

TWO KINGS, TWO CASTS: KING LEAR @ DEAFWEST THEATRE IN NOHO

By M.R. Hunter

06/30/2010 11:35:56 AM

To see “King Lear” once in awhile is an exhaustive experience alone, but to see it twice on consecutive nights is akin to blissful agony. Blissful in that the rotating double-cast Antaeus Ensemble packs an emotional wallop, searing the words to your brain like a scalding red-hot poker. The agony, then, is the tragedy of how the foolish and arrogant antics of a king are his ultimate undoing—again and again—both figuratively and in this case, literally.

Yet, if asked to do it all over again, I’d be tempted to say, yes. If that isn’t a ringing endorsement, I don’t know what is. To be fair, one cast is slightly more riveting than the other. Whether it’s the “Fools” with Dakin Matthews in the title role or the “Madmen” with Harry Groener, to see one or the other is better than to miss them entirely.



Morlan Higgins, Ramon De Ocampo, Dakin Matthews and Rebecca Mozo
Photo by Ed Krieger

The two casts are a result of the obtrusive scheduling conflicts between television and film gigs, an oft times infuriating dilemma in this city. One of the main reasons actors here shy away from the theatre is it rarely pays the bills quite as residually as does its counterpart. But Antaeus Ensemble challenges the financial strains of its members with a more practical solution, giving veteran actors an opportunity to play on the boards alongside greener talent. In this, everyone wins. And in their first full feature production, it proves to be a successful endeavor.

Bart DeLorenzo wrangles both of these casts with fearless precision. The pace varies between the casts, with the “Madmen” more arduously wrung out than the swifter, glossed over “Fools.” Within the intimate space, DeLorenzo works his magic, relying on thundering sound effects and superb shadow play with lighting to fill the voids of the minimalistic set. The set itself is unremarkable with a blood splattered backdrop and two revolving walls. But it doesn’t distract either, putting the emphasis on the actors and the words that ring a bit truer in the mouths of the “Madmen.”



Gregory Itzin, John Sloan, Rebecca Mozo and Harry Groener
Photo by Ed Krieger

While the direction is practically equivalent in both performances, it is interesting to see the subtle variety between the two. In the “Madmen” Edmund’s (Daniel Bess) evil plotting is far more oily and dark, his shadow cutting a sinister silhouette against the backdrop, while the “Fools” Edmund (Seamus Dever) strides around the stage and is better lit although far less threatening for it.

The music (bearing a close resemblance to the score used in “Pericles Redux”) can at times come across somewhat jarring in such a small space, vibrating the seats by its sheer volume. The sound effects, however, are extremely effective in the storm scene with clever lighting effects and booming rumblings that underscore King Lear’s fury and immediate peril. One almost feels wet from the rain with all the crackling and flickering of the lights by Lap Chi Chu.

In these, it is the cast that separates the men from the boys—or fools from the madmen. Harry Groener shades his Lear with far more complexity than Dakin Matthews’ oafish, ailing old fop. Matthews’ is a sweeter, gentler king who might just be a tad touched in the head and from this view is a more likable Lear. In his portrayal, Matthews plays up a heart condition that in Groener’s performance is only suggested, but considering the sudden end, Matthews’ interpretation justifies the conclusion tidily. Still, with Groener there is considerable control over his instrument and his way of infusing the language with resonate feeling and clarity that goes missed or skimmed over altogether in Matthews fitful, blustering tirades.



Adam Meyer, Dakin Matthews, Rebecca Mozo and Morlan Higgins
Photo by Ed Krieger

The sisters Goneril and Regan are a fascinating study of contrasts in the actors approach. In Madmen, Allegra Fulton’s Goneril is saucier but less conniving to Kirsten Potter’s droll deliveries. Jen Dede plays up the bloodthirsty temptress angle as her double Francia DiMase delivers a simmering, contemplative study of the spoiled princess Regan. Rebecca Mozo fervently plays Cordelia in both productions.

Along with the sisters, the Fool’s are divergently portrayed in two equally amusing executions with Stephen Caffrey nimbly cavorting about with a biting tongue to JD Cullum’s mature and mellower jester. Both have heart and go about the humor so uniquely that each bring something new to the character for those who see both shows.



Jen Dede, Jeremy Shouldis, Harry Groener and Rebecca Mozo
Photo by Ed Krieger

Robert Pine is heartbreaking as Gloucester and there seems to be true kinship between his character and Lear as he and Groener are a dynamic duo. Norman Snow comes across as stalwart and obedient by duty alone and not by any bonds of real friendship. Both are pitiful in the graphic gouging scene that DeLorenzo amplifies with sizzling sound effects and nausea inducing stage make-up.



Harry Groener and Robert Pine
Photo by Ed Krieger

The rest of the cast offer interesting variations that reveals just how variable Shakespeare's characters when put in the mouths of actors. It boils down to a matter of taste, although the Madmen seemed tighter and clearer than did the Fools. If a lighter, leaner Lear is what you're after then I recommend an evening with the Fools. For a darker study with deeper undertones, leaving you mentally and emotionally drained then the Madmen will be your best bet. If possible, I urge seeing both if for nothing else to appreciate the subtleties in both performances and subtext, although I do not suggest taking them back-to-back unless you're masochistic.

It's enough if an ambitious company can successfully mount one solid and satisfying "King Lear," but the Antaeus Company gives us two. You'd be a fool or a madman if you didn't see at least one.

--M.R. Hunter

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Runs through Aug 8
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Sundays at 2:30 & 7:30pm
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