

King Lear, Starring Dakin Mathews



Antaeus, Los Angeles' Classical Theatre Ensemble, is producing its first season of full-length plays, after years of ensemble scene-work and an unfortunate clash with Anton Chekov at the Mark Taper Forum/Los Angeles some years ago.

A couple of months ago, they scored with a delightful adaptation of Balzac's *COUSIN BETTE*. This time they're producing a double-cast production of Shakespeare's *KING LEAR*.

The first production (the second is reviewed separately) features the veteran classical actor Dakin Matthews as the mad king. *KING LEAR* is based, it is thought, on legends of a pre-Roman Celtic leader, Leir, but the story has been variously re-written and adapted many times before and after Shakespeare wrote his version. The script Antaeus has used is the conflated one from two slightly different versions presented in the first decade of the seventeenth century.

King Lear, an aging monarch, decides to step down as leader of his England, and divide his Anglia holdings between his three daughters. But, being in the early stages of senility, he makes the fatal error of insisting that the larger share of his kingdom go to the daughter who best praises him with her declarations of daughterly-love. The scheming two older ones, Goneril (Kristin Potter) and Regan (Francia DiMase), do so with false praise, while the more sensible youngest, Cordelia (Rebecca Mozo), refrains from laying on the words quite so fulsomely. Lear takes that as a rejection of his position as father/king and disinherits her on the spot, much to the delight of the other two daughters, as Lear will give them Cordelia's share.

A subplot concerns the two sons of the Duke of Gloucester, Edgar, the legitimate, and Edmund, the bastard. True to the times, the born-out-of-wedlock son will inherit nothing, so he plots his older brother's downfall, along with his father's – a true Elizabethan villain in fine mettle.

The play being a tragedy means more characters die than in *HAMLET*, a fact that disturbed 18th Century audiences, so several versions with sweeter endings were produced, until the early years of the 19th Century, when the original script was finally adhered to.

This brings us to the remarkable production that director Bart DeLorenzo has double-cast. Honors go to everyone on stage, including the servants. Antaeus has a huge company (over 120 members), so finding qualified actors to perform in them is not difficult – hence the need for two casts. On a small stage, dressed in green-colored flats-that-move, the plot is acted-out, quickly and sparingly.

Kudos to Dakin Matthews' Lear, a white-haired and –bearded, befuddled old man, whose need for validation leads to all the troubles in his house. The three actors playing the daughters inhabit their characters squarely, as do the men playing their husbands, Albany (John DeMita) and Cornwall (Adrian LaTourelle). All bring clarity and subtlety to their roles. Morlan Higgins' Kent (except when he couldn't be heard in the first act) stands out, as does, especially, Norman Snow as Gloucester, who brings a wealth of experience to this poor man, maimed by the greed of Goneril and Regan. Ramon de Ocampo's Edgar and Seamus Dever's Edmund (!) find and play the tensions between their characters and Stephen Caffrey's Fool is as a strange teller of truths, a Fool's job, and much clearer in thinking than his boss, Lear.

If you've never seen how good KING LEAR can be, flock to Antaeus' productions and see how it's done. No boredom here. No ungainly histrionics. Just old-fashioned lucidity and focus.

KING LEAR, with two different casts, plays through August 8th at their temporary theatre, Deaf West, 5112 Lankershim Blvd, North Hollywood, CA 91601. 818.506.1983 or www.antaeus.org for tickets.