



A Human Lear

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Host: Anthony Byrnes

This is Anthony Byrnes *Opening the Curtain* on LA theater for KCRW.

"Don't play the idea of a king. You are the king"

That's a note you'll hear in Shakespeare classes every time a young thespian tackles Macbeth, or Richard, or Lear. That's because kings aren't like American Presidents . . . you can act presidential. You can't act the king. Kings are part of the great chain, a divine right to rule. American actors get caught up in showing everyone the concept of a king rather than actually embodying the crown. Shakespeare's plays demand actors who can reveal the foibles and frailties of the man who wears the crown.

For anyone who wants to see what it means to be "every inch a king," make sure not to miss Dakin Matthews tackling **King Lear** in Antaeus Company's production.

What sets Matthews' *Lear* apart is his remarkable command of the language. Not surprising for an actor who literally wrote a book on bringing Shakespeare's text to life.

Shakespeare's texts are so dense that most merely competent companies do their best to just get through the play. So often when listening to Shakespeare that's all we get . . . Shakespeare. It's a challenge to reveal the honesty or truth underneath the cliché that Shakespearean acting can become. The actor has to go beyond playing the idea of the text and actually embody it.

Take the oft-quoted line from Act 3 as Lear is caught in the storm beholding the 'homeless' poor Tom "Is man no more than this?" The idea, or trap, of the line is often played as a billowing question, all outrage no heart. Matthews instead plays the line with such simplicity, such humility, such honesty that its power comes not from a roar but from a whisper.

He brings this gift of subtlety of the entire play. His performance reveals a beautifully frail and flawed king. As Lear descends into madness, we're haunted by an all too human old man. It's a complicated and intimate performance helped by the 49 seat theater. For once the scale of LA's theaters is a luxury . . . when do you get the chance to see a beautifully acted Lear in such an intimate space?

You can't play Lear alone and Matthews has an equally adept cast surrounding him. In fact two casts. Antaeus Theater Company has double cast all the roles, including Lear. With so many talented actors who work primarily in TV and film a double cast is a way to avoid industry 'conflicts'.

For all its strengths, the production, like Lear, is not without its flaws but it's still very much worth seeing.

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