

By **Shiroma Silva**

“Tis the infirmity of his age: yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself,” said Regan of her father. It’s a sentiment that comes through clearly about the central character in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s latest production of *King Lear*. Playing the traditional old man who gets madder as the play progresses, Greg Hicks depicts the ageing King as a character who, though lost in madness, has a self-taunting self-reflective quality.

This is juxtaposed with striking wartime visual effects that ooze symbolism and captivate today’s audience. Alongside some nimble acting, it all helps to shift this intense drama into our era.

Greg Hicks, with his wiry physique and resonant voice, adds an allure to this complex character. In many instances, the audience is left with the impression that Lear is playing a clever psychological game, both with himself and those around him. When he meets the blinded Gloucester near Dover and pretends not to know him, Lear playfully mocks his former character, then rocks back and forth between various sides of his current state. He finally owns up to knowing who Gloucester is, but cruelly belittles the loyal regard his subject holds for him. This is all played off against the backdrop of Lear being caught in a whirlwind of something much bigger than himself, a downward spiral that sucks him towards the hell he knows he’s destined for.

This interplay with himself is sadly not equalled in Lear's interactions with the Fool: Kathryn Hunter's sudden departure from the RSC has taken its toll here. Her replacement's performance was simply not nuanced enough to convince.

The same goes for Cordelia, Lear's favoured and most precious daughter. Where we might have expected a tender, young and wise personality, we were instead presented with a somewhat two-dimensional, whimpering teenager. So the sympathy Cordelia deserves for being deprived of her rightful share of inheritance is also lost. It's a serious weakness of the production, especially as Cordelia is one of Shakespeare's more rounded women. Unlike a saccharine character such as Ophelia, who collapses at the first rejection by Hamlet, or Lady Macbeth, a devious manipulator working her ambition through a slightly less evil man, a well cast Cordelia would have lifted Hicks' complex performance even further.

Cordelia's sisters compensate for this weakness in the female roles. Goneril, played by Kelly Hunter, and Regan, played by Katy Stephens, both dominate the stage with their subtlety, beauty, mistrust and conniving. Their control of the men around them is bold and splendid, as is their cruel casting aside of those who don't live up to the part (witness Goneril's interchange with her husband in scene III, in which she derides his manhood because of his weakness to act forcefully). The fact that the sisters are not immediately awful, and are only later revealed as such, makes them more akin to complex modern characters. The only criticism of Goneril and Regan is that they are hard to imagine as Lear's daughters; they look more like the younger siblings of the super lean and athletic Lear.

With a simple staging made up of derelict buildings and a scattering of found objects, the play passes through several periods of history. The symbolism is rich and effective, signalling the end of an era, the tearing up of the land and loss of control in the wake of an invading army. It could be taken as an analogy to major shifts in today's world – the banking crisis or the failure of capitalism.

Edmund, the bastard son of Gloucester, sides readily with the two sisters in their attempts to acquire power, and is true to Shakespeare's intentions. But his motivation for betraying his father is not altogether convincing; Tanji Kasim's early statements citing his discomfort with his illegitimacy do not gain the audience's sympathy, so his subsequent behaviour is difficult to put into context. Playing up his part as a bar boy enjoying the Caribbean sun and two-timing cheeky chappy shuffling nervously between the two sisters works well. What doesn't convince is his darker side. With one eye always on the crown, he falsely denounces his own, pure-hearted father as an enemy of the state, but lacks the gravitas to pull it off.

In the next scene, the torturers visit Gloucester at his home and carry out a horrific act, in which both his eyes are gouged out. It's torturous and difficult to watch, but skilfully orchestrated. Edgar, the 'good cop' of the siblings, is there for his father, revealing his true identity only after he has helped his father get over the immediate aftermath of what he's just endured. It causes his father to turn; Gloucester expresses deep and touching remorse for having sided with the wrong son, in one of the most moving scenes of the production.

The inner processes leading to those pivotal moments – when a character reassesses himself, or there's a change in atmosphere – have not, as a rule, been well marked in this run of recent RSC productions. Many seemed to sail through these important transitions all too lightly. In *Julius Caesar*

, the moment when Caesar's compatriots decide they must murder him for the greater good is not properly signalled. Neither is the moment when the crowds, who were previously supportive of their leader, perform a u-turn. Similarly in

*Lear*

, the points at which Regan proceeds from hints of ill will, to bad intentions, to absolute evil, are not clearly signposted.

That said, in *King Lear* there is symbolism galore in the staging to compensate for what the acting may lack. Although the costumes switched between Edwardian and Elizabethan for no obvious reason, the set and the effects were striking. The changes in weather and the oncoming storms as Lear travels to Dover are realised by a collection of strong sound effects and evocative lighting. The powerful spotlight of WWI lamps in an otherwise dark environment hints at the trouble Lear is about to face, exposed to truths he would rather not have known. As he makes his “Blow, winds” speech, he is elevated, lit from above and drenched in a heavy shower (with water that appeared very real, but could not possibly have been – after several minutes his clothes and hair were barely wet!) At the end, the same wartime lamps are placed side by side in an overhead grid, shining down on Lear’s prostrate torso, perhaps symbolising his transformed soul being lifted from this treacherous land called earth to a higher place.

Although David Farr’s take on this serious play is probably lighter in tone, look and feel than the much-lauded Michael Grandage version starring Derek Jacobi, it’s compellingly inventive and its characters, though not necessarily deep, are complex and fitting for our age.

*King Lear is running from Feb 23<sup>rd</sup> to April 2<sup>nd</sup> as the opening play at the new Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford*