

Hot take on Hermione

AWAKEN ENVISIONS QUEEN'S LOST YEARS IN THE WINTER'S TALE

By: Frances Koncan

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William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* famously features a huge gap of time wherein Queen Hermione is presumed to be dead before being resurrected as a statue 16 years later to complete the redemption arc of her husband, King Leontes.

It's not the most graceful of Shakespearean turns, and just one of a plethora of reasons why *The Winter's Tale* is rarely staged, but it certainly serves as an exploratory goldmine for playwright Tracey Penner in her new play *Awaken*, which opened at the Rachel Browne Theatre on Thursday night.



A co-production between zone41 theatre and Shakespeare in the Ruins, *Awaken* warm-heartedly hypothesizes what happened to Hermione during those missing, mysterious years.

A Winter's Tale is one of Shakespeare's late romances, which incorporates elements of tragedy (King Leontes' jealousy), magic (Hermione's statue-to-human resurrection), mythology (the Oracle of Apollo) and the annoying presence of old men who are cranky about something and are going to be redeemed, usually via the sacrifice of a woman (the aforementioned Leontes).

Thankfully — or tragically, depending on your perspective — there are no cranky old men in *Awaken*. In fact, there's no men in *Awaken* at all. Instead, Penner focuses on characters that Shakespeare often ignores or uses as plot devices: the women.

Penner stars as Paulina, a servant to Queen Hermione, played by Daria Puttaert. Though contemporary in use of language, the well-paced two-hander draws from select Shakespearean techniques — evocative imagery, recurring symbolism, the occasional monologue — and forgoes others (there is nary a fourth-wall break to be found here) to create something of an impressionistic companion piece to one of Shakespeare's last plays.

Penner proposes that Hermione — whose son has just died and whose baby daughter has been abandoned in Bohemia at the behest of the king, believing Hermione to be unfaithful — has been whisked away to safety by Paulina. What

unfolds next is a 90-minute play that spans 16 years of Hermione living in a shed, learning to cook, exploring her sexuality and training to be a statue.

Out of context from the greater stakes of *The Winter's Tale*, *Awaken* can sometimes feel too distant from the overarching conflict Hermione truly faces, but there's plenty of quiet internal drama and philosophical musings for Penner and Puttaert to play with as their characters reflect on their social status, their sexuality and their agency as women living in a patriarchal society.

Penner's script doesn't plumb the depths of gender and feminist theory as it could, and has a few elements of third-wave feminism that don't fully connect in a fourth-wave world (Hermione's embrace of her new-found bisexuality is represented by ditching her corset and... wearing high-waisted flared pants?), but it's a kind and jovial take that pulls from a variety of mythical and literary sources, much in the way Shakespeare liked to do.



The graceful set design by Kara Pankiw is supported by Scott Henderson's unfussy lighting that mostly relies on simple warm and cool washes to demarcate the indoor environment of the shed in which Hermione lives and the changing seasons of the world outside of it.

Daina Leitold's costumes are a masterclass in colour and texture, if not particularly indicative of the time period in which the play is set (for the record: I don't know the time period, and it doesn't matter to me, but it may to others), and the elements are aptly harmonized with Chris Coyne's sound design, which alternates between a deeply satisfying ambiance and a kind of jarring but not uninteresting pseudo-Celtic vibe.

All of this is brought skillfully together by director Krista Jackson, who takes Penner's slightly-too-amiable script and imbues it with an intriguing, enigmatic air that makes for a tale worthy of heading out in the middle of winter for.

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THEATRE PREVIEW

Awaken

Shakespeare in the Ruins and zone41 theatre, presented as part of Shakespearefest

- Directed by Krista Jackson, written by Tracey Penner, starring Tracey Penner and Daria Puttaert
- To Jan. 26
- Rachel Browne Theatre, 211 Bannatyne Ave.
- Tickets at shakespeareintheruins.com or 204-891-91604 out of 5

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