

Prelude to The Winter's Tale – dinner with AC Grayling

Lyrebird Restaurant, QPAC
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Guests:

Fiona Stager

Jim Soorley

Mary Philip

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Prof Julianne Schultz

Prof Peter Holbrook

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Professor Judith McLean

John Kotzas

Rebecca Lamoin

Kirsten Siddle

AC Grayling

I'm going to stand up too. In my case, it's because I've no idea where I keep my brains so it's always safe to be on my feet.

This is a delight. Thank you so much for your invitation. It's lovely to be back. I really do love being here and to be in this setting with you folks is quite exclusive. I'm really delighted.

I'm also delighted to be talking about this play in connection with the performance coming up. I haven't seen it myself, but I'm a balletomane. I love the ballet and my very, very dear friend Carlos Acosta at whose wedding in Cuba a year or so ago, I had the honour to speak about what it is to be married, and in fact what it is to be married to a ballet dancer because when I first knew him I happened to be guest director of the Chapel Literary Festival and my program or my part of the festival was just to be in conversation with some people and one of the people I invited was Carlos.

Every now and then during the conversation, he would do something balletic. He would make a gesture like this and there was this huge audience mainly of women and a great frisson went through the audience whenever he did it.

At one point he said "You know it's extremely punishing on the body, ballet so after every performance I have this masseur that I work with all the time, and after every performance I have to have a massage" and a hand went up in the audience and a lady said "Can I massage you?"

Anyway, it's a great picture, and as you said *The Winter's Tale* is one of the late plays and I think ought really to be read alongside *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* because there's something very, very interesting and unusual about that set of plays.

People think of it as late work so at least it makes you think of Titian and Rembrandt and their late paintings. You know when their eyesight was going and they didn't care anymore. You do remember don't you that triptych of cartoons where it has the young man 19 or 20 years of age, know it all, and then you have the middle aged man with the big beer belly, say it all and then you have the old bloke in his bath chair saying "Bugger it all".

You get the sense that Rembrandt and Titian at that stage in their lives anyway were no longer all that bothered about their particular encounters. They just wanted to work the paint onto the surface of the canvas and to be more expressive and free and to do something outside the bounds of whatever it was that was going to please the patron.

When you look at the structure of those four plays that Shakespeare's written in about 1611, '12, '13, that kind of period was like, because he died as you know in 1616, you see something similar. You see a greater freedom, especially with the use of the time.

A greater freedom with the use of devices that you move a plot on or solve a problem or bring somebody back to life from seeming death or whatever it might be. The use of ideas from alchemy, from magic, from astrology, from the mystic.

So, it's an interesting collection of works and you notice about all of them in particular that if you just came to the work fresh and unfamiliar with the conventions of Jacobian theatre, you'd be very surprised at what seems like structural clumsiness. After all, in *The Winter's Tale* is a great gap of 16 years left over bang in the middle of the play, that seems a bit awkward until you realise that that play, *Pericles* for example, has a big gap of time in it too and the other two have long pre-stories to them.

There's a long period of time before where things happened and times were passing until the crucial moment. That's an example from *The Tempest*. So you get a sense of a much more expansive vision both in time and in place because the action takes place in different countries as well.

When you think about the poetry of Shakespeare's language and you think about the beauty of *Antony and Cleopatra* for example or certainly of the great tragedies and you think of the wonderful, sparkling, playful humour of some of the earlier comedies, when you look for that in the later plays you don't really find it so much, but you find a slightly different, richer language which has a different hue to it.

I was thinking actually just a week or so before I flew over here, I was going down into Surrey to talk at a school at Bramley College. I'd been driven from Guildford and the car came around a big corner and there was a great bank of daffodils. Now everybody thinks Wordsworth of course, but I thought because *The Winter's Tale* was on my mind, "Daffodils, that come before the swallow dares and take the winds of March with beauty". Wonderful.

Every now and then in *The Winter's Tale* there are these extraordinary lines and my own personal most favourite line in all of Shakespeare is in *The Winter's Tale* was when the shepherd and the clown find the little baby Perdita and after poor old Antigonus has been chased off by a bear and eaten by it.

So there they are with the little baby and all the jewellery and the gold and the rich things around there and the shepherd says to his son, he says "On this day's good luck we will do good things". Wonderful line. Absolutely marvellous.

So there is this play in which the ferocity of Leontes' jealousy and the submission to it of Hermione and the ferocity of Polixenes' anger – quite suppose Leontes' too – but Polixenes' anger with Florizel, his son when he finds that he's been dallying with what he thinks is a shepherdess. The hypocrisy of it, the tyranny of these two kings stands out against the background where everybody else with the single exception of Autolycus who's a real rogue, but with the single exception of him, everybody else in that play is a really good person, really warm-hearted, kind, generous, honourable royal, even to the extent indeed of royalty on the part of Camillo and Antigonus to these tyrannical kings that they serve.

This is something which has been picked up by critics a lot about the tenor, the character of these last plays which strike people as being, even when they have these unpleasant and sort of bitter scenes, Leontes' bitter, acidic attack on Hermione when he thinks that she's been unfaithful.

Even despite that, there is this much, much kinder feeling. There's a sense of the possibilities of reconciliation and that people can make it up even if it takes a great deal of time. Still, time will bring in the opportunity for a resolution to a great falling out and it's common to all those plays and there is a sense that because he was at the end of his career maybe some of these works were written in retirement or semi-retirement, that there was a lot of reconciliation and sense of ultimate compromise in Shakespeare's own vision of the world.

Then one remembers something, that he was in his late 40s, early 50s. He died at the age of 52. He wasn't an old man when he wrote these plays although people think of them as plays of great maturity or great experience when somehow he had crossed the bar and then was in an open sea of acceptance of a different view of what lay ahead.

I think there is something else to be said about it. We know that *The Winter's Tale* might have been performed at the marriage of Princess Elizabeth to that really awful Elector Palatine who was so responsible for precipitating the Thirty Years War later because he thought he was the subject of a prophecy about how the red Protestant prince would save the whole of Europe from the rule of Catholics at that time.

But, that moment in time must have been one where anybody looking back in 1590 to the 1580s when Shakespeare was young and when he was first beginning to work, has been at times so different from the late Elizabethan period, the Jacobian period and the settlement that followed the attempted atrocity of the terrorist attack on Parliament on the 5th of November 1605 and that things were in a different state or a different condition and that that too fed into this idea of some kind of reconciliation.

What it reminds me of is this. Have any of you here read *Sanditon*, the few chapters that Jane Austen managed to write of *Sanditon*? It is a most astonishing experience to see where Jane Austen was going just in the last months of her life.

As you know, all the classic Jane Austen novels were originally written back at the end of the previous century. So they were all written in the 1790s and then she reworked them and so around about 1811 or 12 she began to publish them in a revised form because she revisited them and rewrote them, but they were all essentially late 18th Century works.

1815, the war had ended. There had been a great economic depression and people with baronetcies and peerages were having to make money. Therefore, they'd started to build ribbon development housing along the south coast to sell and make a little bit of money. Quite a different world from the world of the 18th Century, that's for sure and *Sanditon* was a novel about a baronet who is poor and is having to get into property and build some houses, holiday homes on the southern coast of England.

This is Jane Austen, and you realise that she was seeing the world differently and was working or actually thinking on a different key. For me, the plays, the four plays I've mentioned of Shakespeare's are like that. They're in a different key. The themes in them, the language in them, the use of time and the fact that he was prepared to move his characters from Sicily to the shores of Bohemia and back again was a new departure for him.

He was criticised in his own way for it too because people thought that he'd become sloppy. A lot of critics since, right up into our own time, have thought that these plays have broken back to be structurally very poor and their use of these immaculate devices in order to resolve the plot or to bring it to an end.

Even indeed the use of descriptions of what happened off stage, it was one of the things that was most criticised at the time. Surely they should have been enacted on the stage. They discovered who Perdita was and how they knew that she was Hermione's daughter. It was all just reported off stage.

In fact, if you think about that, that's a very innovative device. It makes you think. If Shakespeare were alive today he would be a television director or a film director or really excited about doing things completely differently from how anybody had ever done before because he was experimenting.

What we're looking at in those plays and in *The Winter's Tale* is experimental theatre in Jacobian terms. It's also by the way, Shakespeare's version of what we would now think of as science fiction because he's using alchemy, magic, strange things happening. In the *Tempest*, the isle is full of strange noises. It's a different key, a different bit of theatre for maybe an audience that was wanting different things and was fed up with what was traditional.

One of the little things that people don't notice is that the play is very closely based on a novella by Robert Greene called *Pandosto*. If you've read it actually, it's rather full of good things. There's a tradition in that kind of writing where there are often wise sayings of the ancients and obviously agreeing with others he wrote because there are a lot of lovely aphorisms and pieces of wisdom. But Robert Greene was the person who when Shakespeare was starting his career had lampooned him as an upstart crow even then for doing things in half-borrowed feathers you may remember.

There's some rumour to the effect that Shakespeare interfered with one of Greene's own works and changed something because he didn't like it when it was brought to the stage and Greene was very, very annoyed. I read this paragraph in something else that he was writing, as an attack on Shakespeare just before he died.

You can see Shakespeare got over it. He was perfectly happy to use Greene's work. He used *Pandosto* and very, very close to the text theme, the language is similar – as so it happens with Shakespeare. Compare his text with Ovid and other sources.

As always with that magic he transformed the text division, the way the story is told, the characters and how they present themselves with that extraordinary alchemy of literary genius that Shakespeare had.

I think of *The Winter's Tale* which I've seen a number of times, a number of different performances in London on the stage with efforts made to deal with the problem of what seems like the awkwardness of the Great Temple of the Aten and the use is made therefore of the occasion where Polixenes and Camillo disguise themselves in order to see what Florizel is about.

You remember there's a party, I mean it's a rural scene and he's handing flowers out to people and Shakespeare's extraordinary botanical knowledge comes into play there too. That scene is a scene which gives an opportunity for a king, not known to be a king, to encounter a maid who thinks that she's just a shepherdess.

Go back to the original text of Greene in *Pandosto* to the moment where the prince, the young prince meets and talks to the young shepherdess and the way she responds. This idea of natural nobility, of being somebody who is this special woman and wasn't just a shepherd's daughter.

But in that encounter between Polixenes and Perdita when she's talking to him and responding to his questions, the conception that Shakespeare had of what a noble character is like, what a noble mind, a fine mind. I mean noble in the sense of being an aristocrat in the sense of its virtues, but the idea of the aristocratic mind and the fineness of sensibility is paradigmatically expressed in Perdita's responses to Polixenes and indeed it's also in Hermione when Hermione is responding to Leontes' accusations earlier on in the play.

Those two women, especially the Perdita speech captures for me this tremendous respect that Shakespeare had for fineness of an intellect or the fineness of the mind and its moral sensibility.

You see it in *The Tempest* as well. You see it in *Pericles*. So I think he was thinking about these things more at that time and whatever it was that he was thinking about, my old tutor actually, AD Nuttall, Tony Nuttall wrote that wonderful book about Shakespeare as a philosopher was interested in this problem as well.

It was something that gave him, Shakespeare, as it seems to me, just an interpretation, a more positive and a kinder view of human nature than is present in some of his earlier characterisations, people like Young and so on.

So that is my halfpenny worth from *The Winter's Tale* which I'm sure you're going to love when you see it being danced.