

THE PRESS

Review: The Winter's Tale, Northern Broadsides, on tour until November 28



Conrad Nelson as Leontes and Hannah Barrie as Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. Picture: Nobby Clark

56 minutes ago / [Theatre](#)

CONRAD Nelson combines directing with playing the king in *The Winter's Tale*, dual roles in a play noted for its supposedly troublesome duality of settings, 16 years apart.

"It's got a reputation as a problem play but it's only a problem play until you look at the problem," he says in an act of positivity you would want to hear in a plumber and a car mechanic and especially so in a theatre director, who delivers a "daringly

theatrical and heartbreakingly human” staging of the shape-shifting Shakespeare drama.

Nelson moves the initial setting, in King Leontes’ Sicilia, to 1999 on the eve of the Millennium with a party in full flow until the King throws a spectacular wobbly, wrongly accusing his pregnant wife Hermione (Hannah Barrie) of having slept with his brother Polixenes (Jack Lord), who does a flit from the palace without explanation.

In an irrational jealous rage, Nelson’s dark and brooding Leontes orders the death of his wife and “bastard” child, but quickly regrets it. So far, so superior soap opera storyline, *Broadsides* at their most grave.

Cue a switch to 16 years later, in other words 2015, and we are in the world of Bohemia, with Mike Hugo’s Autocylus revealing beatbox and busking skills and a very passable imitation of Bob Dylan, before the company of actor-musicians join in for a glorious song and dance. Hugo’s comic turn is a stand-out in an impressive ensemble cast that hit its straps in its first week at Harrogate Theatre, the show’s co-producers.

The child, thankfully not dead, has grown into love-struck teenager Perdita (Vanessa Schofield), and the second act is an utter joy, with romance, sheep, disguises, swapped roles and bags of northern energy.

The mood must change again for the third act’s scene of reconciliation, forgiveness and the triumph of love, as the statue of Hermione comes to life. Nelson’s third string to his bow, as composer, comes to a peak with an ensemble choral number as beautiful as Hermione’s expression.

Nelson does not overplay the significance of the 1999/2015 settings but it does give a contemporary context to the drama, one where Millennial new hope vanishes so quickly, so ominously, but beguiling love conquers all.

Dawn Allsopp’s sparse set is the perfect complement, letting the language and characterisation, the music and dance, tell the story in the claustrophobic Sicilia and quirky, free-spirited Bohemia.

The Winter’s Tale, Northern Broadsides, vists Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough, from October 20 to 24. Box office: 01723 370541 or sjt.uk.com