

King Lear, directed by Trevor Nunn for the Royal Shakespeare Company, New London Theatre, London, 14 December 2007

With its bare stage, evocative of the structure of Shakespeare's 'Wooden O', Trevor Nunn's production of King Lear is an undeniable success. Ian McKellen as Lear is here the life and soul of the whole play, even though the supporting cast is also fairly impressive. At the beginning of the highly ceremonial opening scene, the old king is in a cheerful mood, as he proudly receives his elder daughters' flattering words. Then, all of a sudden, the audience are witness to his first unexpected outburst of anger, when his youngest daughter, Cordelia, announces that she cannot express her love for him in words. The spectators are as puzzled as the young lady, played by Romola Garai, whose imploring look and nervous smile fail to soothe her father's fury. Though the actress's rather strange delivery may sound irritating to some, she does look like innocence itself. Consequently, her being cast away by her father conveys a strong feeling of injustice.

The loss of his daughter does not seem to affect the king much since, a little while later, we find him enjoying the company of his fool, played by Sylvester McCoy. Like a typical clown, the plump character indulges in tricks, uses all sorts of props, even pulling down his trousers or making funny sounds. His merry behaviour seems infectious for he is soon followed by the king's soldiers, who then engage in some kind of Russian dance. Moreover, his intimate relationship with Lear allows him to pat him on the back, to sit on his lap, and even to kiss him, thus revealing the surprisingly affectionate nature of the king. Among his jolly entourage, McKellen's Lear is obviously happy to have renounced his kingly duties and intends to lead a carefree life. However, things don't quite work out the way he had hoped, as he is shown little respect by those he appointed as rulers. Outraged by the situation, he repeatedly raises his arms in indignation, until he can no longer bear it and decides to leave in the raging storm. The latter is true to life and rather awe-inspiring thanks to the downpour of artificial rain and to the realistic sound effects. It works as an objective correlative to the king's incipient madness, which leads him to strip naked in the foul weather. The audacious choice to have the king strip naked reinforces the theme emphasized throughout Nunn's production, namely that of man's beast-like condition. For most of the scene, Lear's face is covered, so that the audience's look is riveted on his naked body. It sends the spectator back to the rather embarrassing previous moment, when Lear delivers the 'unaccommodated man' speech while observing with fascinated eyes the semi-naked 'Poor Tom' lying on his back with his legs sprawled wide apart.

The situations of both characters may be meant to illustrate the fickleness of fate. Edgar's metamorphosis is remarkably quick. Having thrown away his spectacles, taken off his clothes, powdered his face, slashed his arms and chest, he is then often seen crawling on the ground like an animal, with a mere loin-cloth to cover his naked body. As to Lear, he undergoes a drastic transformation after the storm. In sharp contrast to the dignified man he was in the first few scenes, he lets himself go to wearing rag-like clothes. Also, as if by an accelerated process of ageing, the broken-hearted father now appears to be a tired old man. Realizing how powerless he is, his rage is replaced by resignation. Nevertheless, he seems to have gained wisdom in the process. The authoritative, self-centred character has now become humble and meek, as when, moved by pity, he selflessly offers his garment to Poor Tom.

In spite of the tragic atmosphere, Nunn insists on scenes which provide comic relief. Thus, in line with Shakespeare's play, he wonderfully blends high and low styles, without making the play any less majestic. Hence, following the unexpected entrance of the king crowned with wild flowers and Gloucester's question 'is it not the king?', the king answers by clutching his crotch—a gesture his clown had made earlier—thus provoking laughter amid the audience. Similarly, during the 'sulphurous pit' speech, he describes women as centaurs while obscenely wiggling his hips. In a word, the king plays the fool and the humour of such scenes contains a great deal of irony.

Besides, through the close attention he has paid to detail, Nunn endows each main character with very distinct personalities. Therefore, the audience finds it much easier to relate to the play. In this respect, the casting seems particularly judicious. Goneril (Frances Barber) is tall and thin; her bony features are enhanced by white make-up and very dark hair, which fits her cold and haughty character. Regan (Monica Dolan), by contrast, has a cheerful and animated countenance. Accordingly, she is lively and always has a glass of wine in her hand. Yet, despite these differences, both sisters are heartless in their own way, as is revealed by the ungrateful manner in which they treat their father. Regan addresses him as a senile old man, whereas Goneril treats him with sheer disdain.

Particular stress is put on cruelty, as shown by the savagery and detachment with which Gloucester's eyes are plucked out by the ruthless Duke of Cornwall and by his burst of laughter at the sight of the bloody eyes. The stress on cruelty is also represented by the hanging of the fool on stage. Cornwall's soldiers, having arrested him for high treason, clearly enjoy killing him as if it were a sport. Despite being terrified, this sympathetic character continues to crack jokes, until he breathes his last. At this point, all the lights are switched off and a loud sound is being heard, which makes the scene even more tragic.

As for Philip Winchester as Edmund, he is so good at pretending, that, beyond the women on stage, he also

seduces the audience. Indeed, one cannot help admiring his performance both as an actor and as a Machiavellian character within the play. He addresses the spectators through monologues and often leaves with a smirk on his face. He is the perfect embodiment of the medieval Vice. But he is also a highly nuanced character who sounds almost sincere when, in the end, he realizes how wickedly he had behaved. He who manoeuvred and manipulated people and events, and who always seemed in control of everything, now expresses a sense of fatality as he realizes the grim consequences of what his evil nature has achieved.

When he reveals his plot against Lear and Cordelia, all those present raise their hands, as if to invoke the gods. But it is too late. The devastated king enters with his dead daughter in his arms. He then kneels down, and the corpses of his two elder daughters are brought onto the stage, and placed in the foreground. The intensity of the moment is enhanced by the light effects on their white clothes, in contrast to the darkness in which the stage is plunged. The overall effect is to convey a feeling of great woe.

So, all in all, I was allowed to watch a truly impressive performance of one of Shakespeare's most moving tragedies, which I feel grateful I was fortunate and lucky enough to attend.

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