

## **PJC THEATRE REVIEWS**

### **LEARY OF LEAR AT THE NATIONAL**

**Review of W. Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606),**

**as seen at the National Theatre, 29 April 2014**

No, sorry to say, I was not happy with Simon Russell Beale's *Lear* at the National. I was not helped by the fact that my partner, who'd never seen *Lear* on stage, discovered that he hated both the play and the production. It's hard not to be influenced by someone sitting close and obviously unconvinced. On the other hand, the other people in the audience near us seemed pretty happy. The upshot was that I was glad to have seen the show but found myself slowly alienated from it.

Is it the play itself that's impossible? There are moments, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde on the death of Little Nell, when it's hard not to laugh. The finale when Lear arrives, howling and staggering onto the stage with the dead Cordelia in his arms, is never very convincing. No wonder that actors playing the part of the youngest daughter have to be feather-light. At other moments, the deaths of Regan and Goneril are also hard to take, as they writhe and go 'Aaaargh!' like cartoon characters. Let alone the gouging of Gloucester's eyes.

But Shakespeare's melodrama of regal and family meltdown is known for its difficulty of staging. What of Sam Mendes's production? Did he surmount, or at least, corral the difficulties? My answer is in the negative. The switches from quiet scenes to super-storm were well done. And the lightning and thunder effects were almost too brilliant. Yet the production seemed to veer uneasily between presenting the characters with dour realism or as surreal archetypes. The extra chorus of figures in army fatigues were introduced to supply an air of menace behind the political power brokers but I found their parades distracting

as they had little to do. At one point a line of characters, holding umbrellas, marched across the stage, to indicate that it's raining. But then most disappear, as they are superfluous to the scene in hand. It's just itchy movement for no gain. Indeed, the whole production, including Simon Russell Beale's performance as *Lear*, was all too fidgety.

So, yes, the actors? I detected from the body-languages of Regan [Kate Fleetwood] and Goneril [Anna Maxwell Martin] that they were offering contrasting types of scheming and outwardly charming womanhood, who came to bad ends. But it is difficult to understand their words – that is, they were audible but not easily comprehensible. Their intimate style of discourse did not project across the huge auditorium at the National. Meanwhile Edmund [Sam Troughton] was convincing early on as a clammed-up character, fretting over his illegitimacy; but unbelievable in later scenes as the ardent, if self-interested, lover of the ugly sisters. Edgar [Tom Brooke] did his best between fooling and delivering the final message of wisdom ('speak what we feel, not what we ought to say'), as did the Fool [Adrian Scarborough]. The other 'goodies' were dignified in adversity and the 'baddies' malignant.

Yet, overall, this play depends upon its *Lear*. I have seen Simon Russell Beale in many roles, always admiringly. I thought that his flat, unbelieving, delivery of 'Never!' five times in a row (just before he expires) was wonderful. Overall, however, on yesterday's evidence, his *Lear* was far too stagey, fidgety and predictable to be tragic. I didn't quite laugh but I didn't weep either.