



King John at the Union Theater

by Kevin Quarmby. Written on 2012-02-19. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: King John (2012, Claire Evans, in association with The Steam Industry, UK).

THAT RARELY PERFORMED SHAKESPEARE DRAMA, *KING JOHN*, ENJOYS A WELCOME AIRING AT the Union Theatre, London. Directed by Phil Willmott, who introduced the first professional staging of *Double Falsehood* to the ranks of UK Shakespeare completists, *King John* is realized as a satirical comic romp through England's medieval past.

Enter the Union Theatre and you enter a smoke-filled crypt-like cavern where four simple wooden tables flanked by two wooden chairs can combine to create palace dining hall, windswept battlement, besieged town and royal throne room. The audience sits in a traditional semi-circle fronting the action. The play's simple staging, far from problematic, actually adds to the clarity of what otherwise is a complex exploration of power politics and xenophobic, anti-French zeal.

King John is a child-like ruler. Not childish, but manipulative and malicious like any spoilt brat whose strong, warrior-like mother dictates his every move. Nicholas Osmond prances and dances through the role as King John, adding murder and intrigue to his reign. Osmond's easygoing style of acting, and obvious relish for the more Machiavellian aspects of his part, complements perfectly the character of a monarch on the edge of insane megalomania. Maggie Daniels as his mother, Queen Eleanor, plays a blustering Amazonian, the true 'power' behind the throne. In her armoured breastplate, Daniels brilliantly evokes maternal influence and authority at its most dangerous.

King John's ire is reserved for the effected French court, whose ruler, Philip of France (Damian Quinn) fails to play homage to his English cousin. The resulting power struggle is exacerbated by the hot-headedness of Lewis the Dauphin, portrayed with threatening malice by the excellent James Corscadden. Willmott's casting of so many regional accents in *King John* – Corscadden's warm Irish tone adds a unique identity to the Dauphin – ensures an aural feast for a play too easily grounded in 'received pronunciation' anachronism.

As expected, the star performance belongs to Rikki Lawton as Philip the Bastard. Supposedly the illegitimate offspring of King Richard the Lionheart, Philip enters King John's court (and the welcoming arms of Queen Eleanor) with passionate disregard for courtly etiquette. Philip is the voice of the people. Philip might seem self-serving in his angry rise (the moment he, with seeming reluctance, hands over the crown at King John's death hints at his own lust for power), but throughout his thuggish confrontations with the French he is patriotic English 'everyman' in every detail.

This excellent production, with its committed and talented ensemble cast, makes *King John* an accessible and enjoyable Shakespeare novelty. The humour and wit in Willmott's vision highlights the liminal generic status of this 'History' play, understandably isolated from its more famous Tetralogy associates. The comic satire of its narrative accentuates *King John's* situation between 'comical history' adventure and 'Chronicle History' exactitude. *King John* appears a conflation of the two. When its 'entertainment' value is heightened by an irreverent though clear performance style, the wit of this little considered drama shines through. Excellent, enjoyable and well worth the trip to London's Union Theatre.