

The Winter's Tale warms souls at the Esplanade

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CONTRIBUTOR/SINGAPORE

Being known as a schizoid Shakespeare play that flips from tragedy to comedy, it is no surprise if *The Winter's Tale* raises questions in inquisitive minds about how to marry two clashing genres into one lucid, seamless story. Fortunately, Sam Mendes, with his brilliant direction and sensitivity, can make sense of the contradictions.

Mendes (*American Beauty*, *Revolutionary Road*) and his Neal Street Productions orchestrated a unique series of coproductions with the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) and *The Old Vic* in London (run by Kevin Spacey) in making what is called *The Bridge Project - The Winter's Tale*. The Anglo-American collaboration engages stars from the United Kingdom (Simon Russell Beale, Sinead Cusack and Rebecca Hall) with those from the United States (Richard Easton, Josh Hamilton and Ethan Hawke).

And just recently, after creating a lot of buzz with its hugely successful premiere in New York in February, *The Winter's Tale* was then brought to Singapore, its next and only stop in Asia. Produced and created by Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT), who previously performed the Royal Shakespeare Company's *King Lear*, the classic play which generated a frenzy of applause from its audience in its five-day run from March 26 to 31.

Mendes keeps the first half

gloomy with grief and tragedy before finally introducing a lighter tone of the rest of the play. In ancient Sicilia, the suddenly jealous King Leontes (Simon Russell Beale) accuses his pregnant wife Hermione (Rebecca Hall) of adultery with Polixenes (Josh Hamilton), the King of Bohemia, who had been their houseguest.

Claiming that the unborn child belongs to Polixenes, who is also a friend from his youth, the insanely paranoid Leontes sends the queen to a court and a prison, where she delivers the baby. The chaos leads to the sickness, then the death, of their son Mamillius (Morven Christie) and Hermione herself. Instead of killing Polixenes as Leontes orders him to, Camillo (Paul Jesson) helps the Bohemian ruler to flee.

Standing as a noble and powerful Paulina, the wife of Lord Antigonus (Dakin Matthews), and the queen's loyal friend, Sinead Cusack comes onto the stage to bring the newborn baby to open Leontes' heart. Sadly, the king still insists on getting rid of her. Instead of doing that, Lord Antigonus leaves the baby with a large amount of gold, where she is then discovered by an old shepherd and his son. Realizing that he has lost his family, Leontes sinks down into sorrow and regret.

Switching to the happy Neverland of Bohemia 16 years later, Anthony Ward's set dramatically turns from the dark and depressing feel of the conflict-ridden first half to a lit-up stage with a jolly white-tufted sky, which is later adorned with colorful balloons of red, white

and blue.

In this disparate second part, we see a fun crowd of Bohemians singing and dancing hilariously, accompanied by a company of guitar and fiddle players as the charming Florizel (Michael Braun) the son of Polixenes is falling in love with Perdita (Morven Christie) the daughter of the Old Shepherd.

Seeing her as nobody of royal blood, Polixenes objects to the union of the two. Once again Camillo, who escaped to Bohemia in the past with Polixenes, saves the day by sending the young couple to the still-mourning Leontes and revealing the secrets and the truth in a moving, forgiving reunion.

As the cuckoldry-ridden Leontes, Simon Russell Beale is simply incredible. From the first moment, he is insensibly blinded with jealousy at the intimate-looking scene of Hermione touching fingers with the tall and slim Polixenes under a (romantic?) candle-dotted background, he just owns the gravity of his constant rage and obsession with the infidelity.

His erupting madness creates such a terrifying monster feel to the atmosphere, but at other times he can show his sentimental side (that fills the air when he first holds his newborn daughter) or an intelligent comedic side that evokes chuckles among the audience with the way he responds in the dialogue. Even in a serious scene where the magic oracle flies down to his table at court and writes the truth itself, Beale manages to cause some amused laughter with his denial, saying that

there is no truth in the oracle.

Rebecca Hall, who played a charming role in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, comes across as both elegant, regal, yet loveable, drawing sympathy from the audience (especially in the emotional scene at court) and a natural urge to side with her instead of the well, obviously nutty, jealous king.

Having an equally strong presence on the stage is the wonderful Sinead Cusack as Paulina with her tremendously intense interaction with the stubborn king to open his eyes to the truth. And, as you can guess, literally stealing the show is, yes, Ethan Hawke as the energetic, roguish pickpocket, Autolycus, reminding us of a '70s Bob Dylan, strumming his guitar lustily.

Another enlightening element that brings humor to the stage is the adorable Richard Easton as the Old Shepherd (where else can you see him wearing such distracting orange-red checkered pants?) who pairs up with Tobias Segal as his loony madly-costumed son.

Mark Bennett's subtle and melancholic music intimates deep emotions. But what is the most beautiful moment is when Paul Pyant's bluish lighting falls on Hermione's majestic statue, which then slowly changes as she magically comes to life.

Performed by an impeccable cast, in *The Winter's Tale* Sam Mendes spoils you with a three-hour roller-coaster ride of emotion that finally moves your soul with its simple and beautiful happy ending that makes your evening.



COURTESY OF JOAN MARCUS

Ethan Hawke charms as a wild guitar-strumming outlaw.