



Shall We Not See These Daughters? King Lear at Ashland

by Michael Best. Written on 2013-11-18. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: *King Lear* (2013, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, USA). See production details at the end of the review.

MUCH OF THE DEPTH OF TRAGEDY WE FEEL IN *KING LEAR* COMES FROM OUR SENSE OF THE spiritual and emotional journey Lear is forced to make, long after the age when we can reasonably expect an old dog to learn new tricks. He begins the play as a cranky, egotistical, shortsighted and short-tempered tyrant. It is only when these qualities lead him to lose all he has – including his sanity – that he learns both empathy and humility. He learns, but it is too late to save himself or those he loves. Others around him undergo a similar journey. Gloucester learns through blindness that he was blind to his own faults; Edgar learns through deprivation the value of possession; Albany – depending somewhat on whether we speak of Albany [Quarto version] or Albany [Folio version] – learns to take some leadership in the name of virtue; and even Edmund, who is thwarted in his chosen journey towards power and wealth, despite of his own nature learns that he may do some good.

All these are male characters, and all, in one way or another are privileged to hold power, or to lose it. We are less used to thinking of the three women in the play as undergoing a similar kind of journey. They are the three daughters of legend and fairy tale: two evil, one good. The most thought-provoking choices in the recent production of *King Lear* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland were in the characterization of Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia.

The production was directed by Bill Rauch, and staged in the round in the Thomas Theater. The setting was contemporary, and the effect was both intimate and, on the whole, minimalist. The opening scene, where Lear commands a love-test between his three daughters, challenged – even reversed – the audience's expectations, largely through costuming and the non-verbal reactions of the three women. Goneril (Vilma Silva) and Regan (Goodrin Nordli) were wearing formal, colorful gowns, suitable for a solemn occasion; Cordelia (Sofia Jean Gomez) was dressed in somewhat revealing black, which, together with a visible tattoo, suggested that she was the favored, but punk-influenced and rebellious teenager. As the love-test was announced, both Goneril and Regan were clearly nervous, while Cordelia rolled her eyes, and at the moment

when she was to perform, simply refused. We were reminded that youthful rebellion can be both self-aggrandizement and a kind of idealism. Her older sisters were clearly deeply shocked by their father's consequent rage.

The brief scene between Goneril and Regan after their sister leaves, disowned and rejected by Lear, is one of the few places that the sisters are given stage time to analyze their situation. My response to this scene in the past has been to think of them as two scorpions warily circling each other, deciding when and where to strike. But this production took a different tack – one no less available in the text – suggesting that they were trying to make sense of a dangerous and difficult predicament. Goneril hints at some sibling rivalry in the background, but at the same time reacts with strong language to Lear's rejection of her youngest sister: "he always loved our sister most, and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly" (TLN 317). Regan's response can be seen as combining something like compassion – as she speaks of her father's age – with a backstory on his character that rings true: "'Tis the infirmity of his age, yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself" (TLN 318-9).

As events unfold, the production shows the sisters adopting different strategies: Goneril, in a manner characteristic of the first-born, does her best to take control of events and to organize them, becoming increasingly aggressive and ruthless as her control is challenged; her costuming changes to more masculine riding clothes. Regan retreats into a kind of manipulative narcissism, continuing to dress in feminine clothes as her actions become more extreme until they verge on a complete dissociation from feeling. She depends increasingly on drink to keep her going. This last stage device is neatly integrated into the ending of the play, where it becomes very easy for Goneril to poison her by slipping some white powder into her ever-present drink. Both older sisters undertake rapid journeys towards evil, but the production suggests that this development was not inevitable.

Cordelia's journey is less clear. She begins by being rebellious and assertive. Then, of course, she disappears from the action for almost three acts of the play. When we see her again she is in military garb, closely following the hint in the Folio text: "*Enter with Drum and Colors, Cordelia, Gentlemen, and Soldiers*" (TLN 2349). The connection to the outspoken young woman of the opening scene is clear, and there is a journey in her status from the rebellious youth to the general of the invading forces she brings on behalf of her father; but there is less evidence of an internal change as she speaks to Lear in the scene I usually find the most moving in the whole play, their reconciliation. This Cordelia is more convincing in her anger than in showing affection for her father. At this crucial moment in the play she seems more kin with her sisters rather than different from them, and the result is that she does not clearly demonstrate to her

father that his earlier outburst of disturbing misogyny is far wide of the larger truth of female humanity.

A feature of this production was the director's choice to have the part of Lear performed alternately by two seasoned actors, Jack Willis and Michael Winters. Whatever the differences between the two performers, the fact that the remainder of the cast had to adjust to varying nuances of style and characterization clearly had the effect of keeping the production as a whole very much alive; I saw it close to the end of a long run. The night I attended featured Jack Willis in a strong performance that conveyed intensity without too much of the fortissimo one often encounters in the scenes where he reacts with verbal violence to his daughters – and the elements. In the intimacy of the theatrical space the effect of his control was to heighten rather than to reduce the sense of pain he communicates as he travels from the comfort of his easy chair and wide-screen television to the wilderness of exile. His loss of sanity – and parallel discovery of insight and compassion – is accelerated when he loses his Fool (Daisuke Tsuji), who has hitherto acted at times like a kind of prompter, reminding him of his need for control by shaking a puppet-Lear at the moments when his “*hysterica passio*” (TLN 1329) is in danger of taking over. The Fool's death – a notorious performance crux – in this production is the result of an accident in which he is killed by Lear himself, without the king realizing what he has done.

Willis is deeply moving in the final scene when he drags Cordelia in on a tarpaulin; at the very end, when he believes he sees his daughter alive, he looks away from her body to an imagined or hallucinated image in the distance.

In the echo-chamber that is the subplot of the play, Gloucester (Richard Elmore) is dapper and vain – hence both his deeply insensitive comments about the begetting of his bastard son, Edmund, at the very beginning of the play, and the ease with which Edmund deceives him. At the same time, this Gloucester is essentially decent, and is an instinctive peacemaker in a play that has no room for negotiation: “I would have all well betwixt you” (TLN 1396). In his movement from moral shortsightedness to insight Gloucester suffers the single most horrific moment of the play in his blinding, where the physical violence was in stark contrast to the elegance of the setting in – the gracious music room of Gloucester's castle, complete with grand piano. In a striking touch, Regan slashes the neck of the servant who tries to defend Gloucester with the jagged edge of a wine glass she has just broken. The intermission was just after this scene, with the result that a somewhat subdued audience picked its way around the edges of a stage littered with blood, broken glass, and two bodies, as they made their way to the everyday world of snacks and something to drink. Some stayed to watch attendants clean up, and carry the bodies offstage.

If Lear's daughters have tended to be seen in black and white, in part because their initial motivations are barely hinted at, the sons of Gloucester are more clearly differentiated. Again in this production, costuming was used effectively to provide an immediate backstory: Edmund (Raffi Barsoumian) is in uniform, and it is clear that when he has "been out nine years," this has been in military service. Edgar (Benjamin Pelteson) enters as something of a party boy, tuxedoed and semi-drunk. Edgar's journey in the play is hard to pull off on the stage. He has to morph from his initial naivety to the nothingness and assumed madness of Poor Tom, rising again in stages until at the end he is to take charge of the "gored state" (TLN 3295). It is a structural challenge in the play that Edgar's father is given no stage-center moment for his death. The responsibility of bringing closure to Gloucester's role in the play falls to Edgar, and it was fitting that one of the strongest moments in Pelteson's performance was his narrative of the moment when his father's heart "burst smilingly" (TLN 3162). The moment of his transformation from Edgar to Poor Tom was especially difficult in this production, mainly because the stage set – a diagonal barred iron fence otherwise brilliantly used as the interior and exterior of Gloucester's castle – provided no practical space for his soliloquy, with the result that he was banished to a catwalk in the ceiling among the stage lighting fixtures and a echoing acoustics.

Other than this one scene, the stage sets in the first half of the play were minimal, unobtrusively underlining the action. The storm scene was unexpectedly effective in the confined space of the theater. The technology of sound and lighting is such today that we take the dramatic use of these effects for granted; more surprising in its effectiveness was the way in which the wind in the storm was generated by mutes onstage holding large fans (leaf-blowers?) up to the characters as they moved around the stage, in a manner reminiscent of the puppeteers in Bunraku theater. The storm was orchestrated remarkably well, such that very little of the dialog was lost in what can be a chaotic rather than a moving scene. In the second half of the play, the stage was littered, as if post-apocalyptically, with broken pieces of furniture, presumably as a result of the destruction of the storm. This staging was less successful, as actors were at times constricted in space, and there seemed to be little use of the objects on stage to underline or facilitate the action.

The selection of a modern setting for Shakespeare has become something of a commonplace, as directors seek to provide ways of making the works relevant to modern taste. The result can at times be hit-and-miss, with the modernization offering no more than a surface connection to the audience. In this production, although I found the stage sets uneven in their illumination of the play, the costuming, was immensely effective in providing an immediately recognizable context for many of the characters. That the representatives of Lear's hundred knights were

dressed in battle fatigues made them threatening enough that Goneril's concerns over their excesses seemed plausibly legitimate, and I have already commented on the effectiveness of the dress chosen for members of the younger generation – the three daughters and two sons.

The combination of strong direction, a consistently high standard of ensemble acting, and intelligent use of costuming to support characterization made this the kind of production that the Oregon Shakespeare Festival does best: balanced, always probing, with flashes of thought-provoking originality.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	King Lear
<i>Year</i>	2013
<i>Theater Company</i>	Oregon Shakespeare Festival
<i>Theaters</i>	Thomas Theatre (USA)
<i>Start Date</i>	2013-02-03
<i>End Date</i>	2013-11-03

Cast

KING LEAR	JACK WILLIS
KING LEAR	MICHAEL WINTERS
GONERIL	VILMA SILVA
REGAN	ROBIN GOODRIN NORDLI
CORDELIA	SOFIA JEAN GOMEZ
FOOL	DAISUKE TSUJI
KING OF FRANCE	TONY DEBRUNO
DUKE OF BURGUNDY	RAY FISHER
DUKE OF CORNWALL	REX YOUNG
DUKE OF ALBANY	PETER FRECHETTE
EARL OF KENT	ARMANDO DURÁN
EARL OF GLOUCESTER	RICHARD ELMORE
EDGAR	BENJAMIN PELTESON
EDMUND	RAFFI BARSOUMIAN
OSWALD	BARZIN AKHAVAN
ENSEMBLE	CHARLES S. COURAUD
ENSEMBLE	TONY DEBRUNO
ENSEMBLE	RAY FISHER

ENSEMBLE JOSHUA HEUERTZ
ENSEMBLE MCKENZIE ROBINSON

Creatives

DIRECTOR	BILL RAUCH
ASSISTANT TECHNICAL DIRECTOR	STEVEN R. WILLEBY
DRAMATURG	BARRY KRAFT
COSTUME DESIGNER	LINDA ROETHKE
SCENIC DESIGNER	CHRISTOPHER ACEBO
LIGHTING DESIGNER	CHRISTOPHER AKERLIND
SOUND DESIGNER	ANDRE J. PLUESS
COMPOSER	ANDRE J. PLUESS
FIGHT CAPTAIN	BARZIN AKHAVAN
FIGHT DIRECTOR	U. JONATHAN TOPPO
STAGE MANAGER	MOIRA GLEASON
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER	GWEN TUROS
COSTUME DESIGN ASSISTANT	MERILEE FORD BARRERA
ASSISTANT SOUND ENGINEER	JOHN J. GIBSON
PRODUCTION ASSISTANT	ROXANA KHAN
SIR JOHN GIELGUD DIRECTING FELLOW	DESDEMONA CHIANG
PROPERTIES MASTER	JAMES N. CLARK
LIGHTING VIDEO & PROJECTIONS MANAGER	MICHAEL K. MAAG