The Winter’s Tale
By William Shakespeare
Directed by Bonnie J. Monte

Know-the-Show Audience Guide
researched and written by the Education Department of

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

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William Shakespeare, widely recognized as the greatest English dramatist, was born on April 23, 1564. He was the third of eight children born to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England. Shakespeare’s father was a prominent local merchant, and Shakespeare’s childhood, though little is known about it for certain, appears to have been quite normal. In fact, it seems that the young Shakespeare was allowed considerable leisure time because his writing contains extensive knowledge of hunting and hawking. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. She was eight years his senior, and the match was considered unconventional.

It is believed that Shakespeare left Stratford-upon-Avon and went to London around 1588. By 1592, he was a successful actor and playwright. He wrote approximately 38 plays, two epic poems, and over 150 sonnets. His work was immensely popular, appealing to members of all social spheres including Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. While the plays were well-liked, Shakespeare’s work was not considered by his educated contemporaries to be exceptional. By 1608, Shakespeare’s involvement with theatre began to dwindle, and he spent more time at his country home in Stratford. He died in 1616.

Most of Shakespeare’s plays found their first major publication in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare’s death, when two of his fellow actors put the plays together in the First Folio. Other early printings of Shakespeare’s plays were called quartos, a printer’s term referring to the format in which the publication was laid out. These quartos and the First Folio texts are the sources of all modern printings of Shakespeare’s plays.
Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to spoil the plot, consider skipping this section.

King Leontes of Sicilia has enjoyed a nine-month visit from his best friend since childhood, King Polixenes of Bohemia, and begs him to extend his stay. Polixenes politely refuses, reminding Leontes that he has a son and responsibilities at home in Bohemia. Leontes asks his beautiful (and pregnant) wife, Hermione, to persuade Polixenes to change his mind. Thanks to her wit and charm, the queen succeeds, and Polixenes agrees to stay a little longer. Leontes misinterprets Hermione’s gracious behavior and becomes possessed with jealousy, convinced that Polixenes and Hermione are lovers. He orders his loyal advisor, Camillo, to poison the Bohemian king. Instead, Camillo warns Polixenes of what is afoot, and the two men flee Sicilia immediately.

Furious at their escape, Leontes publicly accuses his wife of infidelity, and he declares that the child she is bearing must be illegitimate. He takes their young son, Mamillius, away from her and throws her in prison over the protests of his nobles who insist that the King’s actions are unjust and mistaken. To pacify them, Leontes sends two emissaries to the Oracle of Delphos for what he is sure will result in divine confirmation of his suspicions.

Meanwhile, the Queen gives birth to a baby girl in prison, and her loyal friend Paulina brings the infant to the King in the hopes that the sight of his child will soften his heart. He only grows angrier, however, and orders Paulina’s husband, Antigonus, to take the child and abandon it in some desolate and wild place.

After Antigonus’ departure, a public trial is arranged for Hermione, with Leontes acting as prosecutor, judge, and jury. Despite her weakened physical state, Hermione refuses to be intimidated by Leontes’ accusations and threats. The sealed scroll with the Oracle’s answer is presented and it states that Hermione, Polixenes and Camillo are innocent and faithful, Leontes a jealous tyrant, and that “the king shall live without an heir if that which is lost be not found.” Enraged, Leontes declares Apollo’s oracle to be untrue, at which moment a servant enters with word that the young prince Mamillius has died of a broken heart after his separation from his mother. Hermione collapses and is carried out by Paulina and attendants. Leontes realizes that he has blasphemed the Oracle, and begs Apollo’s forgiveness for his unjust actions. Paulina returns to tell him that Hermione has died. Leontes is crushed with grief and vows to spend the remainder of his life in mourning for his wife and children, repenting his rash actions.

Meanwhile, Antigonus lands on the shores of Bohemia with the baby princess, reporting that Hermione’s ghost appeared to him in a dream and told him to name the girl Perdita and to leave gold and other tokens with her for when she is found. With a tempest brewing, Antigonus bids farewell to the infant and tries to rush back to
his ship, but he is attacked and devoured by a bear. The Sicilian ship is destroyed by the storm, leaving no witnesses to Perdita’s whereabouts. Fortunately for the baby, a kindly old shepherd and his son find her and take her in.

16 years pass, and Perdita grows up to be a remarkable and graceful young shepherdess. The son and heir to Polixenes, Prince Florizel, falls in love with her and begins to secretly woo her. Suspicious that his son is spending so much time among the shepherds, Polixenes and Camillo attend a sheep-shearing festival in disguise and watch as Florizel publicly proposes marriage to Perdita.

The party comes to an abrupt end when Polixenes unmasks himself and orders his son never to see the Old Shepherd’s “low-born” daughter again. Camillo, however, sees that Florizel and Perdita are deeply in love and formulates a plan to aid them (while also engineering his own return to his native Sicilia). Disguising themselves with the help of Florizel’s former servant, the roguish peddler and thief Autolycus, the young lovers set sail for Sicilia to ask for the support of the one person who Polixenes once trusted most, Leontes.

Back in Sicilia, the lords have begun to urge Leontes to remarry and produce an heir. Paulina reminds them of the Oracle’s words, and she assures Leontes that when the time comes, she will find the right wife for him. Prince Florizel arrives with his “Libyan princess,” but their plans are quickly foiled when they discover that Polixenes and Camillo have followed them to Sicilia and ordered the arrest of the couple. The Bohemian king has also captured the Old Shepherd and his son and brought them with him to Sicilia. Leontes promises to do what he can for the couple.

What happens next is relayed by gentlemen of the Sicilian court: the Old Shepherd tells everyone how Perdita was found and produces the tokens which Antigonus left with her. Leontes realizes that Perdita is his lost daughter, leading to exuberant rejoicing. Knowing that Perdita is a real princess, Polixenes gladly agrees to let her marry Florizel.

Paulina invites the two royal families to her home to see a remarkable statue of Hermione which she has commissioned. Everyone is filled with awe at the lifelike quality of the statue. Leontes is overcome with grief, although Polixenes and Camillo try to comfort him. Paulina declares that by a “lawful art” she can make the statue move and speak if they will agree to behold it. They agree. Music plays, the statue descends and takes Leontes by the hand. Feeling the warmth of its flesh, Leontes realizes that it is no statue, but his own living wife, miraculously restored to him. As the play ends, the reunited families go off to celebrate and to make up for the time that they have lost.
Who’s Who in the Play

THE COURT OF SICILIA:
LEONTES: King of Sicilia; he becomes overcome with jealousy when he suspects his wife of having an affair with his dearest friend.
HERMIONE: Queen of Sicilia; loyal wife to Leontes.
MAMILLIUS: young son of Leontes and Hermione.
CAMILLO: a loyal Sicilian lord, advisor to Leontes; he is ordered to poison Polixenes.
PAULINA: a loyal Sicilian lady, attending the Queen; she is an outspoken advocate for Hermione, and wife to Antigonus.

ANTIGONUS: husband to Paulina; a Sicilian lord; he is ordered to abandon the suspected illegitimate newborn princess outside the lands of Sicilia.
EMILIA: attendant to Hermione.
LORDS AND LADIES of the Court.

THE COURT OF BOHEMIA:
POLIXENES: King of Bohemia; life-long friend to Leontes.
FLORIZEL: son of Polixenes; Prince of Bohemia; he falls in love with the shepherdess Perdita.
ARCHIDAMUS: a Bohemian lord.

THE COUNTRYFOLK OF BOHEMIA:
THE OLD SHEPHERD: a peasant who finds Perdita as an abandoned infant and raises her as his own.
LORDS AND LADIES of the Court.

THE WINTER’S TALE: Know-the-Show Guide

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

PERDITA’s name, as the text of the play suggests, is Latin for “lost,” referring to the oracle’s prophecy.

FLORIZEL is a name associated with flowers and flora, the natural landscape of Bohemia and the symbols of his courtship with Perdita.

AUTOLYCUS is named for one of the Argonauts of Greek myth, a renowned thief who was the son of the God Hermes and a human mother.

PAULINA’s name is a feminine version of “Paul,” which suggests the Christian evangelist, someone equally noted for eloquence, a bold sense of morality, and a dedication to spiritual redemption.
The characters and plot of *The Winter’s Tale* are primarily adapted from a 1588 prose romance entitled *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*. In 1607, *Pandosto* was republished and enjoyed great success in the Jacobean era, usually retitled *Dorastus and Fawnia* (the names of the Florizel and Perdita characters). As usual, Shakespeare was keenly aware of the box office potential of adapting the literary bestsellers of his day — within a few years he had completed his stage adaptation, which was produced at The Globe in 1611.

Interestingly, *Pandosto* was the work of one of Shakespeare’s oldest and most bitter literary rivals, Robert Greene, the man whose pamphlet *Groatsworth of Wit* had attacked Shakespeare as an arrogant “upstart crow.” Unlike Shakespeare, Greene was a university-educated writer from a well-connected family — the title page of *Pandosto* proudly reminds the reader that it was written by “Robert Greene, Master of Arts in Cambridge.” Despite these academic accomplishments, Greene was eluded during his lifetime by the popularity and financial success that seemed to come so easily to Shakespeare. He was deeply in debt as well as terminally ill in 1592 when he penned his bitter essay against Shakespeare, dying before the pamphlet reached London’s streets.

Shakespeare not only augmented Greene’s story by changing character names, but he also included many new additions to the story. The miraculous restoration of Hermione is Shakespeare’s own invention, as are the key characters of Paulina and Autolycus. While the idea of time is a major thematic element in the source text, only Shakespeare’s play features “Time” as a speaking character.

We know a bit more about the performance history of *The Winter’s Tale* in Shakespeare’s lifetime than is the case for some of his other plays. On May 15, 1611, Simon Forman wrote in his diary that he had seen a performance of the play that afternoon at The Globe. A quack doctor who was a bit of a con artist himself, Forman seems to have been especially fascinated with the character of Autolycus. Apparently the play was a great success with the company’s royal patron as well, since there are records of payment for performances at King James’s court in 1612 and, most auspiciously, in 1613 as part of the massive wedding festivities surrounding Princess Elizabeth Stuart’s marriage to Frederick, the German Elector Palatine.

*The Winter’s Tale* (like *Pandosto*) was the kind of story that Jacobean audiences liked, filled with intrigue, high drama, and a roller coaster ride from tragedy to comedy. After the Restoration, however, critics and theatre professionals struggled to find merit in what seemed to them to be a melodramatic mess. In 1672, John Dryden wrote that the play was “so meanly written that the Comedy neither caus’d your mirth, nor the serious part your concernment.” In the mid-18th century, David Garrick condensed the first three acts into a prologue of 150 verse lines and presented the latter half of the play as
Florizel and Perdita, a Love Story.

Even Shakespeare’s friends Heminges and Condell seem to have had some difficulty deciding how (or if) to publish *The Winter’s Tale* in their First Folio. It appears, somewhat oddly, at the end of the Comedies section, after *Twelfth Night*, but with a blank page between the two plays, suggesting that the printer believed that no other comedy was to follow *Twelfth Night*.

Victorian-era critics, influenced by the Romantic movement with its intense interest in psychology, “recuperated” late plays like *The Winter’s Tale* by defining them as part of a new genre, the stage romance, which Shakespeare and others were inventing in the Jacobean era. The mingling of “high” and “low” elements with fantastical plot lines — the subject of so much earlier critical scorn — was explained to be a defining characteristic of this “experimental,” forward-looking genre.

Today, not all critics agree on the importance of such well-defined genre boundaries — *The Winter’s Tale* shares as much with plays like *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Hamlet* as it does with *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*. Almost everyone, however, would now agree that *The Winter’s Tale* contains great roles for actors, great passages of poetry, and some of Shakespeare’s most powerful scenes of conflict and reconciliation. It has justly become one of the more frequently-produced Shakespeare plays in the 20th and 21st centuries.

WILD AND WOOLLY FUN

Act IV, scene 4 takes place at a sheep shearing festival in Shakespeare’s fictional Bohemia, but as portrayed, the event is typical of the English countryside in which Shakespeare grew up. The traditional English sheep shearing usually took place in early June around “Whitsunday” (or Pentecost), the religious holiday which is also mentioned in the text of the play.

The sheep shearing was a survivor of earlier pagan fertility festivals, hence the emphasis on flowers and the selection of a “Queen” of the festival. Because of the time of year, Whitsun or Pentecost celebrations throughout the Christian world have been tied to nature and vegetation (a tradition that dates back to the Jewish holiday of Shavuot).

The English “Whitsun Ale” was not a type of beer, but a community festival that included sheep shearing, dancing, feasting, games and plays, as well as the brewing of a special beer for all to share. As Perdita suggests, disguise and pageantry were a typical part of the Whitsun celebration, which naturally led to the association with plays. William Shakespeare probably saw some of his first live theatre at such an event as a little boy in Stratford.

ABOVE: Perdita, Florizel and guests; engraving by James Fittler, after a painting by Francis Wheatley.
Like all of Shakespeare’s most brilliant plays, The Winter’s Tale is a tale for all times. It transcends time and place with grace and ease, and like all great fairy tales (for The Winter’s Tale is indeed an adult fairy tale), its characters are archetypal and its messages are eternal and universal. It is a complex piece of writing; part allegory, part searing drama, part pastoral comedy and part uplifting and moving romance. It is filled with symbolism and with mirrored characters and situations that shed light on things that are exactly alike as well as those that are diametrical opposites. 407 years after it first hit the stage, it remains shocking, surprising, delightful and true. And while it is resonant and meaningful for all times because it encapsulates life and the human condition in such an acute and all-encompassing way, it seems to me, that there are few times more right than now to present this story. It focuses its important and urgent light on the need for ordinary people to do the right thing, to be good, and to let their moral compass guide them when the world in which they live turns upside down.

It is a piece of work so beautifully constructed, so rich with layers of meaning, and peopled with such memorable characters that, like all of Shakespeare’s master plays, one could spend a lifetime contemplating the literary, psychological, and philosophical treasures that lie within its pages. In the two kingdoms of Sicilia and Bohemia in which the play takes place, we find all of humanity — along with all of our foibles and all of our virtues. It is a world where the basic moral construct of Christianity co-exists seamlessly with the polytheistic world of the ancient Greeks. It is a land in which morbid jealousy flares up as quickly and as passionately as love at first sight. It is a play where rewards and punishments are meted out in direct relation to the choices made and actions taken by its characters, and it is a world where redemption and forgiveness can ultimately be earned, and happiness regained. That being said, it is also a universe in which no one pretends that costs are not exacted along that path, and loss and sorrow flow through the tale even as reunion, reconciliation and joy emerge triumphant.

Like all fairy fables, it is a cautionary tale, warning us of the dangers of extremes and touting the virtue of balance in all things. It is a play about love, family, friendship, integrity, honor, truth and the forces of nature and time that rule over everything — even over the various gods that we call upon to aid us in our hours of need. Time indeed is a major character in this play, and in taking human form, Time’s mercurial assets and inequities, as well as its omnipotence, become palpable for us.

Constantly shining through all of this, however, is the message that while we often seek the elusive aid of providence, good fortune, or a deus ex machina of some kind, it is the actions of good people that are most effective and most needed to affect change and to better the world. We must take responsibility ourselves; we cannot rely solely on higher powers nor should we resign ourselves to fate. In this play, even the oracle of Apollo makes that abundantly clear.

It is also important to mention that in this, one of Shakespeare’s final plays, he finds three of his greatest heroes in the women of the story. Paulina, Hermione and Perdita are a fierce trio of formidable women, not because they are fierce or formidable in the warrior sense, but because their moral core is as strong as steel and their sense of what is right and what is wrong is invincible and true. That being said, out of the three, Paulina is indeed part verbal warrior, part fairy godmother and part brilliant puppet master — a woman whose sense of justice and determination to right what is wrong is aided and abetted by her pragmatic common sense, her intelligence, fierce loyalty, compassion and love.
Add to all of this, of course, a bear. *The Winter’s Tale* contains the most famous stage direction ever written, “Exit, pursued by bear.” This is such an exciting play, for so many reasons and a perfect tale for the winter holidays. When little Mamillius is asked by his mother what kind of tale he will tell, he says, “A sad tale is best for winter.” There is much in this tale that is sad, for it is about life, and each of our lives are filled with measures of sadness and sorrow; but it is also a merry tale, filled with heaping measures of exuberant joy, laughter, delight, great happiness and love. We have endeavored to tell the tale well, and we hope it brings you the same magic it has supplied for those of us who have brought it to life.

Happy holidays! May all your tales this winter have happy endings!

Bonnie J. Monte
Director

**THE COAST OF BOHEMIA?!**

Shakespeare's sharp-tongued friend, Ben Jonson, famously mocked the Bard for having set a major scene of *The Winter’s Tale* on the seashore of Bohemia, an entirely landlocked country whose boundaries were more or less similar to the present-day Czech Republic. In Shakespeare's defense, it was actually his source, Robert Greene, who decided to depict Bohemia as having a coastline.

However, it is a fact that during the Middle Ages, around the turn of the 14th century, Bohemia extended all the way south to the Adriatic Sea, incorporating parts of what are now Slovenia and Croatia. Thus, it would have been possible at that time to sail from Sicily to Bohemia.

Other scholars have argued that Greene meant to write “Bithynia,” a region of Asia Minor, or that Apulia, part of Southern Italy, was once referred to as “Bohemia.”

It is more likely, however, that Greene and Shakespeare knew that they were writing in the genre of romance, where magic and improbable happenings were to be expected, and simply used the name “Bohemia” to represent a generic “kingdom far, far away.”
Commentary & Criticism

“I should conjecture of The Winter’s Tale...that only some characters, single scenes, or perhaps a few particular passages were of [Shakespeare’s] hand.”

-Alexander Pope

“The shepherd scenes, written in the full maturity of Shakespeare’s genius, owe nothing of their treatment to the pastoral tradition, nothing to convention, nothing to aught save life as it mirrored itself in the magic glass of the poet’s imagination. They represent solely the idealization of Shakespeare’s own observation, and in spite of the marvelous and subtle glamour of golden sunlight that overspreads the whole, we may yet recognize in them the consummation towards which many sketches of natural men and women, as he found them in the English fields and lanes, seem in a less certain and conscious manner to be striving in plays of an earlier date.”

-Walter W. Greg
Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama

“A Midsummer Night’s Dream is a parallel case, its title ostensibly implying ‘a weak and idle theme’...These two plays combine courtly and popular elements in a setting of courtly or pastoral romance. One is a product of Shakespeare’s professional midsummer, the other of the winter of his career... Perhaps Shakespeare, noting all this, saw with a smile a special appropriateness in his choice of title for The Winter’s Tale, in pointing back by contrast to what in some ways is a companion piece... Both plays have their eye on the Metamorphoses.”

-Fitzroy Pyle
The Winter’s Tale: A Commentary on the Structure

“Lives and years which have gone cannot be recalled, evil cannot be conquered quickly or without some suffering and loss, but all the leading characters survive and these are reunited and reconciled with understanding, forgiveness, and love in as nearly complete happiness as the trials of life are ever likely to allow. It is not a Beaumont-and-Fletcherian facile reconciliation but one which has been won and earned by human effort aided by the gods.”

-J.H.P. Pafford, Introduction to The Winter’s Tale (Arden Shakespeare edition)

Hermione’s statue is revealed. An etching by Robert Thew after William Hamilton’s painting.
SEEING A PLAY VS. HEARING A PLAY
Modern audiences go to the theater to see a play; but Shakespeare’s audiences would go to the theatre to hear a play. His audience was much more attuned to the language of the play, the inflections of the actors’ voices, and rhythms of the poetry. This is not to say that Shakespeare’s plays lacked visual interest, just that the visual elements were not nearly as important as the language.

We see this is, in some ways, true today, at least in the words we use to describe attending the theatre. People who attend the theater are most often referred to as an “audience” sharing the root of audio or sound in the name. Conversely, people who attend movies are often referred to as “movie-goers;” sports enthusiasts are often referred to as “spectators.”

WHAT DO I WEAR?
People often ask if shows at The Shakespeare Theatre will be performed in “traditional dress” or “like real Shakespeare.” This comes up even more often with the history plays.

It is interesting to note that, though often sumptuous and expensive, the costumes used in Shakespeare’s plays were rarely correct to the period of the play. Most often, actors were dressed in their finest attire (or clothes donated by wealthy patrons), and then these clothes were adorned with capes or crowns or other items denoting the character’s status. The shows in Shakespeare’s day were simply put up too quickly to create elaborate period-accurate costumes for the full company, nor did they have the money to do so. Therefore, despite popular assumption, a more accurate “traditional dress” approach to Shakespeare plays would be to dress actors in their finest contemporary clothing adorned with capes and crowns to denote status.

There were also very strict laws in Shakespeare’s day detailing what clothes, styles, and colors citizens were allowed to wear. This was a deliberate maneuver to reinforce the class structure of the era. Penalties for violating these Sumptuary Laws could be quite severe — loss of property, imprisonment, fines, and even loss of title. These Sumptuary Laws meant that fashionable clothes could only be worn by the wealthy and were often only seen at a distance.
In this Production


SHAKESPEARE WROTE IN MODERN ENGLISH. Despite popular belief, Shakespeare did not write in Olde or even Middle English. Take a listen to these samples of Olde and Middle English for yourself.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL071DC49FD027E2A2

A link to the Folger Shakespeare Library’s Winter’s Tale page.

http://www.folger.edu./winters-tale

Royal Ballet dancers and members of the creative team introduce Christopher Wheeldon’s ballet of The Winter’s Tale.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Y2fWYHWewQ
Sources & Further Reading

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THE FRIENDLY SHAKESPEARE by Norrie Epstein
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THE MIRACLE OF LANGUAGE by Richard Lederer
SHAKESPEARE A TO Z by Charles Boyce
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