

Theater group brings 'Cymbeline' to the stage

[Mariah Rush](#) | Thursday, November 15, 2018

Faked deaths. Real deaths. An evil stepmother. Conspiracies. Betrayal. Love. Ghosts. A god. You can catch all of these elements at the Not-So-Royal (NSR) Shakespeare Company's production of "Cymbeline," which is running from Thursday to Saturday.

"I think it's one of the most intense plots Shakespeare ever wrote ... I like to think of it as Shakespeare's fairytale," junior Mary Elsa Henrichs, who is directing the play, said. "It's got a lot of those elements. There's a wicked stepmother, a princess who runs away in disguise and kidnapped princes. There's also decapitation and a war between Britain and Rome ... so there's a lot of elements going on."

Henrichs described the play as "genre-breaking," and said it takes elements from tragedies, comedies and romances.

NSR is a unique Shakespeare troupe as it is entirely student run — from the production design to directing to marketing, the students are at the reigns of the project.

"I think it's really special and amazing that we have this club on campus, because I think it's one thing to encounter a text of Shakespeare in a class, and that can be really wonderful and beneficial, but I really believe they were written to be performed and written to be seen," Henrichs said. "To be able to bring plays, one a semester, to the Notre Dame campus community so that we can experience Shakespeare in the fashion that he wrote for, rather than just reading it on a page or even SparkNoting it, is really great."

Henrichs is a veteran of acting in Shakespeare plays and said "Cymbeline" is one of the reasons she fell in love with Shakespeare's works.

"I've been in 15 of Shakespeare's plays, and this was the one where I think I fell in love with acting," she said. "... It's just such a wild plot for actors to be spinning together. So I think it offers a lot to its actors and its creators. It's a show that everyone has to work together to bring together."

Henrichs said there is also value in producing a lesser-known play.

"I think there's a lot of pressure to be haughty for some prestigious play, but we are the Not-So-Royal Shakespeare Company, so we're able to take on these pieces and bring a cool life to them," she said.

Junior Ellis Sargeant is acting in a production of “Cymbeline” for a second time after first acting in it in high school. This time he is taking on the role of Posthumus Leonatus, a character whom Sargeant said he can relate to, although the character does go through some things that most people will not, such as ordering the murder of his wife.

“One of the reasons I was really drawn to the role is that, although murder is a bit much and it’s about royal figures in life and death, the actual things that he’s going through is stuff that I can actually relate to, like heartbreak and betrayal,” Sargeant said.

Sargeant said “Cymbeline” is an interesting play to perform, because Shakespeare incorporates many of the typical fairytale archetypes that we know of today, even before most of those typical fairytales were written.

“You have these fairytale elements,” he said. “ ... There’s the evil potion given by an evil stepmother. It’s following all of these tropes and predates all the Disney movies that we’re familiar with. Despite being a very little known play, it actually shows up a lot in our cultural consciousness. We understand the archetypes of the characters that are in it. We know what it’s like to have the virtuous heroine. We know what it’s like to have the fallen hero. We know what it’s like to have the trickster, the evil stepmother or the blind king.”

This particular production of “Cymbeline” uses key props to both set the stage of the play and as plot devices. A couple of these, according to Henrichs and Sargeant, are a trunk and a vial of something that may or may not be poison.

“We consistently throughout the play are pulling things out of the trunk and building the world around us. We even build the theater around the audience in order to start the show and expose just a little bit of the artifice in order to bring people into the story,” Sargeant said.

Sophomore Isobel Grogan, who is playing Cymbeline’s daughter Innogen, said “Cymbeline” has many of the qualities that Shakespeare is known for including in his works.

“If you had to pick one play of Shakespeare’s that perfectly encapsulates all of his tropes and his weirdness and his issues and his strengths, I think ‘Cymbeline’ is the best one. It’s got a lot of moving parts,” Grogan said.

Grogan said each character has a specific prop throughout the play, which works towards their goal in stripping the play of many of its more complicated frills in order to simplify it for the audience.

“We’re playing with the idea of everybody having one emblematic prop that defines their character. [We are] taking away as many frills as possible to get down to the base of the story and let that speak for itself,” Grogan said.

Sargeant said the beauty of performing this fairytale-esque play instead of something more realistic or relatable is grounded in our ever-present storytelling as a society and as people.

“We constantly tell stories about ourselves,” he said. “There is not an aspect of our lives that we don’t tell in the form of a story. No one can actually condense themselves down to something that’s able to be given to another person without a story, without a narrative. You always pick and choose which details you’re telling ... and bring[ing] the audience into them rather than hiding them I think is a good way to have people look at it in a way that’s different from how it’s normally done.”

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