

Latest ASF production fit for a "King"

Theater Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

Last week Kent Thompson revived "King Lear" at Alabama Shakespeare Festival for the first time since 1992.

One of the pleasures of live theater in Montgomery is to watch a play cast almost entirely from the Festival's permanent acting company, one of the finest in the country. This kind of in-depth casting is not affordable if the actors need to be imported. But if they are a part of the permanent company, then we can see, as here, a former Lear, Philip Pleasants, in a minor role like the Fool. Thus imperious Greta Lambert and Monica Bell are Lear's daughters General and Regan, and regal Greg Thornton and Ray Chambers are their husbands. Paul Hebron plays a superb Gloucester, and Brian Kurlander and John Preston play his sons Edgar and Edmund. Rodney Clark is Kent.

All these actors, many of them headliners in other plays,

are very much known quantities to Montgomery audiences, perfectly at home on this stage and experienced in working with Mr. Thompson. If ever there was a "dream cast", this is it. Only Jennifer Mudge Tucker as Cordelia is making an AFS debut; we'll see her again in "Twelfth Night".

But with this much high-powered talent in the supporting cast, the quality of Lear himself becomes all the more critical. Ironically the troupe is so strong that any of the senior men could have played the part.

Instead Mr. Thompson has surprisingly cast Barry Boys, a Festival stalwart in character roles, as his new Lear, perhaps with the mistaken idea that only one of the older actors in the troupe can play an old man. But in my view he lacks sufficient weight for the part's tragic potential.

Fortunately, the others more than compensate. Mr. Preston's first scene as Edmund, where he smiles and smiles and is a villain, received applause at the preview I saw.

Mr. Hebron is astonishing as

Gloucester, with the bloody eye gouging and the scene at the "cliff" especially skillfully managed. Mr. Clark, along with Mr. Pleasants, showed us throw-away acting technique, a welcome lightening of the dour melodrama.

Karen TenEyck's set has a marbled, blood-red floor with the background of a portcullis, and Christina Turbitt's costumes are unusually stylish, with over-sized collars substituting for armor, suggesting affinities with grand opera.

"King Lear," one of the few modern tragedies that approaches the achievement of the ancient Greeks, was one of the most popular of Shakespeare's plays in the nineteenth century. The version of our first great native-born actor, Edwin Forrest, was heard repeatedly in theaters and opera houses season after season, cut but not mutilated and with the original ending. This production is in that fine, American tradition.