

THEATRE ALIVE!

A Tale With A Twist

Charlie Walker-Wise on a exciting new theatre venture with strong RADA connections

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It was a wet April afternoon when the phone rang and stalwart RADA director and founder of The Cherub Company, London, Andrew Visnevski called to offer me *Leontes* in *The Winter's Tale*. An actor of twenty-seven needs to think about playing a part like that for about three seconds before the inevitable answer is delivered (in perfect regal RP). So began Andrew's latest venture and *Theatre Alive!*'s inaugural production. Collecting together RADA graduates from the last five years, recent graduates from other drama schools, seasoned actors who have worked with Andrew before, a young composer associated with Andrew's Cherub days and doyenne of RADA dance and movement, Francine Watson Coleman to choreograph, *Theatre Alive!* and RADA's *The Winter's Tale* production was a venture with a fine pedigree.

Always part of *Theatre Alive!*'s ethos, the stress on young talent and new actors was a dominant force here. And rightly so, as this was not your run-of-the-mill production of a Shakespeare play. As a tutor on the RADA MA in Text and Performance, Andrew had fostered the dramatic reworking of the play by his former student, Zoe Miller-Lee. She took the already complex story and turned it on its head. Our production started with Act 5 and the rest of the play was seen in flashbacks throughout the running of that final act. The result brings the tragedy of the jealousy and madness of *King Leontes* to the fore, constantly reminding us why he now lives a cold, lonely, monastic existence.

But it was not just the performances and the text that the RADA connection was limited to. The set was designed by 2005 Theatre Technical Arts graduate Sam Lerner, further strengthening Andrew's belief that *Theatre Alive!* should be a company that helps young artists create exciting and dynamic work. For many of us to play parts we are not likely to stand any chance of being cast in for another twenty years, it was quite an opportunity. Working with us was Elisa Lombardi, an Italian actress who has spent several years working with and assisting Arianne Mnouchkine at the Théâtre du Soleil in Paris and is currently a resident actor at the Piccolo Teatro di Milano.

The Winter's Tale was commissioned by the Mayfield Festival and the production made possible by a grant from The Batty Foundation

Thus began my first experience of Commedia dell'Arte. No one is going to say that this production did not put its constituent members, both on stage and in the wings, through their paces. We opened at the Mayfield Festival in Sussex on 11th May to a full house. The performance was received enthusiastically and aside from putting my back out while warming up it all went very successfully. One more performance followed in Eastbourne a week later and that, alas, is as far as it has currently got.

While there have been plans to resurrect *The Winter's Tale* it later in the year, the varying commitments from the cast have made this very difficult. One member is moving to Switzerland, another is off for another stint at drama school and others have acting commitments. While this is a shame for *The Winter's Tale* itself it is actually a triumph for **Theatre Alive!** as it has proved that there is the will and dedication to mount such projects. Neither is it flash in the pan, as **Theatre Alive!**'s second project recently completed a fantastic week of development at the Drill Hall. It is a new version of *The Oresteia* by young London performance poet, Joseph Coelho. Again at the helm was Andrew Visnevski but the focus here being a new writing talent this production, funded by the Arts Council, drew together a cast of experienced professionals to work on a vibrant new telling of Aeschylus's Argive tragedy. Again the RADA connection was a strong one, not only with Andrew directing but with both myself and 2003 graduate, Jed Staton in the cast. Inevitably it has to be said, as far as RADA and **Theatre Alive!** are concerned, British theatre is being kept very much alive!

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