

Elizabeth Williamson

The Evergreen State College



Embedded in Time: Performance Strategies in *The Winter's Tale*

This piece explores the historical concerns enfolded in *The Winter's Tale*, both in the text and in performance accounts. The play itself clearly displays the effects of time, and production records provide a good example of the way theater practitioners stage their own temporal identity. By examining the points of chronological rupture in the text, and the ways in which actors and directors re-figure them, I argue that the presence of living voices in the theater remind us of the absence of the dead. Through these moments of heightened awareness, performers articulate their own place in time, and inevitably recall to the anxious search for the instant of original creation. Though the Time chorus urges a suspension of disbelief, his appearance at the end of act 3 merely points to the inexplicable mystery of the play's chronology.

Because of its blatant violation of the unities of time and space, *The Winter's Tale* was almost never performed in the eighteenth century. This paper focuses on the work of nineteenth- and twentieth- century practitioners who resuscitated and re-shaped the play according to their own cultural sensibilities. In attempting to recapture the past, they were inevitably speaking from the present, re-staging contemporary dialogues about the uses and abuses of theater. Even the Times reviewer who dismissed the play in 1912 as "less than vivifying" betrays a superstitious desire to see the dead brought back to life. My main concern in this essay is to make the past speak to the present by inserting the voices of theater reviewers and practitioners into a theoretical discussion of the play and its moments of chronological meltdown. The act of re-introducing these contemporary accounts into a current theoretical discourse reinforces the historical specificity of performance while simultaneously suggesting an inherent self-awareness in the text itself. What emerges from the performance record is not a story of success or failure, but an account of the moments in which particular aspects of the past are dragged forcefully into the present, and subsequently re-formulated by the performers' sense of history.