

# Early Modern Literary Studies

***King Lear* presented at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, February 2013.**

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Directed by: Selina Cartmell. With Serge Bolze (King of France and Ensemble), Sean Campion (Earl of Kent), Beth Cooke (Cordelia), Lorcan Cranitch (Earl of Gloucester), Aidan Crowe (Ensemble), Phelim Drew (Duke of Cornwall), Caoilfhionn Dunne (Regan), Robert Fawsitt (Ensemble), Manus Halligan (Ensemble), John Kavanagh (Duke of Albany), Tina Kellegher (Goneril), Ronan Leahy (Curan, doctor and ensemble), Andrew Macklin (Duke of Burgundy and Ensemble), Ciarán McMenamin (Edmund), John Merriman (Ensemble), Aaron Monaghan (Edgar), Danny O'Connor (Ensemble), Hugh O'Connor (Fool), Owen Roe (Lear) Dylan Tighe (Oswald), and Lauterio Zamparelli (Ensemble).

The Abbey Theatre's first performance of *King Lear* in over eighty years set itself firmly in a pagan past. Before the play began and at intervals during the performance, two Irish wolfhounds stalked across the stage, led by a hooded figure. These large and impressive dogs, who greeted the audience in the foyer after the show, enhanced the sense that we were in a royal court of medieval Britain. A shadow-filled, stark grey, split-level set also gave the appearance of an ancient castle. One piece of the production that generally worked well was the decision to have an apron in the centre of the stage, which jutted out into the audience. As the audience took their seats, Hugh O'Connor's Fool sat on the apron, in character, applying white face paint and looking vulnerable and distracted. This apron was again used by the three sisters when, prompted by Lear, they stood there to enact their filial devotion (1.1). Using the apron in this way made it clear that what was required was the performance rather than authenticity of feeling. On occasions however, the apron did seem to encourage a declamatory style and, if I had one complaint, it was that by the end of the play I longed for a character to give a subdued speech in a corner somewhere

Owen Roe's performance of the eponymous king was a weighty one. Arriving on stage, attired in lavish furs and stomping about, Roe established his dominance and ownership

of the space and its inhabitants. This was a Lear certain in his command, cognisant of the importance of appearances, and with a flair for showmanship – a sharp contrast to the man he would become. The audience were allowed glimpses beneath the big personality, however, as the other characters froze and Lear took centre stage to speak of his secret doubts.

In his madness, Roe's Lear was a cross between a mischievous Puck and a bawdy Falstaff. He capered about the stage, garlanded and garrulous, with 'Poor Tom' in tow. Upon his labelling of all women "centaurs" (4.5.119) with nothing but "hell" below (4.5.121), Roe promptly inserted his hands down the front of his animal-skin pants and conspicuously groped his crotch for several lines. This action led to laughter as Roe, wrinkling his nose and repulsed by his own malodorous hands, spoke of a "stench" and his desire for "civet" perfume (4.5.122-123). Further laughter ensued when Cranitch's Gloucester cried "O, let me kiss that hand!" and Roe responded with a deadpan "Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality" (4.5.125-126). The action brilliantly captured how much can be gleaned from these lines – Lear's disgust, madness, and grief, the play's interest in the gross physicality of the body and reproduction as a source of anxiety, and the potential for dark comedy inherent in such a pitiful spectacle.

The three sisters were marked as different-but-similar through resplendent medieval gowns – Goneril in wine, Regan in evergreen, and Cordelia in midnight blue. Although slight in comparison to the girth of Lear, Beth Cooke's Cordelia was not effete; at every turn, she remained a strong-minded woman of principles. Tina Kellegher's Goneril was similarly determined, calm and in command. In the opening acts, her Goneril was heavily pregnant. This was an original choice that emphasised how Lear's antics were burdensome and made his cursing of Goneril's womb all the harsher – she collapsed under the weight of his curse, clutching her belly. Later, Goneril entered no longer pregnant and drew attention to her noticeably flat stomach by placing Regan's hand on it. However, while Goneril's pregnancy was an interesting directorial decision, not enough was done with the concept and the pregnancy and its absence went unmarked by the other characters.

For all his bravado and showmanship, Hugh O'Connor's Fool was a frail figure. Pale, shaven-headed, and with a permanent disability – an injured leg strapped into a brace – O'Connor's Fool was marked as an outsider whose infirmity provided him with an insight into dependency. His pleas to and criticism of Lear took on an extra edge as his advice went unheeded and it became clear that Lear's banishment meant banishment for his dependents too. Hobbling about the stage, O'Connor struck a fine balance between the humour his role demanded, the bitterness of the outcast, and the vulnerability of the

weak. The Fool was a firm reminder that, despite the play's title, this was not only Lear's tragedy but the tragedy of a nation.

Aaron Monaghan's Edgar was particularly notable for his no-holds-barred performance of 'Poor Tom'. Sporting a bare loin cloth, Monaghan covered himself in reddish clay and scrambled about the stage with movements borrowed from tribal dance. This Poor Tom was reminiscent of Djimon Hounsou's Caliban in Taymor's recent film of *The Tempest*.

At the finale, bearing the body of Cordelia, Roe's cries of anguish cut the silence in the theatre like a knife. Gazed at by his entire court and a packed theatre audience, Roe was isolated, a truly tragic and lonely figure in the centre of the stage. This was a pitiful spectacle that rendered everyone a mere spectator, a voyeur of one man's grief. The sterility, hopelessness, and disunity of the kingdom was emphasised as Sean Campion's Kent withdrew from the company, bitterly refusing to rule with Edgar and eager only for his grave. John Kavanagh's Albany spoke the final lines of the play like a shell of his former self, a man eternally scarred by his experiences.

Overall, the Abbey's *King Lear* was a solid production that included some strong performances and that took some original risks. Hopefully it will not take another eighty years before this tragedy graces the national stage again.

### **Works Cited**

Shakespeare, William. "The Tragedy of King Lear: The Folio Text". In *The Norton Shakespeare Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008.