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'King John' cast reaches brilliance

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Read a play as often as you might, it remains a half alive thing on the page. Not until actors and their director stage it before your eyes and ears is it fully resurrected and the extent of its genius unveiled.

So that is why the appearance on the Octagon stage at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival of Shakespeare's magnificent, but infrequently performed, "King John" is something more of an event than is yet another "Midsummer" or "Julius Caesar." But being a historic event for ASF is only the beginning of the attraction here.

Four observations: First, this script, despite a certain unevenness in the youthful playwright, is fascinating and glitters with poetry of a high calibre; second, the cast gives uniformly stunning performances with some of them attaining brilliance; third, Howard Jensen's direction is astute, perceptive; but fourth and foremost, brace yourselves to ignore the abject absurdity of the production concept.

In another evening's visit with the Plantagenet family, James Goldman's "A Lion in Winter," the mother Eleanor of Aquitaine remarks at a particularly bad moment, "Every family has its ups and downs." The observation is a decidedly understated truth in Shakespeare's version which takes place a few years later. John, the last of the four sons of Eleanor and Henry II holds the crown of England with only a partial legitimacy as his young nephew Arthur has a stronger claim to it.

The allied King of France and Duke of Austria go to war with John to gain the throne for Arthur. Thereafter, allegiances realign with such frequency and speed as to set one's head spinning.

Ultimately, this play is about perfidy, vows and the casual breaking of vows. It is neither a flattering nor inaccurate picture of humanity; kings, pope, cardinal and nobility are Machiavellian seekers after what Philip the Bastard calls "commodity."

The cast is rich in exquisite performances. Brian Kurlander and Rodney Clark, respectively the Earls of Pembroke and Salisbury, give finely wrought performances. Johnny Lee Davenport, as Hubert de Brugh, has the audience despising him one minute and weeping with him the next. Paul Hebron's suave, duplicitous French king and Rick Hamilton's cynical, manipulative Cardinal Pandulph are admirable, strong creations. Roger Forbes' richly comic Duke of Austria ? an early ancestor of Falstaff ? is heartily welcome in a play otherwise largely devoid of humor. As Melun, a French lord, John Renshouse successfully and cleverly navigates the reefs of a death speech perhaps unequalled for ineptitude in Shakespeare's writing. Regan Thompson is touching, even heartrending, as young Blanche of Spain, a pawn in these power struggles. Fredi Olster's grim, even vicious, Queen Eleanor borders on the terrifying.

As rich as these characterizations are, there is more ? the novalike, incisive brilliance of Ray Chambers' John, of John Preston's Philip the Bastard and Greta Lambert's Constance, mother of the doomed Arthur. Eschewing more commonplace interpretations, Chambers gives John a dignity and seeming strength up to the moment everything falls apart in on him ? his sustaining mother dies, the French invade England and his barons desert. Only thereafter does his interior weakness show through. It is at once an insightful and revealing characterization.

Preston as the Bastard, possibly Shakespeare's first really great character, is heroic, ironic, self-deprecating ? in short, immensely complex. Preston plays the role like a musical instrument as we watch him grow from bucolic innocence to knowledge of the evil world.

Lambert's Constance reveals why such legendary actresses as Sarah Siddons valued and loved this role. She is a tigress defending her cub, and like Siddons, a tragic muse in her grief and despair. The Festival has not before seen the equal of this performance, even from the protean Lambert herself.

But then there is the oddly comic production concept.

An unfamiliar play, written in the 1590s, with a setting in the early 1200s, is arbitrarily set during World War I. That last straw is a bit much to dump on a camel or an audience.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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