

Leary

Playing King Lear's like trying to swallow a whale.

When tragic lines get laughs, something is gravely amiss.

The San Diego Rep's *King Lear* is all haywire extremes. The production's so compulsively comic, so eager to entertain, you'd swear it's a parody. It opened March 25 and might be in better shape by now. The problems were systemic, however. They preclude optimism.

REVIEW

JEFF SMITH

While many in the cast favor theatricalized acting, Jonathan McMurtry gives spare, internal readings as Gloucester, the betrayed father who stumbles when he sees. A frail bundle in tattered browns, McMurtry reveals a blasted heart.

The Earl of Kent is Lear's ally. When exiled, Kent becomes an anti-Fool. Rather than quip and criticize, he acts, with profound loyalty (one of the most amazing things about *Lear*: amid the chaos of slipping standards, the play has more unconditional bonds than any other in Shakespeare).

Peter Van Norden, an Old Globe vet, makes Kent a humble force. His anger can be dead serious and funny at the same time. In the only believable fight scene (the others are choreographed safety-first and by the numbers), Kent snaps fierce thrusts at Oswald, who parries with a saddle.

Shakespearean A.C. Bradley called Goneril "the most hideous human being (if she is one) that Shakespeare ever drew." Rather than one-note her as Evil Incarnate, Linda Libby swaggers. Goneril's at the helm now, gaining control. People assume that Lear was once wonderful. Libby's brazen, scheming Goneril is either a portrait of her father

as a young man or how the daughter of a closet misogynist perceived him in her youth.

Armin Shimerman's sharp, precise Fool makes you wish Lear's sidekick had a larger part (or that Shimerman essayed the role of the King). Gloucester's illegitimate son Edmund verges on a hat trick: he wins the love of Regan and Goneril and almost nabs the whole of Britain. In Edmund's asides, Hasan El-Amin almost wins the audience as well. His rapport creates a split between seductive deliveries and the mayhem they describe.

Giulio Cesare Perrone's set locates massive, late-Bronze Age walls (Lear supposedly lived in the Eighth Century BCE) in the Painted Desert. Tall, sliding panels reveal barren and sculpted terrain. Perrone's design is terrific. His part-ancient, part-modern, mostly goofy costumes, however, sabotage the stage.

Edgar wears bell-bottoms and unbuttoned shirt, as if he's "a woman's man, no time to talk," headed for a '70s disco. Regan's in a sleek, low-cut, pointy outfit from the *Star Trek* collection? Others range from jogging to Armani suits. And Lear, though he often refers to his white hair, is wrapped in a blue teepee and sports gray, Medusa-droop dreadlocks, which he keeps throwing back behind his ears, like a Charlie's Angel. Costumes should define character. Perrone's just call attention to themselves. Worse, every time a new one appears, the audience must readjust to the play, after uttering a hearty "what?"

Stephanie Robinson wrote excellent back-



Sam Woodhouse, Marielle Heller in *King Lear*

King Lear, by William Shakespeare

San Diego Repertory Theatre, 79 Horton Plaza, downtown

Directed by Todd Salovey; cast: Sam Woodhouse, Peter Van Norden, Marielle Heller, Karole Foreman, Armin Shimerman, Linda Libby, Jonathan McMurtry, Ruff Yeager, Brennan Taylor, J. Todd Adams, Hassan El-Amin, Matthew Henson, Thomas Haine, Elzie Bishop, Walter Murray, T.J. Johnson, David Valdez, Trevor Hollingsworth; scenic and costume design, Giulio Cesare Perrone; lighting, Jennifer Stelow; composer, Stephanie Robinson; fight director, Colleen Kelly
Playing through April 17; Wednesday through Saturday at 7:30 p.m. Sunday at 7:00 p.m. Matinee Sunday at 2:00 p.m. 619-544-1000.

ground music for a serious *Lear*. Ominous whole notes, like foghorns in a desert, establish moods the production doesn't sustain.

Many Elizabethans believed in "Degree," a

proper order to things. They feared that when the order is upset, savage discord follows. Lear's whimsical test of his daughters' love untunes the universe, which becomes catastrophic, strafed of meaning.

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