A Theatergoer’s Resource

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, Guido,
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
Pisario’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 Aristotelian 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 Akalaistis 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,
Akalaistis’s production came to be a watershed for
theatrical postmodernism, and a swell of counter-
criticism rushed to Akalaistis’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.