



Summer's Shakespearean Tales, Topdogs/Underdogs

by [Don Shirley](#) | August 25, 2010

This year's summer Shakespeare season has been rife with cases of unfounded sexual jealousy. Independent Shakespeare Company staged the most famous play on the subject, *Othello*, and it's now presenting *Much Ado About Nothing* - with its subplot about the ridiculously callow and green-eyed Claudio.

In any competition for the most jealous Shakespearean character, however, Othello and Claudio would have to duke it out with King Leontes of *A Winter's Tale*. And this is truly the summer of *A Winter's Tale*. Kingsmen Shakespeare Festival in Thousand Oaks tackled it (sorry, I missed that one), as did Theater 150 in Ojai. Now, one of the most creative interpretations of the *Tale* ever conceived is at the Falcon Theatre in Burbank under the title *A Wither's Tale*.

Yes, the Troubadour Theater has tossed the ingredients of *A Winter's Tale* with the soulful musical stylings of Bill Withers.

More about that in a moment, but first let's note that Jessica Kubzansky's take on *Winter's Tale* at Ojai was fairly creative, too. She expanded the brief role of Time into a character who appeared sporadically, reciting Shakespearean sonnets related to the time theme. But I found these passages too abstract to serve the function of a guide, and they made the play longer than necessary.

Also, in an attempt to explain what happened to the much-maligned Queen Hermione in the years in between her announced death and her dramatic return, Kubzansky arranged for Hermione to go undercover as the rogue Autolycus in the play's pastoral scenes (with both roles played by Carolyn Ratteray). This required only five altered words and a few judicious cuts, Philip Brandes reported in his Times review. But the concept was more original than satisfying - I wanted more details about why the queen would assume that particular identity, which seemed so foreign to her nature. How could she pull it off for so long? Why was it so necessary, considering that the king had long ago repented?



Joseph Keane as the Green Eyed Monster and Matt Walker as Leontes in *A Wither's Tale*

Kubzansky's ideas were relatively tame, compared to those of director Matt Walker and the other creators of *A Wither's Tale*. Would you believe a Hermione who might not be quite as unblemished as advertised? A bear who gives Antigonus ample time to be rescued? A green-eyed monster who isn't simply a metaphor? A play whose Shakespearean passages are occasionally interrupted by contemporary jokes and more frequently by choreographed Withers-inspired musical numbers?

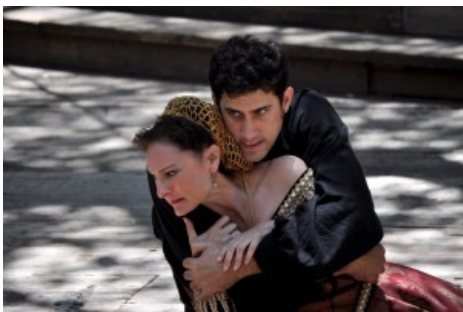
Actually, you probably would believe it. The mood of the music is well-matched to the shifting moods of the play, including the more serious moments. The power of the Shakespearean original still manages to emerge from time to time, in a way that's reminiscent of the company's *OthE.L.O.* in 2007.

Troubie regulars will want to know which roles Walker and Beth Kennedy are playing. Walker plays Leontes, of course, giving himself the chance to wail "Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone," but he also plays a carrot-topped clown (Autolycus?) in the pastoral scenes. Kennedy plays the no-nonsense Paulina and the (male) shepherd who finds the baby Perdita in the woods - and she also offers sushi to the guests at the harvest festival.

Although *A Wither's Tale* is the season's funniest Shakespeare, a close runner -up is Independent Shakespeare's *Much Ado*, especially the scene in which Benedick (David Melville) tries to snoop on the carefully staged conversation in which his friends prattle about how much Beatrice secretly dotes on him. Melville takes this scene and runs with it - quite literally.

It's a moment that bridges the gap between stage and audience in the company's new home, next to the Old Zoo on the east side of Griffith Park. The audience sits on a lawn that offers a lot more room than did the company's previous home at Barnsdall Park. But the audience must bring low-slung chairs or simply sit on blankets, because the keepers of the park won't allow risers to rise, as the authorities at Barnsdall did in their own, smaller park. I hope that the company can eventually persuade the parks department to change its mind about this and/or raise enough money to pay for whatever re-seeding might be required by the use of risers. Raked seating on risers helps concentrate the theatrical energy of an outdoor venue - a point that I've also made to Shakespeare Festival/LA (which didn't do a show this summer, but is scheduling another *Much Ado* next winter under its new name, Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles).

Turning from the hilarious to the truly chilling in this summer's Shakespeare, let me briefly point out something about the double-cast Antaeus production of *King Lear* that most of the critics didn't mention - probably because they didn't want to dilute the shock value. But since it has now closed, I won't spoil anyone's surprise when I report that director Bart DeLorenzo brought the usually offstage murder of the Fool into the open. The poor Fool was strangled by the Duke of Cornwall in a startling scene that took place just before the same duke gouged out Gloucester's eyes. I asked DeLorenzo about it during intermission, and he told me that he got the idea from the box-cutter murderers on 9/11, who quickly killed a few individuals in order to terrorize others.



Susan Angelo as Gertrude and Jeff Wiesen as

Hamlet at the Theatricum Botanicum

Like DeLorenzo's *King Lear*, the Theatricum Botanicum's *Hamlet* should probably be seen twice, as Mike Peebler and Jeff Wiesen take turns playing the roles of Hamlet and Laertes. So far I've seen it only once, so I won't make any comparisons here. But I will point out that Ellen Geer's alfresco production uses the widest stage I've ever seen for *Hamlet*, leading to a few especially expansive scenes.

Hamlet's pivotal conversation with the ghost of his father takes place on a real rooftop, where it looks as if either one of them could slip and fall without too much effort. This, of course, more or less sums up the position in which they see themselves - the ghost is about to enter hell, and Hamlet is wondering if he might be dragged down there, too.

Finally, the drowning of Ophelia is more clearly suggested than usual, because we see her disappearing down an actual stream bed. OK, it's dry. Still, if this production is ever revived, Geer should start thinking now about how to make that creek briefly flow with real water - but not ruin her main stage, which bridges it, a few yards downstream. Creative grantsmanship might come in handy, to pay for the engineering. Naturally, the engineer would have to figure out how to recycle the water, which could generate extra points in the grant proposal and in the later publicity. Are we all aboard on this?

***Much Ado About Nothing*, Old Zoo area of Griffith Park, enter from Crystal Springs Drive on the east side of the park, near the merry-go-round. Follow the signs. Free. Thur-Sun 7 pm. Closes Aug. 29. www.independentshakespeare.com.**

***A Wither's Tale*, Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank. Wed-Sat 8 pm; Sun 4 pm. Closes Sept. 26. 818-955-8101. www.FalconTheatre.com.**

***Hamlet*, Theatricum Botanicum, Sundays Aug. 29, Sept. 12, Sept. 19, 3:30 pm and Sept. 5, 7:30 pm; Saturdays Sept. 25, 8 pm; Oct. 2, 4 pm. 310-455-3723. www.theatricum.com.**

L.A. TIMES MONITOR: The Theatricum's innovatively-cast *Hamlet* has been open now since early June without an L.A. Times review. But let's give the Times some credit - it quickly reviewed the latest productions at two of the midsize companies whose preceding productions it had either ignored entirely (*Othello*) or ignored until it was almost too late (*Grace & Glorie*). In recent weeks, the Independent's *Much Ado* and the Colony's *Free Man of Color* received glowing Times reviews, at greater length and with more prominent displays than the Theater Beat reviews. Cheers for that.

Now let's look briefly at the Arts and Books section from last Sunday, which usually contains a feature article about some kind of theater, happening somewhere, if not in L.A. Last week, however, was an exception. The only trace of theater coverage in the section was the fact that theater critic Charles McNulty wrote a "Critics' Notebook" - but it was about a Patti Smith memoir, not theater. Nor did it even mention Michael Sargent's play *Black Leather*, which was about characters based on Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe and which played the Unknown Theater in Hollywood last fall (without a Times review).

DUELING 'DOGS': Which of the two current productions of Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog* is the topdog and which is the underdog? Well, the one that just opened at Fremont Centre Theatre in South Pasadena would initially appear to be the underdog, because it follows two weeks after the version at Lillian Theatre in Hollywood - so it probably won't receive as much public attention. On the other hand, James Reynolds' South Pasadena staging will transfer to an Equity-contract production at the Cape May Stage in New Jersey next month, so in that sense, it might well emerge as the topdog, at least in terms of remuneration for the actors.



Stephen Ryder,
Jed Reynolds in
Topdog/Underdog

I saw both versions over the weekend, and I preferred the Fremont's, in South Pasadena. Dove Huntley's set offers a grimy open window at the back of the two brothers' sad-sack apartment. Through the window, we can

see the top part of a vertical "OPEN" sign at some next-door establishment. This indicates that we're in at least a second-floor walk-up, or maybe even on a higher floor, which adds to the sense of weariness of Lincoln (Jed Reynolds) as he walks up from the street in the Abraham Lincoln get-up that he wears on his job in an amusement arcade.

The window also adds a narrow sense of the world outside the apartment. That world doesn't look welcoming, but at least this brief glimpse of it slightly relieves the sense of prolonged confinement that can overcome a play that lasts approximately 2 hours, 45 minutes (including intermission) with only two characters in one room. The Lillian production - which lacks such a window — is only about five minutes longer than the Fremont version, but it feels maybe a half-hour longer. Part of that is probably due to the direction and the performances as well as the set design, but that window helps the South Pasadena production feel brisker, more urgent.

The casting is also a factor. In the Hollywood production, I couldn't help but wonder if anyone had considered reversing the slightly distracting casting. M.D. Walton is taller and lighter-complexioned than A.D. Murtadha, yet Murtadha plays the more dominant, older brother - who makes his living playing a tall, white man (albeit while wearing whiteface makeup). I guess you could argue that this casting adds yet more irony to the situation.

In South Pasadena, however, Reynolds as Lincoln and Stephen Ryder as Booth are more logically cast in their respective roles, and the performances soar — while those in Hollywood eventually sag. Whatever the reasons, I found the South Pasadena production - which I saw two days after the Hollywood production - considerably more emotionally involving.

***Topdog/Underdog*, Fremont Centre Theatre, 1000 Fremont Ave. (at El Centro), South Pasadena. Fri-Sat, 8 pm; Sun, 3 pm. Closes Sept. 18. 866-811-4111. www.fremontcentretheatre.com.**

***Topdog/Underdog*, Lillian Theatre, 6322 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. Fri-Sat, 8 pm; Sun, 2 and 7 pm. Closes Sept. 12. 323-960-7719. www.plays411.com/topdog.**

A Wither's Tale photo by Chelsea Sutton

Hamlet photo by Ian Flanders

Topdog/Underdog photo by Dove Huntley

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