

Cymbeline: Shakespeare’s greatest hits

Pitt Repertory Theatre parodies little-known romance

Stacking up cases of deceit, mistaken identity, and cross-dressing, Shakespeare’s little-known romance *Cymbeline* is almost a greatest hits album of the playwright’s usual tricks. But, unlike some greatest hits albums, this one wouldn’t sell — sacrificing content for twists and turns in the plot, *Cymbeline* is convoluted to the point of frustrating, as the omniscient audience must watch the characters struggle in vain to figure out who’s who, who’s dead, who’s related, who’s poisoned, who’s secretly female, and so on.

However, as is usually the case in show business, the solution to *Cymbeline*’s problem may as simple as marketing. Though *Cymbeline* may fall flat as a greatest hits album, or even as a play, it succeeds as a parody — of itself, of Shakespeare, and of theatrical devices in general. And this is exactly the angle that the University of Pittsburgh’s Repertory Theatre decided to take, amplifying the play’s ridiculous plotline with exaggerated gestures and even a couple of modern tunes. Directed by MFA student Chaya Gordon, *Cymbeline* opened at Pitt last Thursday in the Cathedral of Learning’s Studio Theatre and runs through this Sunday.

The story of *Cymbeline* centers on the family of a British king by the same name (played by Dangerfield G. Moore). As the play begins, the king’s daughter, Imogen (Cory Tamler), marries the lesser-born Posthumus (Joseph J. Jackson) without her father’s permission, which soon results in her beau getting banished, leaving his loyal servant Pisanio (Patrick A. Berger) to stay with Imogen. Meanwhile, Cymbeline’s wife (Brittany Michelle Jones) hopes to marry Imogen to her dim-witted son Cloten (Ryan Ben), a whiny, loathsome character. On top of that, the king’s two sons, Guiderius (Christina M. Kruise) and Arviragus (Nicole Lynn Wyland), were stolen from their cradles at birth, and no one knows where they are, or even if they know that they are royalty.

As the story heats up, a Roman soldier named Iachimo (Aaron Jefferson Tindall) challenges Posthumus to a bet, claiming

he can seduce Imogen. Although Imogen refuses Iachimo’s approaches, the latter tricks Posthumus into thinking his new wife actually did cheat on him. Enraged, Posthumus sends a letter ordering Pisanio to kill Imogen.

Luckily, Pisanio believes that Imogen is innocent and disobeys his master’s letter. To avoid any ramifications from the Iachimo scandal, Imogen flees her home disguised as a man, and eventually encounters some quaint country folk, Polydore and Cadwell, and their father Belarius (Ana Carolina Noriega).

And here, *Cymbeline* goes the way of *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, resulting in the characters’ (and audience’s) infinite confusion. As it happens, “Polydore” and “Cadwell” are actually Guiderius and Arviragus — the missing princes, thus Imogen’s brothers — but none of the characters are so enlightened. Belarius, for example, knows the boys are princes, but has no idea that his male visitor is actually their sister, Imogen. Imogen, on the other hand, knows who *she* is, but does not know that her brothers are her brothers. And the brothers know nothing; they think themselves an average pair of country bumpkins, and, though taken aback by their strange, almost brotherly love for Imogen, have no idea that she is a woman — or their sister.

The rest of the play follows suit, culminating in a scene featuring nearly all of the characters, who take turns revealing information until everyone finally figures out what is going on; the audience, at this point, has known for at least 20 minutes. Still, this last scene manages to be amusing, as the characters all gasp every time they learn a new aspect of the plot, poking fun at the play’s ironic format.

Under Gordon’s direction, Pitt’s *Cymbeline* features a host of vibrant acting. Ben gives a skillful, hilarious performance of the clueless Cloten, swordfighting like a girl and singing like one, too — the latter in the hopes of wooing Imogen — in a portrayal that leaves the audience howling. Still, Ben and

others sometimes take it too far, using crude gestures to emphasize certain Shakespearean innuendos, which more often succeed in nuance. Playing Pisanio (and, minorly, a British captain), Patrick A. Berger shines without mimicking his over-the-top peers; he is perfect for his part, though it is hard to not want to see him in a bigger one.

Other aspects of the production, including costume design and music, encompass a variety of time periods — for better or worse. Concerning costumes, characters sometimes seem to be wearing 17th-century garb, while others look straight out of the ’70s and ’80s, and still others boast some bizarre combination of the aforementioned. The end effect is interesting, though it is difficult to discern a method behind the madness, so most of the choices wind up looking accidental. Moreover, the use of modern songs in the play’s beginning (“Love is a Battlefield”) and end (“(What’s So Funny ’Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding”) are a bit disorienting to the audience, although they do contribute to the show’s overall parody vibe.

If the creators of *Scary Movie* had been alive in the 17th century, they might have written *Cymbeline*, but at present we can only credit the play to Shakespeare himself. Whether meant to be a parody or just unintentionally absurd, the play works well making fun of itself, a fact the students in Pitt Repertory Theatre used to their advantage.

Sarah Mogin | Editor-in-Chief

Cymbeline runs through Sunday, April 19 in the Cathedral of Learning’s Studio Theatre. Tickets are \$10, \$7 for students. Call 412-624-PLAY or visit www.play.pitt.edu.



Courtesy of Sloan MacRae

Left: Iachimo (Aaron Jefferson Tindall, left) fights with Posthumus (Joseph J. Jackson, right).

Right: Iachimo sneaks into Cymbeline’s house out of a piece of luggage in order to seduce his daughter, Imogen.