



King Lear at The Globe

by Peter Smith. Written on 2008-06-30. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: King Lear (2008, Shakespeare's Globe, UK).

THE FIRST OF FOUR SHAKESPEARE PLAYS TO OPEN THIS SEASON, DOMINIC DROMGOOLE'S King Lear offers hope to a jaded and despairing Globe-goer. Without the populist gimmickry which characterised most productions during the reign of Mark Rylance, this production, predicated on some excellent casting, concentrated on clear articulation, detailed but not fussy playing, and contact with the audience which was engaging rather than crassly diverting. Of the many shows I have seen in the theatre to date, this is the first that I am determined to see again.

At the heart of this production's success was its realisation that the Globe is a non-illusionistic theatre. The production was designed by Jonathan Fensom. In the place of anything resembling a set were a pair of sliding screens which functioned, when drawn, to shield the discovery space or the doors which flank it. An octagonal platform had been erected in the middle of the yard at stage height and connected to the stage by a bridge. Two sets of steps led from this platform down to the yard floor. Both the main stage and the octagonal platform were equipped with traps (the latter used for Poor Tom's cell). Two telegraph poles with climbing rungs stood at the downstage corners on either side of the stage and swags of greenery were draped from the tops of these back to the balcony.

The design was static and symmetrical as was much of the blocking. Frequently an actor would take a position at the centre of the satellite platform and address other members of the company positioned geometrically across the main stage from this 'hot-spot'. The effect was frequently suggestive of a courtly formality but such obvious positioning hinted that the production was not interested in reconstructing the vagaries of real situations or conversations. Dromgoole seemed unencumbered by any obligation towards verisimilitude and stage positioning was used as much symbolically (to indicate relative degrees of political power, for instance) as naturalistically. Indeed the least successful sequence was when the production affected a laboured naturalism by having several bloodied and muddied madmen (weird companions to Poor Tom) invade the yard from under the stage and haloo and whimper at the non-plussed groundlings. Fortunately, this was only a temporary distraction.

The real strength of this production derived from its casting. Not merely were the company vocally fluent and poetically lucid – notable here was Joseph Mydell's Gloucester – but they were physically well cast. For instance, Jodie McNee's tiny Cordelia (whose sheer dress accented her slenderness) appeared all the more vulnerable confronted and bullied by David Calder's Henrician monarch in long furred gown like someone straight out of Holbein. Danny Lee Wynter's fey and whimsical Fool seemed, like Cordelia, to be physically as well as politically outsized by those around him. Daniel Hawksford was a strapping and handsome Edmund who could easily have proved attractive to both wicked sisters (Sally Bretton as Goneril and Kellie Bright as Regan). Even the fairly minor role of Oswald, was played by the weaselly Ashley Rolfe whose encounter with the grizzled and irate Kent (Paul Copley) was a comical mixture of pantomime bravado and desperate panic as the Earl pursued him and forced him to duck behind the screens like a banderillero fleeing an enraged bull.

Calder's Lear was, if not a revelation, a refreshingly new take on the role. This Lear took a long time to go mad. His initial rejection of 'our last and least' (F, I.1.81) was inspired not by lunacy but by anguish. As he presented Cordelia, without dower, to France his attempted resolve not 'ever [to] see / That face of hers again' (262-3) forced a shudder of grief from him and as he lamented his daughters' 'filial ingratitude' (III.4.14), he was shocked by their callousness rather than inwardly demolished by it. Indeed this was a profoundly reasonable, and thereby even more pathetic, old man who (in spite of the warnings of Kent and the Fool) had miscalculated rather than proved mentally incapable. As he turned to Kent, sitting in the stocks, his 'Follow me not; stay here' (II.2.228) was not a symptom of the blithe unawareness of madness – Kent wasn't about to go anywhere – but a final, and comically desperate attempt to issue regal commandments: Lear was stubbornly and rationally attempting to articulate a remnant of authority. When, later in the same scene, he promised 'such revenges on you both, / That all the world shall – I will do such things – / What they are, yet I know not' (445-7), his hesitation suggested that this plot needed further deliberation rather than being a fissure in his ratiocination. As late as his exchange with Poor Tom, Lear spoke out of genuine concern which was eminently practical, sensible even: 'Thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies' (III.4.91). Even during the mock-trial scene (the inclusion of this from Q and the Fool's earlier Merlin prophecy from F indicate the use of a composite text), the legal protocol allowed Lear some semblance of a residual rationality. Without the bald ranting insanity of so many Lear's, Calder's was finally more interesting, more inflected and complex. As he regained consciousness in the camp of Cordelia, his modestly articulated description of his scalding tears (IV.6.40) was profoundly moving – testament to Calder's mastery of such an unintimate performance space as the Globe.

While he had chosen slightly to mute Lear's madness, Dromgoole had given less central roles an increased prominence. Peter Hamilton Dyer's Cornwall, for instance, presided over one of the most horrifying extractions of Gloucester's eyes I have seen. Aided by the simplicity of the staging – Gloucester roped into a Jacobean wooden chair, stage centre, no lighting effects (obviously) – Dyer reached over to Gloucester's face and rummaged with deliberation rather than frenzy to extract the first eye. He pulled the jelly out and threw it contemptuously upstage, wiping his bloodied hand across the front of his white shirt in an adumbration (poetic justice?) of his own stomach wound that would later lead to his death. As the second eye was extracted he goaded his wife to sit on Gloucester's lap. As she screamed in a mixture of perverted delight and horror, tugging at the eye herself, Cornwall groped her from behind. Thus, within this single episode were moments indicative of a calm and deliberate brutality juxtaposed with a perverted delight. Poignantly, Dromgoole allowed the bleeding Gloucester to take his time, guided by the (Quarto only) second servant, to exit through the groundlings in an agonisingly protracted silence.

The mad Lear was kept till after the interval and even then he was quietly confused rather than ranting. The inclusion of Quarto's scene 17, in which Kent and the Gentleman bring each other up to speed, provided a transition between the breakneck pace of the previous political manoeuvrings and the subsequent reunion of Lear and Cordelia. Lear sat up in a wheel-barrow bed which resembled the stocks we had earlier seen Kent occupy – a neat parallel which insisted upon an equivalence between the Earl's physical and the King's mental torture. Calder's quietly spoken Lear seemed to be struggling to determine his whereabouts and the intensity of his concentration was reflected on the expressions of those who sympathetically surrounded him: this was strong company playing. The battle was effectively staged as a choreographed stomp which contrasted neatly with the violent barbarism of the supposedly chivalric duel between Edmund and the anonymous knight – here Edgar was suited in black armour with a visor masking his face.

The final scene is the play's and this production's pinnacle. Lear entered with the Cordelia's corpse draped around his shoulders in a ghastly parody of a childhood piggy-back. Both wore simple white gowns. His fifth 'never' (F has five while Q has only three) came after a pause between it and the fourth: when it came, it was entirely rational, accepting, fatalistic. It was as though he was admitting – in just that one word – his full responsibility for everything that had happened, including the death of his own daughters without a trace of madness. As if to physicalise the sense of exhaustion, Kent slumped against one of the stage pillars in utter submission. A single female singer walked downstage to keen over the bodies. Why, having

effectively staged one of the most powerful scenes in Western drama, Dromgoole followed this with the Globe's jolly jig is one of the eternal mysteries / miseries of productions here.