

First Live Performance in a Year at Blackfriars

Jessica Coyle, staff writer

After over a year of heavily regulated gatherings and the cancellation of almost all public events, things are beginning to look more normal. As vaccination rates climb and the weather gets warmer again, venues like the Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton are opening back up just in time for summer. Their first performance since early April of last year, *The Winter's Tale*, took place Monday, April 26 at the Blackfriars Playhouse in front of a live and virtual audience.

In partnership with the Mary Baldwin University Shakespeare and Performance Graduate Program, the Blackfriars Playhouse is home to most performances by the school. The playhouse is also unique as it houses the American Shakespeare Center. Monday was the student's first live performance since the start of the pandemic, but guests still followed strict virus guidelines. All viewers were seated in groups, distanced from each other, and wearing masks. The cast also wore masks for the performance.

The live romantic comedy seemed particularly timely as crew members drew similarities between the 16 year gap in the play and the 13 month gap in their lives. The story of love, jealousy and the eventual re-uniting of a broken family hit close to home for the student actors as they're finally back together on-stage after a long hiatus.

Amber James, student director and class of 2021, told the audience how the cast was supposed to put on an identical show a month before COVID-19 closures began. Explaining that the show was the effort of returning original cast members, James referred to the play as a "long lost production" and thanked the audience profusely before the play began.

"This has been a true labor of Love and sheer persistence and we are honored to have you all here".

The Winter's Tale was brought to the next level by the famous venue, Blackfriars Playhouse,



The famous bear scene of *The Winter's Tale*.
Screenshot taken by Jessica Coyle

and the cast used the stage to interact with the audience on multiple occasions. The playhouse is the only recreation of Shakespeare's original Blackfriars Theater from the 13th century; with a two story stage and wooden rows of small padded seats. Student actors would go through the audience to the stage while playing instruments and using props like swords and fake babies, they even sang one of the songs to the tune of Jolene, which the entire audience enjoyed.

What stood out most surrounding the show was the excitement of both the students and the audience after being deprived of in person events for so long. The majority female cast later agreed in the Q&A that the production took a lot of effort from everyone involved but was worth the time.

Monday's performance was one of two and had a limited in-person audience while the play was live-streamed to MBU's Facebook page. The second performance of *The Winter's Tale* will be open to the public on Tuesday April 27 as well as the recording of the play being posted for viewers.

Luckily, there will be plenty of other opportunities for entertainment and lots of events taking place at the Blackfriars Playhouse this year in their "Actors' Summer Renaissance" featuring the theater's own troupe of actors. Featured Shakespeare plays this year include *Macbeth*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Henry V*. Visitors can now enjoy Shakespearean classics in person again, breathing new life into actors and students let down by the pandemic.