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THE ARTS: A melting-pot 'Cymbeline' THEATRE:

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Many Americans and many Britons believe that British actors perform Shakespeare better than Americans. Many Americans also believe that most Britons believe that Americans simply can't act Shakespeare. And many Britons do indeed believe that Shakespeare should be performed in British accents. All these superstitions are worth debunking. So it's good to have an American company playing Shakespeare in Britain - in Stratford-upon-Avon, no less.

The New York company Theatre for a New Audience has just launched a new production of one of the rarest Shakespeare plays, Cymbeline, at The Other Place. On press night, you could hear the audience (initially defensive) relaxing - starting to react, starting to laugh - as the production went on. When the company returns to the US, the production will open off-Broadway, where I imagine audiences will react with greater immediacy and glee.

Cymbeline, you may recall, is set in Britain, and maybe that's why I found myself reacting more keenly than ever before to the lines about British independence - especially Cymbeline's reply to the Roman general Lucius: "You must know,/ Till the injurious Romans did extort/This tribute from us, we were free." Pronounced with an American accent, the sentence suddenly becomes as dignified as if Benjamin Franklin or Thomas Jefferson were speaking it.

In general, however, the characters stay cartoon-like; and this is the main revelation of the production. Parts of the plot really are among Shakespeare's creakiest - when it suddenly rushes towards a happy ending, every loose end seems to get up and to tie itself into lover's knots - and Bartlett Sher's production plays it like a marvellous fairytale at which, like a pantomime, we can often laugh. Cloten is a gross Kabuki buffoon whose most complex emotions take us and him by surprise but whose violent death leaves us untroubled. The villain Iachimo is a polished Velazquez courtier whose malice is partly scorn for the uncouth Britons. Cymbeline's sons grow up in Wales to speak with all the twangy Western accents and forthright honesty of Buffalo Bill.

The look of the production is gorgeously multicultural - ancient Rome is dressed to look like the Renaissance, ancient Britain like the medieval orient, and Wales like the American Wild West - and the two halves end, after some thoroughly oriental percussion, with un-Shakespearean country-and western songs. It feels like the best kind of pantomime, and some of its strokes - Cloten rides/wears a toy horse, which needs to eat at one end and then fart at the other; the Queen's herb garden grows on umbrellas carried by cross-legged actors - bring a robust vulgarity and colour and fantasy that enriches a play that already has its share of heroic nobility. The style works well for the main thrust of the play, and even makes the heroine Imogen as funny as other characters.

The actors always start partly outside the characters they're playing. What's missing, therefore, are the touches of open-hearted high-flying lyricism that can sometimes be the highlights of Cymbeline. But I've never seen a Cymbeline that catches all the play's facets and solves all its problems. This one is already more than just a relative high for American Shakespeare. It is, by British standards, a glowing, entertaining reillumination of this rare play.

Alastair Macaulay The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon

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