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The Guide

A Theatergoer's Resource

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Shakespeare's Amazing Cymbeline
adapted & directed by Chris Coleman

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Intrigue in *Cymbeline*

Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* is infrequently produced, and a single reading of the text will reveal why: It's a never ending series of plot twists and turns, possibly containing two complete individual plays. Every single device Shakespeare was fond of shines in *Cymbeline*: mistaken identities, cross-dressing and other disguises, misunderstood letters, political intrigue, devious plots, epic battles, lost children, and the dead coming back to life. Such a complicated text has foiled and bemused directors for centuries. Portland Center Stage's production, adapted and directed by Chris Coleman, tackles the labyrinthine complications in *Cymbeline* with gusto. Adapting a cast of over twenty characters for only six actors, Shakespeare's Amazing *Cymbeline* thrives upon the intrigue that is at the heart of Shakespeare's original play. A piano player—Chris Coleman's personal



touch upon the play—guides the audience through the machination and trickery with the elegance and ease of a seasoned narrator. It's quite a ride. 🏰

Synopsis

Let's be honest: this play is confusing. If you don't mind us spoiling the ending, read on to get a sense of what you're in for.

Cymbeline, the King of Britain, is a widower with three children. His two boys Guiderius and Arviragus were kidnapped 20 years ago at age three, leaving his daughter Imogen as the only heir to the throne. Cymbeline marries, gaining a stepson Cloten through his wife the Queen. Cymbeline wishes Imogen to marry Cloten. Imogen disobeys and marries her childhood friend Posthumus Leonatus. Outraged, Cymbeline banishes Posthumus from Britain and imprisons Imogen.

Posthumus goes to Rome and meets his wartime friend Philario. In Rome, Iachimo bets that he can woo Posthumus' wife Imogen, thereby breaking her chastity. Posthumus takes Iachimo up on the bet, and Iachimo heads to Britain. Iachimo fails to seduce Imogen. However, he sneaks into her bedroom, steals her bracelet, and returns to Rome to successfully convince Posthumus that he has succeeded. Heartbroken and murderous, Posthumus orders his servant Pisanio to kill Imogen. Doubting his master's motives, Pisanio fakes Imogen's death by taking her to Milford Haven and disguising her as a youth named Fidele. In Milford Haven, Imogen (as Fidele) meets Guiderius and Arviragus living with Belarius, a lord banished years



ago by Cymbeline. Imogen is oblivious to the fact that she has just met her long-lost brothers. We learn that Belarius kidnapped the boys in anger towards Cymbeline for banishing him. Thus, Arviragus and Guiderius are ignorant of their true identities.

Unbeknownst to Imogen, Cloten followed her to Milford Haven, wearing Posthumus' clothes, in order to torment her. Cloten meets Guiderius and treats him rudely; a fight ensues and Guiderius cuts off Cloten's head. To cover up the death, he puts the head in the river and lets it float to the sea. Imogen falls sick and takes medicine given to her by Pisanio as a present. {The Queen had given the medicine (she thought poison) to Pisanio, thinking he would give it to Imogen or Posthumus as a gift. The Queen wanted one of them dead so that either her son would

be the only heir, or Imogen would have no husband and would be forced to marry Cloten. The medicine was given to the Queen by the doctor Cornelius, though she had requested he give her poison.} The medicine puts Imogen into a deep sleep, and Belarius et al., thinking she is dead, lay her to rest beside Cloten's body. When Imogen awakes, she thinks (by the clothing) that she is beside her dead husband.

Meanwhile, Caius Lucius visits Cymbeline demanding tribute to Rome. Cymbeline refuses and Lucius declares war on Britain. Distressed by war and grieving the loss of her son, the Queen sickens and dies. On her death bed she admits many evils, including hating Cymbeline. Caius Lucius comes across Imogen right after she awakens and convinces her to join to Roman army. During battle, Cymbeline is first captured by the Romans, and then rescued by Belarius, Guiderius,

and Arviragus. The Britons then capture Posthumus, thinking he is Roman, and take him to Cymbeline. In the last scene of the play, everything is resolved. Imogen returns to her father, Iachimo confesses to his evils and stealing Imogen's bracelet, Cloten's death is explained, Belarius admits to kidnapping the princes, Cymbeline allows Imogen and Posthumus to stay married, and peace is made with the Romans. 🏰



Previous Adaptations

Perhaps because its plot is so convoluted, Cymbeline has a history of adaptation and experimental production in which Chris Coleman's is the most recent. Listed are a few of these adaptations.

The play was adapted by Thomas d'Urfey as *The Injured Princess, or, the Fatal Wager*; this version was produced at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, presumably by the united King's Company and Duke's Company, in 1682. The play changes some names and details, and adds a subplot, typical of the Restoration, in which a virtuous waiting-woman escapes the traps laid by Cloten. D'Urfey also changes Pisanio's character so that he at once believes in Imogen's (Eugenia, in D'Urfey's play) guilt. For his part, D'Urfey's Posthumus is ready to accept that his wife might have been untrue, as she is young and beautiful. Some details of this alteration survived in productions at least until the middle of the century.

William Hawkins revised the play again in 1759. His was among the last of the heavy revisions designed to bring the play in line with Aristotelean unities. He cut the Queen, reduced the action to two places (the court and a forest in Wales). The dirge "With fairest flowers..." was set to music by Thomas Arne.

Nearer the end of the century, Henry Brooke wrote an adaptation which was apparently never staged. His version eliminates the brothers altogether as part of a notable enhancement of Posthumus' role in the play.

George Bernard Shaw, who criticized the play perhaps more harshly than he did any of Shakespeare's other works, took aim at what he saw as the defects of the final act in his 1937 *Cymbeline Refinished*; as early as 1896, he had complained about the absurdities of the play to Ellen Terry, then preparing to act Imogen.

JoAnne Akalaitis directed a controversial production of *Cymbeline* in 1989 that critics initially railed against, especially Frank Rich of the New York times, who hailed it as "the most reckless entry in the Shakespeare Festival's Marathon, a waste not only of a powerful, seldom produced text but also of such major artists as the composer Philip Glass, who wrote the arresting score, and the actress Joan Cusack, who is secure but stranded in the star role of Imogen." However, Akalaitis's production came to be a watershed for theatrical postmodernism, and a swell of counter-criticism rushed to Akalaitis's defense, praising the vision and creativity of a misunderstood adaptation. 🏰

Who Was the Real Cymbeline?

It's possible that Shakespeare's fictional character Cymbeline is based on a real king in pre-Roman Britain, Cunobeline (late 1st century BC – 40s AD). In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136) he appears as Kymbelinus, son of Tenvantius, a powerful warrior who was raised in the courts of Augustus. He was very friendly with the Roman court: his country was equipped with Roman weapons, and all tributes to Rome were paid out of respect, not out of requirement. These Roman tributes play into the plot of *Cymbeline* when Britain ceases paying them. Like Shakespeare's character, the real "Cymbeline" had two sons, Guiderius and Arvirargus.



Geoffrey's account of Kybelinus was incorporated into Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* in 1577, which is likely where Shakespeare found the story and used it as a basis for *Cymbeline*. 🏰

INFLUENCE OF THE DECAMERON

Posthumus's wager on Imogen's chastity in *Cymbeline* was taken by Shakespeare from an English translation of a fifteenth century German tale, "Frederyke of Jennen", whose basic plot came from tale II, 9 of the *Decameron* by Boccaccio

Cast of Characters

A tool to help you keep track of who's who, especially since most of the actors play multiple roles!

Imogen Cymbeline's daughter, the British princess. Wise, beautiful, and resourceful, she incurs her father's displeasure when she chooses to marry the lowborn Posthumus instead of Cymbeline's oafish stepson, Cloten.

Posthumus An orphaned gentleman, he is adopted and raised by Cymbeline, and he marries Imogen in secret, against her father's will. He is deeply in love with her but is nevertheless willing to think the worst of her when she is accused of infidelity.

Cymbeline The king of Britain and Imogen's father. A wise and gracious monarch, he is led astray by the machinations of his wicked Queen.

Queen Cymbeline's wife and Imogen's stepmother. A villainous woman, she will stop at nothing—including

murder—to see her son Cloten married to Imogen and, thus, made the eventual king of Britain.

Cloten The Queen's son, he was betrothed to Imogen before her secret wedding to Posthumus. Her unwillingness to marry him is understandable, since he is an arrogant, clumsy fool.

Iachimo A clever and dishonest Italian gentleman. He makes a wager with Posthumus that he can seduce Imogen, and when his attempt at seduction fails, resorts to trickery to make Posthumus believe that he has succeeded.

Pisanio Posthumus's loyal servant, he is left behind in Britain when his master goes into exile, and he acts as a servant to Imogen and the Queen.

Belarius A British nobleman, unjustly banished by Cymbeline. He kidnapped Cymbeline's infant sons to revenge himself on the king, and,

under the name of Morgan, he has raised them as his own sons in the Welsh wilderness.

Guiderius Cymbeline's eldest son and Imogen's brother, he was kidnapped and raised by Belarius under the name of Polydore.

Arviragus Cymbeline's younger son and Imogen's brother, he was kidnapped and raised by Belarius under the name of Cadwal.



Philario An Italian gentleman. Posthumus stays at his home during his exile from Britain.

Caius Lucius The Roman ambassador to Britain and, later, the general of the Roman invasion force.

Cornelius A doctor at the court of Cymbeline

Soothsayer A seer, in the service of Caius Lucius



An Incomplete Glossary of Elizabethan Language

Given that Shakespeare made up most of the words in his plays, it is no wonder that modern audiences often have trouble picking up on just what the characters are saying. Here are a few definitions to get you started.

Gall Bile obtained from the gallbladder of an animal for use in the arts and in medicine

Puttock Any of several birds of prey

Orisons Prayer

Approbation Proof, attestation, confirmation

Arbitrement The right or power of deciding

Abate To bring entirely down, demolish

Moiety One of two equal portions

Trow Belief, faith, covenant

Arrearages Amounts overdue

Casement Window

Nonpareil Having no equal

Pandar Someone who procures customers for whores, a pimp

Meed A reward or recompense

Wanton Sexually lawless or unrestrained, loose, lascivious

Reck To have care, concern, regard

Vale A valley

'Ods pittikins God's pity

Betid To happen to, come to, befall



Further Reading

The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism by Elinor Fuchs
A great read for those who want to learn more about JoAnne Akalaitis's production of *Cymbeline* and its impact in the world of theatre.

Cymbeline by William Shakespeare
It never hurts to read the original script.

Cymbeline Refinished: A Variation on Shakespear's Ending by George Bernard Shaw
Classic British playwright George Bernard Shaw famously detested *Cymbeline*. This manuscript is his improvement of the play.

Discussion Questions

What was the purpose of the first moment of the play, in which the ensemble spoke directly to the audience?

What role did the piano player serve in telling the story of the play?

Most productions of *Cymbeline* have a large cast. How did the small ensemble affect your experience of the play?

Why do you think Shakespeare combined so many different plot points into a single play?

What is the essential story of *Cymbeline*? In other words, if you had to say this play was about one thing, what would you say?

Group Activities

Divide into groups. Pretend it is your groups job to create an adaptation of *Cymbeline*. Discuss what changes you would make to the script. Share your ideas with the other groups.

1. In small groups, think about a familiar story that has many many characters. Brainstorm ideas of how you can tell this story with only a few people. Prepare a sketch using your ideas, and present it to the other groups.

