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**Article:**

Thom, A. (2024) Review of Shakespeare's Cymbeline (Directed by Gregory Doran for the Royal Shakespeare Company) at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 23 May 2023. *Shakespeare*, 20 (1). pp. 116-118. ISSN 1745-0918

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2023.2224288>

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**Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (Directed by Gregory Doran for the Royal Shakespeare Company) at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 23 May 2022.**

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In a parting feast from the Royal Shakespeare Company's Emeritus Artistic Director, Gregory Doran conjured a production of wild potency. His distinctive 'clarity' of vision and text, a watchword among the *testudo* of reviewers,<sup>1</sup> elevated *Cymbeline* into a lighter Lear. With Stephen Brimson Lewis's design, *Cymbeline* deployed a kaleidoscope of unintrusive details, all working to unify the chaotic plot into a mythic whole whose final message was one of wounded optimism.

A full moon loomed over an empty stage. The court assembled, presenting a dumb-show to support the opening exposition. As a courtier recalled Posthumus's dead family, invoking the father whose valour won the 'sur-addition Leonatus' (1.1.33), the ghostly Leonati (usually confined to the fifth act) emerged from the gloom. Their attire was, at once, recognisably Roman and yet otherworldly: military tassets over blue cloth, trimmed with fur, and tragic masks of faded copper. They were unmistakably different from the scarlet legions of Caius Lucius that later intruded upon the stage. As the dumb-show proceeded, a puppet-boy of Posthumus, tiny and redhaired – stealing an audible 'aw' from the audience – was orphaned and then adopted by Cymbeline, before disappearing in lieu of the man of the present (Ed Sayer).

The court were clad in winter hues: blacks, greys, blues. Even Cymbeline's crown was dull iron. Brimson Lewis cautiously distinguished Posthumus with a muted green, but

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<sup>1</sup> Lawson, '*Cymbeline* Review'; Davies, '*Cymbeline* at the RSC Review'.

Imogen's costume most directly spoke to the grand fertility myth that *Cymbeline's* action rests upon. Her lower skirt was glacial, but her white top was embroidered with blooming flowers and twining plants. Indeed, the moon itself was tinted coldly at court and warmer elsewhere. The message was plain: the king and court are ill, both in body and soul; and Imogen's adventure will take us from winter to spring, from death into life.

In an off-hand remark, Iachimo names Imogen as 'th' Arabian bird' (1.6.17), and Amber James carried this rare, phoenix-like part with moments of scorching wit, sharp incredulity, and dovelike hurt. The dexterity and nuance of her performance threatened to defeat Posthumus, whose pained turn by Ed Sayer was respectably literal. This was, perhaps, the one defect of the play to which Doran had no solution: we hear so much of Posthumus's good parts, but we see so few. The closest we came to glimpsing what Imogen might cherish in the man was perhaps too late: in the final act, smeared with woad, fighting beneath a blood-red moon; and then, reaching for his ghostly forefathers, the puppet of his childhood once more appearing before him, but then slipping into darkness.

The text was pruned sparingly; the production threatened 200 minutes. Yet it clipped along, in part thanks to a bombastic ensemble. Conor Glean's pouting Cloten managed to win laughs with a synthesis of machismo, childishness, and squint-eyed malignance. Mark Hadfield's Pisanio was precisely what the play needed: a human epicentre, a plain witness. Alexandra Gilbreath was deliciously wicked, elevating the Queen with her well-tuned ear for irony: 'Unless thou think'st me devilish?' she asked, cleverly laughing with a little too much incredulity (1.6.16). Peter de Jersey confidently handled the challenging titular role, showing us glimpses of innate charisma beneath bouts of rage and weakness: exhibiting a sovereign in spiritual decline, without souring the audience to his recovery. This perilous trajectory was partly secured from the start, by staging the Queen's regular doses of 'medicine' for *Cymbeline*, from a corrupting flask he metonymically discarded at the conclusion of the play.

Jamie Wilkes thankfully didn't live down to Iachimo's stereotype. Rather than the reprised Iago implied by the programme notes, he was much more like a sleazy *bravo*, who realised the line he was crossing even as he did so. His first appearance, bare-chested in a flowing orange robe, reeked of testosterone and drink-sodden competition. Likewise, the casket scene, which can seem farcical, was riven first with tension and then by doubts. Imogen abruptly moved in her sleep, causing an intake of breath from both Iachimo and the audience. Then '[n]o more: to what end?' and 'I have enough' were murmured in a tone approaching regret (2.2.42, 46). As the crimson-clad Wilkes clambered back into the chest, 'hell is here' felt much less about the 'fear' of detection, but instead about Iachimo's more terrible discovery: he has proven a Mephistopheles not only to Posthumus, but to himself (2.2.50, 49).

The foresters' home was assembled in the interval. Beneath that great moon, we returned to a wreathlike portal, woven from long branches. In its placement, this wild bower repeated but altered the hard palace door that stood, conspicuously apart from the rest of the set, for Imogen's chamber entrance: 'Who's there that knocks?' (2.3.76). Indeed, this new set's nestlike quality became terribly legible when Arviragus (Daf Thomas) emerged with Imogen in his arms: 'The bird is dead / That we have made so much on' (4.2.147-8). They laid her softly on the ground, upon which, one noticed for the first time, was a faint, but great circle. The foresters' forlorn song, the wildflowers laid on her, and the grisly body of Cloten were effective in communicating the dark, fairy-tale quality of her resurrection.

The battle sequence was striking, yet mercifully compact. A beaded scrim was lowered, onto which rain was projected; fog was pumped in and backlit, so the moon seemed to lie, part obscured, behind the clouds. The legionnaires fought in formation, a welcome concession to classicising pedants like myself, but perhaps too static for less uptight viewers. At least this restraint ensured that Jupiter's theophany was not overshadowed by too much

marital excitement. Announced by sudden flashes, cataracts of lightning in the dark; a cacophony of thunder and brass instruments rumbled, and from the dark lofts of the theatre a golden ring descended. Perched upon this floating dais, a muscular and golden Jupiter: his great bearded mask fixed in a rictus, like those of the Leonati cowering below, but polished and godlike. Upon the scrim, the dreamlike silhouette of a vast eagle slowly beat its wings.

*Cymbeline*'s closure is astonishing on the page. Doran's deft blocking rescued the closing scene from the turgid semi-circle that can afflict Shakespeare's climaxes: instead, there were distinct groupings, shifting in and out of perspectival focus. The pace remained high, and the closing scene had moments of great mirth: 'My boys / There was our error,' was perfectly delivered by Christian Patterson's sturdy Belarius (5.5.259-260); likewise, 'O gods, / I left out one thing,' from the mortified doctor (5.5.243-4). Importantly, James injected the scene with Imogen's profound, moving simplicity: 'I have got two worlds by't' (5.5.375). As the production rattled towards its close, Doran pulled off one last trick. The court, the foresters, the lovers, Romans and Britons all, turned to the moon, whose light grew brighter and brighter. The characters, the whole space began to disappear into this incandescence – and, for a moment, the audience also shone with the light of renewal.

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