

VARIETY

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Lear

Lee's deceptively free-form "Lear" starts out as a bug's-eye view of Shakespeare's great tragedy.

By Sam Thielman ▼



Meanwhile, back at the palace, everyone's trying to avoid discussing the way they blinded that one old man and kicked the other one out into the storm. Young Jean Lee's deceptively free-form "Lear" starts out as a bug's-eye view of Shakespeare's great tragedy, exploring some of the Bard's pettiest characters as they pick at each other during the moments they're not onstage in "King Lear." But as the show moves forward, Lee uses that play and some beautifully unconventional additions to flesh out Shakespeare's themes of loneliness, mortality and filial responsibility in gratifying and moving depth.

Lee ranks among the few writers with both the skill and the inclination to suggest that her bad characters are probably no worse than most of the audience. In fact, that's one of the first things she points out here — "I'm a bad person!" Edmund (Pete Simpson) bursts out, explaining when pressed that he only cares about himself. "Everyone is selfish," Goneril (Okwui Okpokwasili) replies, not looking up from her book.

Edmund tries to explain that he's done something really awful by blinding his father and sending him out into the tempest, but no one — especially not Regan (April Mathis), Goneril or Edgar (Paul Lazar) — wants to think about that, so they excuse him. "Plus," Edmund adds desperately, "everyone's started to look fat to me."

Here we have a world in which no one will even admit the possibility of genuine evil unless you insult their appearance.

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The text could have simply stopped exploring new territory here and the play would still have been interesting and funny — sort of a “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead” for the Twitter set. The characters’ hilariously ill-informed discussion of Buddhism (“You know, like with ... like you just accept everything,” Edgar clarifies) and their bitchy battle-of-the-sexes banter could go on for another hour without disappointing most people.

But Lee is a lot more precise than that — she wants to show us, first, what allows these people to live with themselves, which is quite a challenge since most of us are probably champing at the bit to pass judgment on them.

Okpokwasili’s performance is a tremendous help here. With an air of utter niceness, she describes herself in an aside: “My needs are essential,” she says. “If I want to kick you to the curb, that is because my foot is possessed with the desire of kicking. I have no control over myself.”

More importantly, though, “Lear” is about mortality, our own and that of our parents. As the play narrows its focus, the Shakespearean trappings begin to warp and distort, then vanish completely.

Cordelia (Amelia Workman), recovered from her time abroad and looking stunning (Roxana Ramseur has put together some particularly beautiful costumes), talks about virtue as if she’s from another planet. Goneril enters announcing, “I am Lear!” and speaks as her dad for several minutes. Finally, the lights go down and Lazar pulls off his fake beard and addresses us, telling us that each moment could be our last. And come to think of it, why are we at a play?

Again, it’s a place where the show could have ended, and again, it’s a better play for having gone forward. The lights come back up on David Evans Morris’ opulent red-and-gold set, which looks in the little space like the Studio Apartment of Versailles. The actors return in full period garb to perform with heart-rending sincerity “The Most Lamentable Tragedie of the Death of Mr. Hooper.” For audiences unfamiliar with this work, please refer to YouTube, where you can watch the whole “Sesame Street” episode in which it originated.

Those too old or young to remember the segment will understand its gist without research; suffice it to say that when one of the show’s performers died suddenly, the producers of “Sesame Street” decided to try to explain mortality to their young audience rather than pretend nothing had happened.

In other words, it’s the opposite of the snarky conversation at the beginning of the play, where no one will talk about the tragedies staring them in the face. It’s bizarrely appropriate that this is the only scene in Lee’s play intercut with actual dialogue from Shakespeare: Okpokwasili roars Lear’s speech for the dead Cordelia just before we hear a character who is basically a very large toddler come to terms with death.

Without jokiness or sarcasm, Simpson plays Big Bird here, and he carries the character’s guileless sincerity into the play’s next and final scene — one that reconciles the two extremes of grief we’ve just seen and pulls Shakespeare’s huge themes down into the personal in a way that is both comforting and deeply tragic. This, Lee says again and again, will happen to you, too.