

**Michael Billington** discovers in *Cymbeline* a triumphant swansong  
**In praise of death**

**T**HE end crowns all. Because of crucial re-casting, *Cymbeline* is the last of Peter Hall's Cottesloe Shakespeares to be unveiled. It is also triumphantly the best. It gives weight and dignity to this strange mixture of Holinshed and Boccaccio, highlights the perennial debate between Nature and Nurture and brings out the drumming insistence on death as a blessed release from life's travails that sounds through all these late plays.

Hall's restrained classicism here works best because it is filled out with emblematic images and naturalistic detail. The wager over the virtue of Innogen (with Hall adopting the spelling of the Oxford Shakespeare) is here conceived in a world of clay-pipes and post-prandial drink. But when Tim Pigott-Smith's swaggeringly arrogant Iachimo gains access to Innogen's bedchamber, he finds that his malign bet is all but undone by his own lust. He frantically unbuttons as if he means to rape the sleeping heroine. Inspection of her left breast once more inflames him. And the removal of her bracelet becomes a fantastically tricky operation involving the moistening of her palm: a gesture at once practical and erotic and the kind of detail that gives the scene internal life.

Hall discovers in the play much more than the sumptuous romantic fairy-tale he directed at Stratford in 1957. Instead it becomes a complex

confrontation of virtue and vice, civility and degradation always shadowed by mortality; it is the *Into The Woods* of its day with everyone put on trial. Geraldine James's Innogen emerges superbly as a tough, strong-jawed woman full of irony and anger: she gets a laugh when she wonders why Pisanio has dragged her all the way to Milford Haven if he doesn't mean to kill her but smother's mirth entirely when she wakes up next to Cloten's headless corpse. Bating for virtue, Basil Henson also makes the banished Belarius not some wistful prosaist but a figure of golden-voiced stoicism.

What prevents these late plays being sentimental is the emphasis on depravity and violence; and Hall once again pinpoints the uncompromising cruelty. Ken Stott's Cloten is not simply comic but a dangerous regal thug. Peter Woodward discovers in Posthumus an insecure neurotic who lapses into Leontes-like madness when he believes Innogen has betrayed him. Seeing these plays back to back you suddenly start to discover all kinds of unsuspected echoes.

One of the pleasures of this *Cymbeline* is the physical excitement of the staging. The separate ingredients of Alison Chitty's set here reflect the play's diversity. The suspended astrological ceiling becomes the natural vehicle for Jupiter in his earthly descent. The bare stage boards open up to disclose a rough, uneven hillside.

At one point, the back blue-and-white panels part to reveal the Roman and British armies in massed formation: I normally get confused as to who is fighting on whose side in this play but Hall's formalised battle scenes make everything clear. Hall's achievement is to suggest that *Cymbeline* is an epic play in which crucial human values are being put to the test. Even Bill Alexander's admirable RSC production treats the last act as a joke with David Bradley playing the king as a bemused spectator. Tony Church, however, treats *Cymbeline* as a figure of genuine moral stature who sees the multiplying revelations as proof of some divine plan: his "Does the world go round?" is not some eye-popping gag but a moving enquiry about the mysterious operations of the universe.

The sound I hear in these late plays, however, is of Shakespeare in his late forties confronting death. Paulina will wing her to some withered bough. Prospero's every third thought will be of his grave. Innogen, assumed dead, need fear no more "the tyrant's stroke".

Technically, they are experimental plays. Thematically, they seem to share Marcus Aurelius's belief that death offers a release from impressions of sense and twitchings of appetite. By making us listen to them hard, Hall has unearthed Shakespeare's own intimations of mortality.



Superbly full of irony and anger . . . Geraldine James

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## Billington on *Cymbeline*

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