

## A Wither's Tale

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Thursday Sep 2, 2010



Joseph Keane and Matt Walker in *A Wither's Tale* (Source: Chelsea Sutton)

The evening begins with an announcement apologizing for the errant title: the name of Bill Withers already ends with "s" and therefore the possessive is an unfortunate artifact of the original Shakespearean title. Good thing that, otherwise this entire review was going to be about the modern theater's slovenly disregard for proper punctuation.

**A Wither's Tale** [sic] is the meeting of three minds: Shakespeare for his strange play *The Winter's Tale*, Bill Withers for his many megahits, and *The Troubadour's* Matt Walker who can't leave well enough alone. His riotous and iconoclastic revues more often ravage the work of multiple composers - here he picks on one exclusively. Is this the beginning of a series? Beyond perhaps *Little Richard II*, it is difficult to see where we go from here. *The Mercer of Venice?* *Arlen and Cleopatra?*

What makes this show particularly interesting though is the seeming comic meagerness of Walker's choices. *The Winter's Tale* is a dark and unhappy story of suspicion, jealousy, and betrayal with a tacked-on happy ending as discordant as having sonny boy ring the doorbell at the end of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Combine that with the music of Bill Withers, whose great contributions to the American songbook include the wistful "Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone," and the upbeat but melancholy "Lovely Day" and "Lean on Me." To complicate his task, it is immediately clear Walker loves

these songs and treats them with utmost respect. What the hell is going on here?

*A Wither's Tale* is hardly one of the patented side-splitting *Troubadour* shows like *Alice in One-Hit Wonderland* or *Hamlet, the Artist Formerly Known as Prince of Denmark*. Instead Walker coaxes out a charming and mirthful show, that though still fundamentally absurd, is far less sassy than normal. We hope this doesn't foreshadow an incipient bloom of good taste from *The Troubadours!* Perish the thought.

Walker's fine sense of theatricality manifests in his expert editing of the original. He takes Shakespeare's 5-act behemoth and trims it as expertly as a 14th Street butcher dresses a side of beef. To the slimmed down vehicle, he mixes in Withers beautiful songs and slathers on a generous helping of absurdist cultural anachronisms: "Shut up back there, Lindsay" yells a Elizabethan jailer to an unseen troublemaker.

Walker himself plays Leontes, the tortured king who suspects his wife of adultery, punishes her and orders what he believes is a bastard child killed. As always, he commands his stage as actor, director, narrator, and mother hen. Other standouts include Travis Clark as Antigonus, Katherine Malak as Perdita, Mike Sulprizio

as Camillo, Beth Kennedy as the Shepherd, and Monica Schneider as Hermione.

This is a musical which implies singing and dancing, and the company's resident chanteuse, Lisa Valenzuela, delivers her vocal interpretations straight to the heart. Joseph Keane moves effortlessly around the stage even when just walking across it; his execution of Ameenah Kaplan's superb choreography is marvelous.

Though clearly lacking a lush CTG budget, a Troubadour show always has eye-appealing production values. The credit this go-around belongs to Mike Jesperson for sets, Jeremy Pivnick for lights, and Sharon McGunigle for costumes. Especially delightful is the choice to outfit Shakespeare's murderous bear as Alice's Jabberwocky. It gives out of work monsters a break and is an intelligent and witty economy that works theatrically.

Musical direction is by Eric Heinly who, with four other onstage musicians, plays the hell out of Withers' great songs. That apostrophe, by the way, is properly deployed.

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