around the world, completed a number of European tours, as well as winning several prestigious awards. In 1995 they performed in Moscow for the first time in 10 years. All five productions (*Brothers and Sisters*, *Gaudeamus*, *Claustrophobia*, Dostoyevsky's *The Devils* and Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*) were highly acclaimed by Moscow audiences and critics alike.

The finest classical and modern literature forms the basis for Maly productions. Rehearsal periods are long and include in-depth research, as well as company expeditions to the locality of the piece being performed. A major element of the Maly is the close and direct connection between the theatre and the theatre school. Dodin's work as a theatre director is inseparable from his practice and philosophy as a teacher. He has developed a process of instructing actors in which professional training goes hand in hand with the maturing of the characters. There are around 55 actors permanently engaged by the theatre, and with the majority of the company former pupils of Dodin's, the result is ensemble acting that is virtually unique.

The Maly has already had a far-reaching influence on British theatre. Actors and directors have visited St. Petersburg to study their work and Dodin is widely acknowledged as a master director and teacher. The Maly's ensemble acting has also inspired some British directors to form their own permanent ensembles.

In 1981, Declan Donnellan co-founded the groundbreaking theatre company Cheek By Jowl, along with Nick Ormerod, who is the designer on the present production. They have done many productions together including *As You Like It*, *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster. From 1989 to 1997 Donnellan was an Associate Director of the Royal National Theatre, where he directed Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, *Sweeney Todd* by Stephen Sondheim and both parts of *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner. At the National Theatre of Finland he staged *Philoctetes* by Sophocles and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. For the Royal Shakespeare Company he directed *School for Scandal* by Richard Brinsley Sheridan and the UK's first staging of Corneille's *Le Cid* for the Avignon Festival. Donnellan has also won several awards including the Olivier Award for outstanding achievement.

Donnellan's collaboration with the Maly Drama Theatre is the culmination of a 14-year association with Russian acting that began in 1985 when he worked with Maly director Lev Dodin. From this relationship sprang two visits to Russia by Donnellan's Cheek By Jowl, first with *Measure for Measure* and then an all-male version of *As You Like It*, both of which were well received.

It had been one of Donnellan's longest-held ambitions to be able to direct Russian actors and in 1997 after retiring Cheek By Jowl for a trial period, he got his opportunity with an invitation by the Maly. "What attracted me is the willingness of Russian actors to take anything on board, to really attack important themes," explained Donnellan in a recent interview in the *Financial Times*. "In England, the worst thing you can do is be pretentious. As soon as any kind of direct emotional statement is made, you get this instinctive recoil, this protective wall of mockery. You practically have to administer a

general anaesthetic if you want to use an abstract noun. Russians are far healthier. They are far less alone."

Just as novel and exciting for Donnellan is the appreciation of the Russian general public. "I've never been to a theatre performance here that wasn't jammed full of all kinds of people: courting couples, professional types, and young men in military uniform. Theatre doesn't have the same kind of snobbish, elitist overtones that you find elsewhere. It just really matters to Russians that their theatre is good. If every single theatre in London was closed it wouldn't cause a revolution. But here, you'd have people on the streets."

The challenges that this level of audience awareness poses to actors is tremendous. The Maly Drama Theatre sought to rise to this challenge through their ensemble style of acting. The cast members have been together over many years of intense study and work. This dedicated spirit has resulted in the intensity of the present production. Donnellan once said, I think in connection with his previous work in Russia, "The actor can get an audience to believe anything, but only if the actor is prepared to believe it.... This is the basis of all our work and we have learnt it among strangers."

No one who witnesses the central performance of Pyotr Cemak (Leontes) will easily disassociate him from the actual King of Sicilia, or forget the blind fury etched into his expressive face. Nor is it possible not to be touched by the gentle perseverance and noble serenity of the wronged Hermione (Natalia Akimova), culminating in the deeply moving final scene with her surrounded by her family. Sergei Vlassov as Autolycus also deserves a mention if only for his remarkable athleticism and commanding stage presence.

Another bold feature of Donnellan's direction is the way in which he employs significant events from contemporary Russian history. And so from the opening scenes, which are reminiscent of the court of Nicholas II, we move to the trial of Hermione that has unmistakable allusions to the Stalinist show trials of the 1930s. The declaration from the Oracle, which states Hermiones' innocence, is thrown aside; the verdict has already been decided and the trial is but the prelude to the passing of the sentence.

On April 5, Donnellan received a Golden Mask Award (the Russian equivalent of the Olivier Award) for the Maly Drama Theatre's production of *The Winter's Tale*. The play won three awards, best director, best production and best male lead for Pyotr Semak.



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