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The Voice of Interior Alaska

Theatre UAF play a complex, somewhat uneven 'A Winter's Tale'

Sometimes, when a play seems to be veering off subject, it takes strong leads to reel it in and keep it on track.

Enter Hadassah R. Nelson and Andrew Cassel, who play Hermione and Leontes in Theatre UAF's production of William Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale." Both actors have received serious praise from the UAF Theatre Department and the community. While other cast members seem to fumble or fade too quickly into the background, these two stand as pillars, guiding the story and leading the audience with their moving performances.

But "The Winter's Tale" is a strong effort for a student theater group. Despite being labeled as "comedy," "The Winter's Tale" is exceedingly complex. It consists of two very different acts — the first dark and brooding, full of jealousy and miscommunication, the second lighter, happier, funny and romantic.

While the first act digs deep emotionally and leaves you aching at the end, the second half has a harder time finding itself. The actors never seem to find the same emotional depth that makes the first act so riveting. There are moments of wit and tenderness that make the second act entertaining, but ultimately it is sort of dull compared to the first act.

Director Stephan Golux has cut the play from 3 1/2 to a more rea-

sonable 2 1/2 hours. The cuts work, especially during the first act, where quick changes are needed to keep the plot advancing. Yet, despite quick scene changes that give the actors no more than a breath of pause, the second act seems to crawl toward the finish.

The simple stage, designed by UAF student Rhi Johnson, consists of a few stone columns and a balcony. Though minimal, the lighting and basic props change the setting completely, and a meadow scene is fully distinguishable from the brooding, dark castle. Bethany Marx had the equally difficult task of designing costumes, and she succeeds masterfully. The second act's floral, nymph-like outfits are the highlight. They ooze with flowers and femininity, playfully embodying the Bohemian characters.

But between the beauty of the stage and costumes, some of the student actors disappear in the jumble. At times they were hard to hear. The Salisbury Theater isn't known for its acoustics, but even from the third row I strained to hear at times. When music played or sound effects were employed, actors were completely drowned out.

Amid the jumble, Cassel and Nelson shine. Cassel embodies the painfully unaware Leontes. The audience can only sit and cringe as Leontes transforms from friend and loving father to jealous husband and iron-fisted ruler. He is childish in his emotions and set in

his ways, despite all reason. Cassel pulls off the complexities of the character, even when the character twists on a dime.

Nelson, who was recently named Theatre UAF's Outstanding Student of the Year, is certainly deserving of the award, if just for her "Winter's Tale" performance. As the foil to Cassel's mad Leontes, Hermione tries to instill reason in his madness first with tender loving, then later with gut-wrenching pleas. When Nelson, as Hermione, begs Leontes to reason, she shakes and cries. The performance is so visceral, moving and uncomfortable that you almost want to leave the theater to escape her misery.

Melissa Buchta's quirky Autoly-cus brings fun to the second act. The goofy Bohemian rogue is equal parts delightful and slapstick, and Buchta instills heart and humor into a common Shakespeare character (the funny fool who exposes the plot).

The problem with Shakespeare is that the stories are so well known. A quick Internet search and you can find the complete text or a summary of any play. With Shakespeare you have to add some sort of spark to keep that "I knew it was coming" syndrome from kicking in. I'm not sure this version of "The Winter's Tale" has that. I knew what the ending was going to be, and all I wanted was a conclusion. Unfortunately, it took too long to get there.