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CYMBELINE *** out of ****

SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARK

In October, James Earl Jones and Cicely Tyson will start performing in that chestnut *The Gin Game*. I hope Lily Rabe and Hamish Linklater take the time to see those old pros in it, because some day -- if we're lucky -- they'll be doing *The Gin Game* as well. True, their artistic union is relatively new compared to fabled performers like Hume Cronyn & Jessica Tandy or the combustible Richard Burton & Elizabeth Taylor. And Linklater had a point in one recent article: Lily Rabe has great chemistry with everyone.

So let's not turn them into an "event," or a nickname like "Rabelater" or "Hamilily." Let's just enjoy them for what they are: two very talented actors. I'd go see Lily Rabe in anything. I'd go see Hamish Linklater in anything. And if they're together in a show, why that's twice the reason to go see whatever it is.

In this case the show is *Cymbeline*, the latest Shakespeare in the Park offering (not to mention the latest to offer this duo in leading roles). Shakespeare In The Park remains a treasure for New York City and Linklater and Rabe are becoming a terrific annual tradition for that series. A central complaint is the play itself. It's almost an anonymous template for all the other romances: two lovers at cross ends, a foolish wager/moment of doubt on part of the man (men are such foolish beasts), a little cross-dressing, some comic relief and an all's well that ends well wrap-up explaining who did what to whom and when. It's all here, though without the greatness of Shakespeare at his best.

But even so-so Shakespeare can be great fun, especially when performed with élan. From top to bottom, this is a strong, delightful cast having a ball under the summer stars. True, the outdoor setting and short rehearsal can sometimes encourage a loosey-goosey attitude that feels indulgent. But this time the playfulness feels earned and rooted in character. Kate Burton and Patrick Page are royalty indeed. Toss in Raúl Esparza as a big band crooner/bad guy, Jacob Ming-Trent (so good in *Father Comes Home From The Wars*) in numerous smaller roles and of course Linklater and Rabe as two lovers and you've got yourself a winning night of theater.

On the down side, the set by Riccardo Hernandez is basically just a frame for the action. All for the good, but some crates piled up on both sides of the stage rather randomly are marked by the names of Shakespeare plays. Not a lot of them, mind you. Just *Hamlet* (twice) and *King Lear*. WTF? And two tragedies? It's like they started to fiddle with an idea and then stopped. Peppering them with romances or characters from romances or nothing at all would make more sense.

Further, director Daniel Sullivan peters out of ideas by the end, an end that to be fair is labored with countless summaries of the story we've just seen. Plus the battle scene is ramshackle, with no sense of what is actually going on. After a very strong first half, the second starts to drag, despite the goodwill the cast engenders at every turn,

On the bright side, the doubling of many roles pays dividends. Since the play is no great shakes, it keeps the evening lively when you get to see Burton and Page double their parts while others play three or four roles.

Instead of a cost-saving measure and instead of just filling the stage with lesser talents (which is tiring in a lesser play), this encourages a "let's put on a show" atmosphere.

Finally, we have Rabe and Linklater. Though little is motivated, they both bring the lovers Imogen and Posthumus to vibrant life. His despair over her imagined betrayal (while absurdly illogical; I mean, they just parted!) is wrenching. Her scene at his supposed gravesite is also fully invested in pain over the loss of their young love. And Linklater's mouth-breathing take on his rival Cloten is enjoyable precisely because he takes this figure of fun with due seriousness. When Linklater as Cloten is spitting out his anger at Rabe and showering her with spittle, the layers of amusement are manifold. When Rabe tells him with deadpan earnestness, "I hate you," it's witheringly funny. For all the flaws of the play and the lesser flaws of this production, this Cymbeline is one not to miss. After all, it features Linklater and Rabe, or should I say Linklater & Rabe. They remain a classic pairing.

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