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HVSF “King Lear” is Engrossing, Powerful.

by **Abby Luby**

Seeing a performance of “King Lear” against the backdrop of a stunning, Hudson Valley sunset on the Boscobel stage of the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival aptly sets the tone for this play. The dimming, illuminated clouds in the fading sky is poignantly congruent with the story about an aging king’s demise and his ultimate doom.

“King Lear” is a bear of a play: intense, brooding, laden with raw, human rage fueled by a driving lust for power. But it’s also about age discrimination, a theme that strongly resonates with us. The corrupt, younger characters seek to weaken the aged Lear, discounting his wisdom and belittling his very ability to rule based on the presumed limitations of being old. Even Lear himself holds

a similar attitude about age. In Act I, he himself sets us up when he says “shake all cares and business from our age; Conferring them on younger strengths, while we Unburthen’d crawl toward death.” Lear’s daughters inflict suffering on Lear and violently torture the elderly Gloucester, an extreme case of elder abuse.

HVSF actor Stephen Paul Johnson is brilliant as Lear and holds us tightly in his dramatic grip, sweeping us along his spiraling journey down to insanity. Taking on Lear is no easy task, but Johnson easily assumes the very essence of the character. Highly skilled, he masterfully modifies vocal inflections and body language as he incrementally moves to a deeper rung of madness.

Richard Ercole is commanding as the elderly Earl of Gloucester who mirrors Lear in his own downfall brought about by his bastard son, Edmund. Ercole makes us live Gloucester’s agony as he is lied to, accused of treason and tortured. He is strongly persuasive in portraying the earl’s freefall from nobility to that of an outcast. Ryan Quinn as Edmund, intermittently confides directly to the audience of his scheme to kill both Gloucester and his true son, Edgar. Quinn is appealingly personable, almost like the bank robber we want to get away; we like him despite his being shady and deceitful.

Equally strong performances by the HVSF troupe make this production powerful. Jason O’Connell as the king’s very loyal confidant, Earl of Kent, is wholly convincing as the wronged friend after Lear banishes him from the court for speaking out about the dishonestly of the king’s two elder daughters. O’Connell easily switches roles from erudite earl to the disguised, lowly peasant “Caius,” playfully trying out different speech accents until he settles on one that completes his cover. Perfectly cast as Lear’s jester is Wesley Mann. Interjecting doses of advice masked as double talk and puns, Mann fluidly angles his body in and around the rigid stance of the other characters, a floating, comic relief on the tidal wave of tragedy.



L to R; Eleanor Handley, Chiara Motley. Photo by William Marsh

Chiara Motley is the very mean-spirited, stoic Goneril, Lear's eldest daughter, who wants a world free of elders holding power; she stops at nothing to defame her father. Motley's Goneril is calculating and we get her—she's like a silken garment lined with sand paper as she feeds her father sweet, flowery words of love he wants to hear, words that quickly dissipate to those of harsh scorn and destruction. Regan, Lear's second daughter is played by a confidant Eleanor Handley who deftly exacts Regan's cruelty and rudeness, turning us against her. Jessica Frey plays Cordelia, Lear's youngest daughter who truly loves her father but who refuses to flatter him with platitudes. Frey effectively taps into Cordelia's goodness and honesty, one of the few, hopeful, positive tones that fade as the corruption progresses.



L to R; Jessica Frey, Stephen Paul Johnson. Photo by William Marsh



L to R; Jessica Frey, Stephen Paul Johnson. Photo by William Marsh

Charlie Francis Murphy is Edgar, Gloucester's elder son, who adroitly modulates to the role of Poor Tom to keep his real identity a secret. Murphy consistently holds the dramatic tension of the pretense of being a friend to the blinded Gloucester, teasing us while babbling the truth.

The Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival production of "King Lear" is directed by HVSF Founding Artistic Director Terrence O'Brien. This dark play is a sparsely staged performance that lets us focus on the words as charged, verbal conduits that lead us to a tragic place of man's immorality. The stark soundtrack is primarily percussive, the lighting uncomplicated and there is a brief, dance interlude, minimal enough to keep us on track. O'Brien tells us in his program notes that special effects for "King Lear" would never "be as powerful as the emotions of the actors on stage." In O'Brien's hands "King Lear" is an exquisite, rich performance that honors the timeless and powerful words of Shakespeare.

This is one of three plays in the HVSF's 27th season, the other two are *All's Well that Ends Well*, directed by Russell Treyz, and Ken Ludwig's adaptation of *The Three Musketeers* directed by Associate Artistic Director Christopher V. Edwards. The season runs through the September 1, 2013.

*Featured image; L to R, Wesley Mann, Stephen Paul Johnson.
Photo by William Marsh.*

*Hudson Valley Shakespeare
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