

LEAR AT TRAQUAIR.

Saturday 8th June saw the last night of Shakespeare at Traquair's two four-night runs of King Lear. It was, as we have come to expect, a massively impressive undertaking – 44 names on the cast list, an additional “chorus” of 10, a dozen or so extras, and a team of 15 singers and instrumentalists, several names occurring more than once as their owners multi-tasked. There is a production team of 17, and grafting away behind them on prompts, make-up, props, costume and front of house are over 30 more hard-working bodies. The programme also records the company's thanks not only to staff at Traquair House, but to the RSC's Open Stages Programme, The Eastgate Theatre, S.B.C., Jed Press, Tweeddale Fire Protection, Villeneuve Wines, Peebles Life, Scrap Store Selkirk, Nicki Bester and the redoubtable Richard Nisbet... It's an immense accomplishment.

These runs were blessed with a spell of weather the performers could hardly have hoped for as they rehearsed through a cold and grudging spring. Front-of-house know from experience that midge-repellent may be required: it was appreciated on this last night – and no doubt on others. It is ironic that a play with a thunderstorm at its heart should bask in such weather. The elements went some way towards reflecting events on the last night, however: we started in pleasant evening sunshine and concluded under an appropriately dark and moody sky, with a few fat raindrops for the final scene, after which it relented.

This company has been around long enough to have tackled some of the big plays – like Macbeth - twice. But this is the first time they have plucked up the courage for this most bleak and notoriously difficult to stage of the great tragedies. This dark, and Dark Age, tale does not invite colour and exuberance in costumes and props : the designers went, overall, for an indeterminate medieval look that matched these sombre events perfectly, as did the “soundscape”, a team of drummers positioned around us among the trees and bushes producing the first faint thunder-rolls with the first mention of the wildness of the night, and building to a climax as Lear confronts his dark epiphany in the climax of the storm. This is very probably just how the thunder was created when the play was first staged.

To abandon your place in the great scheme of things, especially if you are the anointed king, was to make a breach in nature, an opening for chaos, hence the storm. But this is also the archetype of the thunderstorms we have seen and heard in countless

movies, an intensifier that can ratchet up almost any emotion – fear, suspense, anger, danger, romantic passion... Did Shakespeare invent this? Probably. And here he is, already exploiting it more completely than any of his successors.

The directors also added a “chorus” of darkly hooded faceless figures which they tell us represents the torment in Lear’s inner world. Their very smallness (most were children) was somehow sinister, along with the carefully choreographed animal noises and movements. There was a sense that the underworld was watching and enjoying Lear’s suffering.

Which brings us to Matt Davies’ immense performance as Lear. As he makes his entrance, cheered by his devoted retinue, he is marked out by his simple gold headband and great cloak, but it is the voice, movement and attitude which confirm his enormous stature. Magnanimous, powerful and loved, here is a man who does not dream of being disobeyed... But all things must pass: he intends to divide the kingdom between his daughters, shake all cares and burdens from his age and unburdened crawl towards death. This would have shocked the play’s first audiences: to them, a ruler was the Lord’s anointed and abandoning the role was not an option. But Lear’s tragic error is not so much the decision as the way he implements it. The daughters must tell him, in turn, how much they love him, and he will apportion his kingdom according to how their answers please him. It is like acting out a fairy story. Somewhere inside himself, he must know that Goneril and Regan’s pretty speeches are just words, then out of the blue his youngest and dearest, with all the obstinate integrity of a stubborn teenager, refuses to play the game. It all happens in a flash. Furious at being publicly contradicted (it diminishes him as king) he asserts himself by banishing her. Now there is no going back for either of them, however much it hurts. To a modern audience it’s a perfectly recognisable family situation. The psychology of it is faultless.

There is then a terrible inevitability to events as the daughters unite to oust their father then turn on each other, betraying even their spouses in a display of ruthless greed for power which is ultimately the death of them, and of the scheming and ambitious Edmund, the man of both their dreams. If there was any justice, they would lose the final battle, but there is not, not in this world. Though Cordelia is reunited with her father and they are reconciled, her avenging army is defeated, she is executed and Lear dies of a broken heart.

From the first flourish to his last entrance “with Cordelia in his arms” Matt Davies’ Lear is a powerful presence. He seems to tower above the other characters. He is not diminished by madness and despair: he is terrible and disturbing. He is loquacious, so there are many lines – his ego is such that he talks, shouts, curses others down, often with declamatory appeals to the gods. He requires energy – and a prodigious memory: much of the part is not straightforward dialogue moving the story along; it is mad, disjointed stuff, with the connections not on the surface – a nightmare to remember. One of the pleasures of such a promenade performance is the audience’s proximity to the action – a challenge for the actors, but it’s a buzz to be so close to the energy that emanates from such a committed performance.

And this performance was matched by the principals on all sides. Scott Noble is magnificent as Gloucester, Lear’s counterpart in the sub-plot, another complacent old man who misjudges his children, failing to recognise the one who loves him. Caught in the struggle between Lear and the daughters, he is blinded for his troubles, metaphor becoming a terrible, literal reality in one of the most notorious scenes in theatre. This was finely judged and chillingly effective, the most disturbing moment being the thrill of delight on Regan’s (Leah Moorhouse’s) face as she ran the “vile jelly” of poor Gloucester’s eyes through her fingers.

He stumbles on to another famous and difficult scene, the cliff where he proposes to end it all. The picture is so wonderfully drawn by Edgar (“The fishermen that walk along the beach appear like mice”) that it is fully formed in our imaginations, and, our disbelief suspended, we suppose for a moment that it is a real cliff – which is exactly as the original audience saw it while they watched this on a bare stage, a flat surface, accustomed as they were to using their imaginations to fill in the scene. Confusion must have reigned till they realised this was Edgar’s trick to convince Gloucester, “Thy life’s a miracle.” It could be a moment from a bit of 20th century theatre of the absurd, like *Waiting for Godot*.

Gloucester’s son Edgar begins as the gullible victim of his half brother Edmund, and banished by his father like Cordelia, he becomes Poor Tom and goes through his own epiphany of suffering at the edge of madness till he is reconciled with his father before the old man’s death. The understanding that he gathers along the way fits him to be the man who bears “the weight of this sad time” at the end. David Bon conducts him sure-footedly through every step of this journey.

Edgar's half-brother Edmund (Aegir Maciver) outshines the wicked sisters in his lack of humanity. They have weaknesses – lust, jealousy – he does not. His last-ditch attempt to save Cordelia is not a weakness. It's a logical concession: he's dying and Cordelia's death is no longer useful to him. His downfall? He underestimates what decent people (with values he is contemptuous of and cannot appreciate) are capable of, so Edgar becomes his nemesis. Till then, though, he schemes his way towards dominating the kingdom with contempt for the rest and a panache that is almost attractive: "Yours in the ranks of death," he tells the besotted Goneril, without a trace of sincerity, but she is too gaga to notice – "My dearest Gloucester!" He walks off with a raising of the eyebrows and the slightest of smiles towards the audience, as if sharing the joke with us. Wonderful stuff.

The wicked sisters were equally wonderful. Leah Moorhouse's Regan is dark and glamorous, immaculate and controlled, all black and red, almost doll-like, and frighteningly credible, as we have noted, in the mutilation of poor Gloucester. Donna Vanderberghen's Goneril is a more wild and sensual figure, more raw, much driven by frustration with her husband Albany (who will not comply with her schemes), by her obsession with Edmund, and by jealousy of her sister. Between them, they take us with disturbing ease from what might be daughterly concern for a faltering old man to the point where they jointly cast him out into the storm and shut their doors on him. The line between apparent normality and nightmare is that easily crossed.

One character apparently removed from normality is Lear's fool. Jo Dube's is an interesting performance, partly because this seems to be a feminine fool. Or is it a mischievous reversal of the boy-plays-girl thing in Elizabethan theatre? Lear does refer to the fool as a boy ("in, boy; go first") but this fool (unlike Twelfth Night's Feste) could just as easily be a woman. She does not seem to be a professional jester but rather a "natural fool", kept almost like a pet, for entertainment (which was the case in some great Elizabethan households). The bright red onsie, just a bit alarming in shape around the nether regions, and complemented by the nose, dramatically separates the fool from the others in their plain medieval clothes. Why is Lear so fond of his fool? The great king listens to no-one unless they are playing his game: Cordelia and Kent are summarily banished without a hearing. But the fool has licence to say what she likes when she likes, to anyone. Only she can tell Lear, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise," and only to the fool could Lear say, "O let me not be mad,

not mad, sweet heaven!" She is, in all her breathtaking familiarity (she calls Lear "Nuncle") a kind of confidant. Jo Dube caught this well, her antics (and appearance) bringing brightness to the dark happenings around her.

And the darkest of these is the death of Cordelia. Young Caitlin Morris cuts a slight and vulnerable figure in this role, but she burns with courage, integrity and determination. She faces, and answers, her father's declamatory fury and is implacable, contemptuous even, in the face of her sisters' antipathy. Her mute performance in Lear's arms is wonderful and affecting. We can see why a version of Lear in which Cordelia wins the last battle was preferred throughout the 18th century.

We cannot let the principals go without mentioning Paul Nicholson's performance as Kent. In this terrible world, he is a beacon of hope that there is good in humanity, doggedly persisting with a self-sacrificing and unrecognised loyalty which Lear does not deserve. This was good casting. Paul has a proven track-record with such brave and upright characters. And let's hear it also for Tim Wilcox's creepily wicked Cornwall, Regan's spouse, a great contrast to Angus Shearer as the other husband, the wavering Albany, who eventually turns against Goneril.

A word of praise for Chris Dube and Ben Jones, who composed and, with their considerable team of singers and musicians, performed all the music, which fitted seamlessly and subtly, enhancing the proceedings immensely and setting the seal on a thoroughly impressive production. Congratulations are due to this year's director Fiona Forsyth for a memorable addition to Shakespeare at Traquair's already remarkable record.

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