

## ASC: King Lear 2008



The last time the **American Shakespeare Center** (back when it was just Shenandoah Shakespeare) performed **King Lear** at the Blackfriars Playhouse was in 2003. That production “reimagined” Lear’s kingdom as an American corporation, with the king as a retiring CEO dividing his business interests among his daughters. It only took modern dress and neckties to make that work.

This time, the staging is more traditional, with fantastic costumes (you’ve got to love Lear’s faux wolf-trimmed robe). And it is as dark and intense as any play you’re likely to see. The story is familiar: King Lear is facing old age and plans to settle each of his daughters and their husbands with a third of his kingdom. But right away the youngest, and his favorite, annoys him and she is disinherited. Trouble brews with the other two as well, in part because of the machinations of Edmund, bastard son of the loyal Earl of Gloucester. No good can come of this, and none does.

Once again, though, the performance of the play reveals humor that a straight reading cannot. This is a point raised in the current **Director’s Notes** on the play, and I think sometimes the audience feels a bit uncomfortable laughing in the face of so much tragedy. But Lear is mad and does and says funny things, and Lear’s Fool is there to lighten the King’s mood, and sometimes also lightens ours.

But not much. Because James Keegan as King Lear will blow you away with his anger and madness and pain and grief. He begins rationally, disappointed in Cordelia: How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is To have a thankless child!

And then his frustration grows as age and his new-found impotence increasingly constrain him. He lashes out, he screams, he whines, he HOWLS. But near the end, when he and Cordelia are together again, he almost whispers: No, no, no, no! Come, let’s away to prison:

We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage:  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down,  
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we’ll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we’ll talk with them too,  
Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out;  
And take upon’s the mystery of things,  
As if we were God’s spies: and we’ll wear out,  
In a wall’d prison, packs and sects of great ones,  
That ebb and flow by the moon.

Keegan takes us on the journey of Lear’s through every emotion, brilliantly, and his performance is not to be missed. Stephen Lorne Williams as Gloucester and John Pasha as Edmund also stand out as very complicated characters. Both are welcome newcomers to ASC, along with Chaney Tullos.

The Lear daughters are also excellent: Allison Glenzer and Sarah Fallon as Goneril and Regan, and Alyssa Wilmoth as Cordelia. René Thornton, Jr. is terrific as Kent; John Harrell is a natural as the Fool (no offense meant, it’s just that Harrell makes a great philosopher/comic); and Gregory Jon Phelps does well with Edgar, especially in Edgar’s Mad Tom persona. Christopher Seiler and Sasha Olinick are familiar faces from ASC’s touring company and shine as Albany and Cornwall.

I’ll probably see this production again before the end of the run. But first I’ll be sure and catch Measure for Measure, Twelfth Night and Richard II.

Perpetual Folly / Clifford Garstang 2008

<http://perpetualfolly.blogspot.com/search?q=ASC:+king+lear>