



## The Winters Tale at Harrogate Theatre

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Reviewed by Trevor A. Broadbank (the artist formerly known as Dj Trev)

Did you know that Charly Chaplin played at The Harrogate Theatre? Neither did I. Ben Kingsley also “trod the boards” there (which means “done an acting”). It’s a pretty cool theatre.

This is one of the things about living in Harrogate: tourists flock here and we kind of don’t get it – because – well, it’s where we live and there is nowt special about that surely?

In my profession (I am, essentially, a really expensive mobile disco or “juke-box”) I have been lucky enough – occasionally unlucky enough – to play all over the country; doing that has really given me a perspective of how fantastic Harrogate is. Seemingly every year we win an award for being the happiest place to live in Britain and people here are often surprised! But as someone who often goes away, Harrogate is always a fantastic place to return to. I love Britain, there are some amazing places to visit, but it is always great to get back home. The Stray, the pubs, and yes, even the polite and orderly queues on the roads into town. Humans naturally have an affinity with their home, but I do think in Harrogate we are luckier than we know.

Nevertheless it is also natural that we take it for granted.

If, like me, you spend too much time reading other peoples lives on facebook and the like, you will often see people bemoaning that there is little to do in Harrogate. Whilst I would suggest that for younger types, this may have some worth, for those of us in the prime of our lives, it’s just not true.

Harrogate International Festival runs events ranging from Classical Concerts to lifestyle management, with Historical Fiction weeks, Crime Writing, open air cinema and more. Meanwhile the range of live venues means we get a scope of performing arts that rivals pretty much anywhere in the UK.

The Royal Hall, International Center and Harrogate Theatre (did you know it used to be called The Grand Opera House? Opera being bigger in 1900 than dubstep was in 2013) have stages of an apt size for a huge range of shows, so if you do find yourself wanting to do something a little more cultural than watching the latest Marvel re-boot at the cinema, you can’t go wrong.

I’m hardly the greatest aficionado of Shakespeare, but it is impossible to not have some appreciation for the genius of the man. As I’ve mellowed with age, I find myself less looking

for the visual theatre of someone like Marilyn Manson, and want to watch something that demands a little more from me. I am sure that there are people who don't find Shakespeare challenging, but I am not one of those people. Accordingly, the first 15 minutes of any play of his tends to be a bewildering barrage of words I don't understand, with me often thinking "Why didn't you just say there are two families who don't like each other, but their kids did??" . However, having just re-read my preamble to this piece, I can attest that writing is a bit like Peanut M&Ms. Why use one word when you can eat an entire bag?

I usually only see one Shakespeare production a year, and it tends to be one of the great Sprite Productions that are held at Ripley Castle. Unfortunately Sprite are taking 2015 off (well deserved) so I had thought to not seeing any of the Baird's work this year. Open air theatre is something it's easy to get people to go to; I lure them in with promises of prosecco, crusty bread and boursin, before bludgeoning them into submission with my artificial high-brow. Nevertheless I saw *The Winters Tale* was on at Harrogate Theatre, and despite having never heard of that particular piece, decided to give it a shot. My girlfriend wasn't convinced, but she makes me go to zoos to look at stupid animals so I was insistent.

I somehow got to thinking that *The Winters Tale* was a comedy, and on the basis of the first half of the play, was accordingly baffled and, not a little, distressed. This really is a play of two halves, and the first half is bleak and crushing, but that isn't to say it's not enjoyable.

The acting is superb. The king's descent into jealousy and madness is utterly convincing and, as a bloke who sometimes takes leave of his senses through strong liquors, brought to mind the unmindful kebab-house-4am-logic of the mentally troubled. His queen delivers a heart felt scene that she steals, and the first half of the play is broadly speaking brilliantly traumatic, testing and intense.

Then, in the closing scene of the first half, the tone changes significantly. There is evidence of Shakespeare's comedy, with the introduction of two, clearly, lighter characters. This means that as you head to the (beautifully restored) Circle Bar you are at once confused, curious, and speaking for myself, very much looking forward to seeing where the second half would take things.

Speaking to people at half time this seemed to be the consensus; though I met my editor here at Harrogate-news, who confessed to me that since he "struggled to follow what was going on in *The Matrix* movie, (he was) totally lost with this".

My girlfriend seemed to be enjoying it, though she did say, somewhat archly, "you said it was a comedy"...

On then, to the second half, which opens up and it is as if you have been transported to a different world. Indeed, the premise is that you have, having moved from the homeland of the king "not entirely in touch with reality" of Sicilia, to Bohemia (a far away country about which we know little).

The nature of this shift is mainly in the performance, there is very little scenery, indeed the visual aspect subtly brilliant, but more of that later.

The atmosphere change comes from the songs that suddenly abound, alongside jokes and physical comedy. Suddenly the play is a romp, and it romps along at a pace.

In the first half there was a young boy who was disturbingly attractive, but through the magic of theatre, the player portraying the boy who – spoiler alert – passes away, goes on to play his younger sister, who has grown into a deeply beautiful character and splendid heroine, who, in the way of such things, you really hope everything turns out ok for.

The plot unfolds at a barn dance – so far removed from the sparsity of the first half of the play, you have to keep reminding yourself that it is the same production. Naturally, once the main story arc is revealed, as is the way with Shakey, you realise why his plays are still being performed to this day, several weeks after he passed away. As someone who frequently gives this writing lark a bit of a go, nailing the full circle of a story like this is what I am always trying to achieve.

By all accounts *The Winters Tale* comes and goes in and out of popularity; some critics find it to be one of Shakespeare's "problem" plays, due, I suspect, to the change from intense psychological drama to an upbeat comedy. Certainly, it makes for an unusual play, but personally I find that to be what makes it rewarding. I don't enjoy tragedies, and loathe and detest the current popular type of open ended movie ("work it out for yourself" they say, if I wanted to do that I would have done a crossword). Equally, I don't want it all laid on a plate for me, and the nature of Shakespearean dialogue means I had to put effort into enjoying this show, and by the final scene I was loving it.

The cast is very strong, one player portrays his modern schemester character perfectly, jumping from persona to persona, in-between throwing in a busker style pastiche of Bob Dylan and then Oasis-esque lad rock that he absolutely nails, utilising a loop pedal better than many live musicians I have seen. He is also the axis of a musical threesome that is the highlight of the play, brilliantly visual, and played and performed with two duelling dames who deliver the number with West End aplomb.

I mentioned the staging of the play, which is an exercise in subtle brilliance; again it was only three quarters of the way through that this became apparent. As we move towards the conclusion, the action moves once more back to Sicilia. Various shutters are closed on the stage and white sheeting returns and... well, that's basically it! Yet the effect is immediate. From the warmth of Bohemia, we return to the sparse, muted land which played host to the dark brooding opening of the play. The conclusion is more downbeat than the uplifting farmyard fun that makes up most of the second half, and some Shakespearean exposition notwithstanding, the play closes with all parties satisfied, not least of all the audience, which is – let's face it – the whole point.

This is a really interesting play; it's not the most straightforward thing you will ever watch, taking some work, but is ultimately all the more rewarding for that.

Most importantly, you should remember this is right on your doorstep! Harrogate Theatre regularly has some of the finest talent on display, and whilst you may have missed Charly Chaplin when he was there, you owe it to yourself to check out what is on.

I totally get that Shakespeare is not to everyone's tastes; if you are looking for something less dark, the comedy festival commeth, from the 5th of October until the 17th. Featuring some really big names (Jenny Éclair, Ed Byrne, Josh Widdicombe, Stewart Francis, Julian Clary, Jimmy Carr, Beardyman, Tim Brooke-Taylor & Chris Serle, and something called The Thinking Drinkers guide that looks like it was written for me, apart from the thinking bit) it's establishing itself as one of the leading comedy seasons in the UK. The theatre and the Royal Hall split the events between them, with the Studio Theatre offering a smaller venue suitable for the more intimate shows.

Outside of the theatre, the town has fantastic house music events (monthly, Knee Deep at Moko Lounge); regular live music gigs 7 days a week at The Blues Bar; occasional live gigs such as Tom Hingley from the Inspiral Carpets at 10 Devonshire Place on October 14th, or the Oompah band playing there for Oktoberfest on 30th September; a range of great pub quizzes (such as The Geek Pub Quiz at Major Tom's Social on 25th October or more disingenuously my own pub quiz every Sunday at 10 Devonshire Place); An all day live music festival just down the road at Henshaws, Knaresborough for Hallowe'en; plus of course a great range of bars ranging all the way from the try-hard hipster right through to the mainstream. That's before you even think of how many restaurants we have (currently at a ratio of 6 to every member of the population).

For arts and culture, and beer, and food, whatever you fancy, you've just got to stick your head out of your front door.

The Winter's Tale is only running up to this Saturday, so don't hang about, before you know it winter for real will be upon us, so make the most of this "Indian-sh" summer we are getting!

Cheers for reading, Trev x x x