



## King Lear at the National Arts Center

by Michael Best. Written on 2012-06-13. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: King Lear (2012, National Arts Centre English Theatre, Canada). See production details at the end of the review.

THE PRODUCTION OF *KING LEAR* AT THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE IN OTTAWA THIS LAST MAY was staged with a fully indigenous cast, and was directed by Peter Hinton, a highly regarded Canadian dramaturg, playwright, and director. Hinton set the story in seventeenth century Canada, the period of first contact between Europeans and indigenous people. Clearly there were high hopes, both that the production would showcase the depth and quality of the First Nations acting community, and that the setting would bring new insights to a play often considered to be one of the pinnacles of Western European culture. Judging by the performance I saw, mid-way through the run, the first of these hopes was generally realized; the second less so.

The production opened to mixed reviews. At the core of the sense of disappointment was August Schellenberg's Lear. Maja Stefanovska's review of an early performance was still to a significant degree true on the later evening I saw the play:

August Schellenberg plays the old king with varying degrees of success. He's at his best during Lear's rapid decline. He makes a wonderful and at times funny, confused, and lost king. However, the rest of his performance lacks excitement, he fumbles over some lines, and does not take enough time to give meaning to the rest.

A *King Lear* with a tentative performance of the title role is unlikely to be memorable. But there were some remarkable strengths in the performance; the younger generation of actors – the three daughters of Lear and the two sons of Gloucester – were more fully highlighted, and all gave strong performances. Edgar, in particular came closer to the promise of the original title page than any performance I have hitherto seen. The title page to the 1608 quarto gives major billing to Edgar, especially in his disguise: "M. William Shak-speare: HIS True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King LEAR and his three Daughters. With the vnfortunate life of Edgar, sonne and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of TOM of Bedlam." The role of his bastard brother Edmund is something of a gift to an actor – the

attractive, witty anti-hero – but Edgar can too often seem merely distracting to a modern audience. Gordon Patrick White, however, created a dynamic and sympathetic Edgar whose “mad” speeches were cut enough that they did not become tediously puzzling. It was fitting that in this production he was given the last speech of the play (Folio text) rather than following the quarto, which gives it to the Duke of Albany.

Although Lorne Cardinal’s stage set was flexible and impressive – a stylized birch tree and fort – the cultural context of the setting produced little in terms of insight into the play. A good example was in Jani Lauzon’s double roles as Cordelia and the Fool. Lauzon was a wonderful Cordelia: earthy, vigorous, passionate – despite the production’s cutting of her asides in the first scene. In her dual role, there seemed to be a potential for a genuine cross-cultural fusion of the court fool with the trickster figure, implied by a costume that suggested Coyote. Although, as the Fool, Lauzon garnered some laughs, I felt that she was struggling with the lines, trying too hard to keep up momentum, and never sure that the language would communicate with the audience. Perhaps her sense of the role failed in part because Shakespeare’s Fool is as a largely passive commentator, whereas the Trickster is an active mischief-maker (more the role of Edmund in the play). In addition, the potential resonance of doubling the two roles was never clearly exploited in the production.

Two scenes in the play did use the period and culture of First Nations effectively. One of the most difficult passages in the play to bring off is the sequence in the storm, where modern sound systems too easily overwhelm the mere words of the actor. In this instance, after one or two fine thunder-claps, the storm was represented by six spotlighted drummers surrounding Lear and his small entourage. The drumming was sympathetically synchronized to allow the actors to be heard without straining, and the sense of the First Nation culture’s ritualistic connection to the natural world was powerful. The second effective use of cultural resonance was in one of the few places where the chronological setting was used to advantage, the duel between Edgar and Edmund: Edmund used the new European weapon, the sword, while Edgar (wearing a wolf mask) used the traditional stave, the clash creating a sense that he was attempting to sustain traditional values against those of the invaders.

Overall, the first half of the play, where Lear’s lines dominate, was slow, and there were times that the static grouping made me wonder if some of the actors were not more comfortable with a friendly camera rather than a distant, removed audience. After the intermission, however, when Schellenberg adopted a quieter, more subdued character, the performance picked up, and the final scenes achieved both tension, with a taut duel scene between Edgar and Edmund, and real pathos in Lear’s final moments.

## Production Details

### General

<i>Title</i>	King Lear
<i>Year</i>	2012
<i>Theater Company</i>	National Arts Centre English Theatre
<i>Theaters</i>	National Arts Centre (Canada)
<i>Start Date</i>	2012-05-08
<i>End Date</i>	2012-05-26

### Cast

LEAR	AUGUST SCHELLENBERG
GONERIL	MONIQUE MOJICA
REGAN	TANTOO CARDINAL
FOOL	JANI LAUZON
CORDELIA	JANI LAUZON
FRANCE	JEREMY PROULX
BURGUNDY	MEEGWUN FAIRBROTHER
CORNWALL	KEITH BARKER
ALBANY	LORNE CARDINAL
KENT	CRAIG LAUZON
GLOUCESTER	BILLY MERASTY
EDGAR	GORDON PATRICK WHITE
EDMOND	KEVIN LORING
OSWALD	RYAN CUNNINGHAM

### Creatives

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR	PETER HINTON
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	LORNE CARDINAL
PRODUCTION DRAMATURG	PAULA DANCKERT
SET AND COSTUME DESIGNER	GILLIAN GALLOW
LIGHTING DESIGNER	LOUISE GUINAND
SOUND DESIGNER	ALESSANDRO JULIANI
FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER	JOHN KOENSGEN
STAGE MANAGER	STÉFANIE SÉGUIN