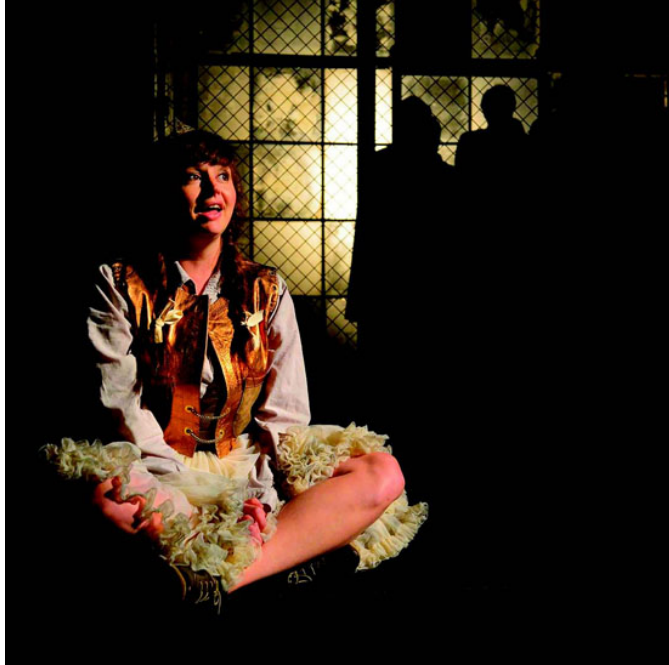


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Final Cal Shakes' Season Production Falls a Bit Short

By Lou Fancher



From left: Kjerstine Rose Anderson as The Fool and Anthony Heald as Lear in California Shakespeare Theater's production of "King Lear," directed by Amanda Dehnert. Photo Kevin Berne

Given Cal Shakes' bold approach to Shakespeare's canon and the temptations of a versatile, endlessly plumbable cast to be comedic or tragic, the Orinda outdoor theater's final 2015 season production, "King Lear," chooses to be both.

Director Amanda Dehnert's split treatment travels in two too disparate directions to be entirely successful, but the peaks are certainly high enough for applause. A commanding, two-stories-high set - an enormous steel grid box like a Rubik's Cube with grimy, frosted glass pane windows - pivots, opens to reveal, closes to capture and masks the actors. Set designer Dan Ostling's well-used construction is balanced by designer Melissa Torchia's costumes, marvelously suggestive of past elegance, slick trickery, provocation and decay.

Perhaps Dehnert was as captivated by the precocious Cordelia as was King Lear, whose favor for his youngest daughter is his - and everyone's - undoing. Casting the same actor (an energetic Kjerstine Rose Anderson) as both Cordelia and as the Fool who whispers or sings dangerous ditties in the ear of Lear (a rock-steady, beautifully vulnerable Ashland Shakespeare Festival veteran Anthony Heald) is a misstep that brings mixed

results. While there is reason to draw parallels between the spirited Cordelia and the sprightly Fool, doing so confuses the father/daughter relationship. More egregiously, the poignancy of their bond and the eventual tragedy of their lives is lightened by the two actors having shared silly antics and slanted glances as the Fool and Lear.

Nevertheless, the unraveling of a man, his mind, and his power makes for compelling scenes including the play's opening. When Lear demands that his daughters profess their love to earn a portion of his empire, Cordelia's two older sisters, Goneril (cool, devilish Arwen Anderson) and Regan (smoldering El Beh) create an astutely-toned buildup for Cordelia's "I have nothing to say" declaration. Lear's favorite daughter loves him only dutifully, she teasingly tells the King, setting off an inferno that leads to her banishment and all manner of behavior that tears the family bonds to shreds.

Alliances break throughout the kingdom, with the most compelling moments the electrocution and eye-gouging of Gloucester (Charles Shaw Robinson) and every scene in which the Earl of Kent rants or raves his philosophies (a stunning performance from Aldo Billingslea) or Edmund (immeasurably watchable Daniel Clegg) displays his wickedness and avarice.

At times, there is so much talent raging on stage a viewer wants to freeze the action, laugh or cry, then shout "carry on!" It makes for excitement, if not a sense of connectivity and overall flow.

Dehnert can clearly stretch the tension of love, lust, lost mental powers and sibling rivalry into fierce, snapping scenes that escalate in the play's ultimate explosions of a storm, torture, poisoning, and deaths. So it is a mysterious choice to undercut the journey to total tragedy with digressions including a Monty Python-style death of a servant (marvelous physicality from charismatic Patrick Alparone), Kent's pink mohawk that jarred and seemed nonsensical, and Cordelia's scampering as the Fool.

Ultimately, a strong cast and a director with broad capabilities proves this "King Lear" could be either comedic or tragic. Aiming in both directions and loaded with a courageous director, excellent cast and striking visuals, it impresses, but never quite arrives at either destination.

"King Lear" runs through Oct. 11 at Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (formerly 100 Gateway Blvd.) in Orinda. For more information, visit calshakes.org.

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