



King Lear by William Shakespeare – Los Angeles Theater Review GET BEAT UP AND ENJOY IT TWICE



by Tony Frankel , July 5, 2010

King Lear, now playing in Los Angeles at Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre through August 8

The dazzling Antaeus Ensemble, creators of the sweeping masterpiece *Cousin Bette* earlier this year, has created another miracle with Shakespeare's sledgehammer of a play, *King Lear* – the miracle being that this unrelenting, unforgiving and oft times unredeeming tragedy is handled with such mastery and skill that you won't want to kill yourself after three hours of some truly nasty people; the perfect craftsmanship of playwright and thespian will leave you as breathless as the *de rigueur* bodies piled on the stage.

You see, *King Lear* is textbook tragedy: a dramatic composition, often in verse, dealing with a serious or somber theme, typically that of a great person who, through a flaw of character, is destined to downfall by some overpowering source. And *King Lear* is a brute of a tragedy – a bully of a tragedy. One that will trip you, taunt you, kick you, and steal your lunch money. If *Hamlet* is a splinter, *King Lear* is a plank; for when human goodness appears, it is choked, tortured, brutalized, hanged, and even has its eyes gouged out. This play will grab you by the scruff of your neck, point a dagger at your eye, and say, "There's no time to waste, go love while ye may." Sounds fun, huh?

And for those of you who are gluttons for masterful poetry of blood and revenge, and parched for artistic interpretation of the highest caliber, Antaeus has double-cast the show for your viewing pleasure. I saw both casts.



The main plot has 80 year-old King Lear dividing his Kingdom amongst his three daughters, based on their professed love to him (he does this either out of senility or obliviousness, depending on which Shakespeare scholar you consult.) Two daughters fawningly make a show of their love, and are granted the land; the third is given nothing when she offers an honest, simple love, and moves to France. The two cunning daughters then attempt to rob the king of his remaining power.



A subplot has a bastard son conspiring to usurp the power bestowed on his legitimate brother to become Earl of Gloucester. (Regardless of this company's proficiency with Shakespearean English, you are well-advised to research a synopsis of plot points if you are unfamiliar with the story.)

I wondered why Antaeus, after 19 years of classic plays, would choose *Lear* as its first full production of a Shakespeare play. When founding artistic director Dakin Matthews (who first bit his teeth into the role two years ago with the Andak Stage Company) treads the boards as King Lear, the reason is satisfyingly clear: it is the perfect actor at the perfect age to play this role. Mr.

Mathews reminds us why theatre remains a magical enterprise: when a masterful interpreter of Shakespeare converts complicated dialogue, via character choices and a teeming inner life, into easily understood language, you must witness it, especially in a space as intimate as Deaf-West Theatre.

That isn't to say that the majority of actors with Antaeus are not as capable – they are. But Mr. Mathews is a centerpiece of this ensemble and you are advised to see from whence the company was born.

The other King Lear, Harry Groener, was completely beguiling and almost child-like; it made perfect sense that his Lear could be duped by the fawning of two unworthy daughters. There was an emotional connection with his Lear, while Mr. Mathews was stronger in a classical vein. It seemed, however, that the players in Mr. Groener's cast were stronger overall than those in Mr. Mathews' cast.



The standouts in Groener's cast include the layered interpretation of JD Cullum as The Fool; he loves his King and works hard to keep spirits high even as he watches the Kingdom crumble; it is an astonishing performance, almost a revelation in its juxtaposition from fierce friend to sad loyalist. Allegra Fulton (Goneril) and Jen Dede (Regan) are so sexy and domineering in their calculations that it's almost a turn-on; John Sloan (Edgar, the legitimate son of Gloucester) is excellent – his tortured whimpers at the sight of his wounded father will bring tears to your eyes. Gregory Itzin triumphs as the ousted (and therefore disguised) Earl of Kent.



Less successful are Robert Pine as the Earl of Gloucester, who seems tired and lacks a sense of urgency and projection in voice. Sadly, Daniel Bess' Edmund does not promote villainy from his soul; as beautiful bastards go, this boy is bedeviling in his looks, but doesn't have the chops for this piece yet. Kevin Daniels, as Duke of Cornwall, is more operatic and bombastic than authentically representational.

Notables in Matthew's cast are Seamus Deaver as Edmund (a rascal you can relate to), Ramón de Ocampo's strong and passionate Edgar, and Stephen Caffrey, who plays the Fool as a sad clown.

Director Bart DeLorenzo is responsible for the crackling pace and lightning-fast scene changes. Lap Chi Chu (lights) and John Zalewski (sound) must have had a field day correlating their cues during the terrifying storm. I would never have believed it, but A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes, all 19th century frock coats, capes, and Victorian gowns mixed with contemporary camouflage, actually works.

After a visit with often misguided characters that torture, mutilate and cheat, I was torn: Do I want to embrace the world because of the high level of artistry I witnessed, or do I want to down a fifth of Tequila and go kick a dog because humanity's few evildoers keep fucking it up for the rest of us? Maybe both. You decide. Twice, if you'd like.

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