

RICHARD HORNBY

An American Lear

KING LEAR IS THE WEIRDEST PLAY ever written, at least until *Waiting for Godot*, which it obviously influenced. It starts with a ridiculous contest to see which of three sisters loves her father the most; the one who really does love him most loses. A subplot has a man who is both literally and figuratively a bastard convincing his father on obviously phony evidence that his other, legitimate son is out to kill him. The father eventually gets his eyes poked out. For no particular reason he then has to “smell his way to Dover,” where he tries to commit suicide by jumping off a cliff, but he is actually on level ground. There is also a madman who is actually someone *pretending* to be a madman wandering around with a court Fool who is nobody’s fool accompanied by the King, a tragic hero who is well over eighty. The bastard eventually repents but forgets to call off the execution of the King’s youngest and most loving daughter, Cordelia. The King retrieves her body, carrying it onstage despite his advanced age, delivers a eulogy, and drops dead himself.

This early exercise in Theatre of the Absurd was so disturbing that after 1681 *King Lear* was not performed on the English stage as written for over 150 years. Nahum Tate instead supplied an adaptation that enhanced “the regularity and probability of the tale” by omitting the brutality, dropping the character of the Fool, having Edgar and Cordelia fall in love, and allowing Lear to survive. This tamed version held the stage until William Macready starred in 1838 with a restored text; since then productions have usually followed suit but with cuts and emendations as well as an emphasis on the less alarming aspects of the play. Macready, for example, focused on the paternal tenderness of Lear, as did Samuel Phelps in his production of 1845.

In the twentieth century, directors have usually accepted the bleaker aspects of the play, most notably Peter Brook in his 1962 “existential” production that starred Paul Scofield. Nonetheless, Brook still rearranged scenes and cut Edmund’s last-minute conversion, apparently not finding Shakespeare’s text depressing *enough*. This missed the point that the defining quality of *King Lear* is not its bleakness but its outrageousness. You cannot pigeonhole it as existential any more than you can reduce it to a depiction of paternal love. Yes, the play is sad—it is a tragedy, after all—and it presents a view of life as ultimately meaningless, but when I first read the ravings of Edgar as the pretend madman, I did not feel I was getting a philosophical message. “Poor Tom, . . .

when the foul fiend rages, eats cow-dung for sallets, swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog, drinks the green mantle of the standing pool” is not a lesson to be learned, it is a shock wave to be *experienced*. Similarly, Edmund’s conversion does not soften the feel of the play at that point, it makes it harsher, because you cannot even write off the play as monotonously pessimistic. Occasional flashes of light make the darkness all the more sinister.

Last winter Kevin Kline took on the role of Lear at The Public Theater, home of the hapless New York Shakespeare Festival, one of the worst Shakespearean companies in the United States. (Perhaps this is why it has lately dropped NYSF from its name, becoming simply The Public Theater, and Shakespeare in Central Park uptown.) One used to go down to Lafayette Street in the East Village with fear and trembling, expecting the worst and usually finding it. Lately, however, a new Artistic Director has taken over, Oskar Eustis, giving the Public its first genuinely talented and capable head in its fifty-three-year history. I last saw Kline in Shakespeare at The Public as Hamlet seventeen years ago, when the company was still under the regime of founder Joseph Papp. It was a flabby production, directed by Kline himself (usually a bad idea) with a weak supporting cast and generally poor speech. This time, Eustis found a strong cast to support Kline and, rather than have the star direct himself, appointed a good director, James Lapine, to take charge. Even though Lapine is not particularly known as a director of Shakespeare (or, these days in the United States, perhaps because of it), he gave us a production that was well acted, well staged, and above all well spoken.

Lear was performed at The Public on the Anspacher stage, the same space in which Kline performed Hamlet. The building is the old Astor Library, converted into a number of performance spaces; the Anspacher is a pleasant, intimate theatre seating about three hundred, well suited to Shakespeare with its thrust stage (like the Globe), a high ceiling, and good acoustics. Scenic Designer Heidi Ettinger provided a metal balcony and scaffolding behind the stage, looking severely modern yet copying Elizabethan staging practice; Jess Goldstein’s costumes were modern as well without being aggressive about it. This was not a “concept” production, the kind that was so popular in Papp’s day, maladroitly trying to make some contemporary statement, but one designed to show off the acting and Shakespeare’s text.

Kevin Kline is a great stage actor, a graduate of the Drama Division at Juilliard in its glorious early days, along with other major actors like Robin Williams, Christopher Reeve, David Ogden Stiers, and Patti Lupone. Performing in the classics was (and still is) the backbone of Juilliard training; in addition, John Houseman of Juilliard set up an affiliated troupe, The Acting Company, with which Kline toured the U.S. for several years in the 1970s doing Shakespeare and other classics. Most acting schools in this country focus on realistic American plays performed in small spaces, good training for television or film acting

perhaps, but not for the great stage works of the Western theatre tradition. With the excellent speech instruction at Juilliard, plus the experience of doing Shakespeare with The Acting Company in large theatres before real live audiences, Kline and his fellow actors were admirably prepared for the great stage roles.

As is apparent even in his film performances, Kline is beautifully spoken—perhaps too much so, since as Hamlet he indulged in odd phrasings and other vocal gimmicks like the ones old-time stage stars used to do to gain attention. Here, he was more straightforward, using the natural blank verse rhythms to give readings that were deeply felt and intelligent, but subdued. Speaking softly but musically with a General American accent like the rest of the cast (no affected Britishisms here), he was the quietest Lear I have ever seen, but far from unemotional; it was just that his emotions were within, in the tradition of American Method acting, like that of Marlon Brando or Montgomery Clift but definitely *not* mumbled. The best British Lear I have ever seen was Ian Holm, a small but dark, frightening actor who could rage like a trapped lion. Kline is basically a light actor, terrific in comedy, whose strength here was not so much in the big raging soliloquies as in his reactions to the other actors. In the opening moments, Lapine had him enter above before the scene between Gloucester and Kent wearing an elegant, purple velvet jacket, then come down to the stage floor to interact with his daughters. No words were spoken, but even someone who did not know the play would have had no doubt that he was a king, and that these were his daughters. Later, when Lear feels betrayed by Goneril and Regan, Kline expressed not so much rage as shock—how could they do this to me?

Kline's ability to relate to another actor was most apparent in his scenes with the Fool, admirably played by Philip Goodwin as an old-fashioned burlesque comic in a baggy suit, straw hat, fright wig, white makeup with lipstick, and a big red hanky in his jacket pocket. The joking scenes between Lear and the Fool are often a low point in productions because the jokes are so feeble, like the reason why the seven stars are no more than seven is "because they are not eight." With Kline and Goodwin the feebleness was precisely the point, a pathetic attempt to find humor in an impossible situation, like Gogo and Didi playing games in *Godot*. And as with Gogo and Didi, the point of the scene is not so much its immediate subject matter as the close relationship it shows between the two men, their familiarity and affection in a mostly hostile world.

The joke among actors about playing Lear, probably going back to Richard Burbage, is how the old King, "four score and upward" and on the verge of death, is supposed to carry in the body of the dead Cordelia. Feeble Lears and/or great big Cordelias have abounded in the theatrical history, in which case somebody else has to do the haulage with the King just tagging along. Nevertheless, it is best when Lear himself can actually do it, as yet another weird detail in a play that is so

full of them. Kline, tall, strong, and dignified, had no trouble carrying petite Kristen Bush in his arms; he is only fifty-nine but with his white beard and hair was convincingly aged, an elderly but physically strong man whose desire to retire from kingship was selfish indulgence rather than a medical necessity. (Burbage, for whom the role was written, was only about forty when he played it.)

Incidental music for the show was provided by none other than Stephen Sondheim. (Lapine has directed the original productions of several of Sondheim's musicals.) Given Sondheim's talents I feared that his compositions might overwhelm the action, but in fact the music was usually delicate and subtle, like the acting itself. For example, underneath Gloucester's "We have seen the best of our time" speech, well spoken by Larry Bryggman, fragile sounds of chimes and wind instruments softly accentuated the poignancy of the lines. The storm scene by contrast was big and thunderous, the best I have ever seen it staged, but was stylized; loud drums underscored flashes of light, while the rain was depicted by having Lear, the Fool, and Edgar huddling at center stage surrounded by strips of scrim flown in from above, augmented by a fog effect. Not a drop of water actually fell, but the device worked better than the usual rain pipes, which are expensive, messy, and noisy—and which of course Shakespeare would not have had.

Modern dress productions of Shakespeare always come up against a stumbling block with the sword fights. Seeing someone in a business suit, or even worse in soldier's combat fatigues, hacking away with a sword, cannot help but look a bit ridiculous. For the clash at the end between Edgar and Edmund, Lapine's "solution" was to have them fight with knives. This was even more unreasonable than swords would have been. The scene is not a street fight as in *Romeo and Juliet* nor part of a military engagement as in *Macbeth*, but a formal duel, a challenge match. There is no reason they could not use any type of dueling weapons, so why not pick something dramatic, i.e., swords, rather than tiny ten-inch blades? Underplaying was the rule for this production, which sometimes implied great emotional depth and sometimes just seemed tame.

Most of the interesting productions on the New York stage this past season came from England. Some of the imported plays I had seen in London and reviewed in *The Hudson Review*: Peter Morgan's *Frost/Nixon*, Kevin Spacey in O'Neill's *Moon for the Misbegotten*, and Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia*, the last a new production of the four-year-old trilogy. (*King Lear* might even also be considered a British import, though like the Stoppard trilogy it was an American production.) One play I missed in London was Patrick Marber's intriguing *Howard Katz*, which played last winter at the Roundabout in New York starring British actor Alfred Molina in the title role.

Howard Katz is a theatrical agent, the most despised profession in show business, and he seems to epitomize everything hateful about it.

Ruthless, abrasive, vulgar, self-loathing, he is a success because of, rather than in spite of, his flaws. His only redeeming quality is his love for his family—wife, son, father, mother, brother—with whom he is nonetheless on bad terms. He is also trying to come to grips with his East End London Jewish roots but is too much the atheistical skeptic. “The world is a turd and we are but flies,” he howls, misquoting Gloucester in *Lear*. But then, as he notes to his brother’s girlfriend, he is not the kind of agent who books actors into Shakespeare, wins prizes, or feeds the starving. He is instead the kind who is trying to book the girlfriend into a nude photo shoot for a girly magazine.

Katz suffers from what used to be called manic depression and nowadays is called bipolar disorder. When he is high, he is funny in an edgy, frightening way: “Your teeth are too big for your mouth and your lips are too big for your face,” he snarls to a complaining client. “EAT SOME FOOD—you’re like a skull on a *stick*.” When he is low, he gambles away all his money, or turns suicidal. It is hard to imagine a less sympathetic hero, yet we cannot help getting caught up in his energy and angst no matter how high or low he may be. Katz loses his clients, loses his job, loses his money, loses his family, but he does *not* lose his life, even though images of suicide and death (like that “skull on a stick”) relentlessly cling to him. Katz is a survivor, whose final line in the play is “I want to live. Tell me how to live.” In other words, he is like all of us in a post-religious world—only more intense—trying to muddle along not only without religion but without any belief system at all.

Alfred Molina is a big bear of an Englishman, of Spanish and Italian extraction, whose dark features have enabled him to play a wide range of ethnicities—French, Spanish, Mexican, Russian, Jewish. He was the first non-Jew to play Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* on Broadway. As Howard Katz he was not only convincing as a London Jew, he played the roller coaster of emotion with both power and fragility. He was supported by a strong cast who were helped by having characters written as more than Katz’s foils. Alvin Epstein, for example, gave a sensitive performance as Katz’s gentle barber father who turns out surprisingly to have been having a long-term adulterous affair. Patrick Marber is an offbeat, multi-talented playwright who is also a screenwriter, stage director, stand-up comic, and Oxford professor. He is best known for his stage play *Closer* and his screenplay for the movie *Notes on a Scandal*, which like *Howard Katz* depict contemporary British life with a sharp satirical eye but also deep affection.

Richard Nelson is an American playwright writing on American themes who nonetheless is more highly valued in England than in the United States; six of his plays have premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Company, where he is Honorary Associate Artist, with one play even winning the London theatre’s Olivier Award as best play of the year. Thus when his dramas are done here they might be considered British imports too, despite their American author and subject matter. Like

much dramatic writing these days, including *Howard Katz*, Nelson's plays are loosely structured, focusing on character rather than plot. In his latest, *Frank's Home*, which premiered last winter in Chicago and New York rather than at the RSC, the character is the fascinating, quintessentially American architect and iconoclast Frank Lloyd Wright.

The title of the play can mean either "Frank is home" or "the home belonging to Frank." Either way the title is ironic, since Frank, a great designer of people's homes, had a chaotic home life himself, rarely being home to his family even when he was physically present. The play is not even set at the Wright residence but instead takes place in 1923 on the grounds of Olive Hill in Hollywood, California, where Frank is designing an ambitious cultural complex for the daughter of a wealthy oil tycoon, which was supposed to include a residence, a movie theatre, a legitimate theatre, a school, shops, artists' studios, guesthouses, apartments for actors, and even a zoo. The rich patroness lost interest (she does not even appear in the play), so that only the residence and two guesthouses actually got built.

The unending incompleteness of the project can be seen as a reflection of the incompleteness of Frank's personal life. He is at Olive Hill with his mistress, his son, his daughter, and her husband. The mistress is a drunk and a morphine addict. Frank has never before even met his banker son-in-law, and he views his own son, an architect and designer for the movies, with disdain, at one point referring to him as a "bitter jealous little fairy." Frank's unseen wife has finally agreed to a divorce, leading him to say, "I need to come home. Or find one." He obviously never will, at least not with this entourage.

Louis Sullivan, Frank's old mentor, shows up broke and ailing; considered old fashioned, he has had only a single, minor commission in the past six years. He begs for work, but Frank, though cordial enough, is noncommittal. Much of the action of the play consists of their banter and reminiscence, but there is a plot development of sorts when a telephone message announces that an earthquake in Tokyo has caused his famous Imperial Hotel to collapse. The structural soundness of Frank's buildings was often in question; since he was constantly experimenting with new forms, new construction methods, and the latest materials, it was inevitable that there would be problems. Leaky roofs were a notorious nuisance, and one poorly sited house floated away in a flood, but there had never been a disaster of this magnitude before. Later a telegram from the Japanese Embassy announces the truth: "Hotel stands undamaged. Tribute to your genius." Frank is vindicated in front of his hapless family, and the world.

Robert Falls, long-time Artistic Director of the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, staged *Frank's Home* for a joint production of the Goodman and Playwrights Horizons in New York, where I saw it in February. The production starred Peter Weller in the title role, a small, fearsome actor with long gray hair and cold blue eyes. (He was the terrifying rogue government agent Henderson in season five of the TV series "24.")

Nonetheless, in addition to depicting Frank's negative aspect, Weller expressed the character's charm and idealism, especially in an argument with Frank's son where the architect insists that beauty is a basic, moral imperative, not a decoration, but life and death, the essence of who we are.

Veteran Harris Yulin played Louis Sullivan with a world-weary desperation, but the character is underwritten, losing in his quest for work and having nothing particularly original or interesting to say. The other characters except for Frank tended to be similarly colorless as written and as performed. Even Frank's son, played by Jay Whittaker, did not seem bitter or jealous nor little nor a fairy—nor a rebuttal of Frank's description of him.

Thomas Lynch designed a setting for the play that looked too arid and empty for Hollywood, even for the early time period. I have never been to Olive Hill (which still exists), and obviously was not in Hollywood in 1923, but surely its surroundings did not look like the Mojave Desert. Susan Hilferty's costumes, however, were glorious. Weller, an actor who knows how to wear a costume, posed and strutted about the stage with brio, immaculately dressed in the loose flowing clothes like those the architect wore, plus a large jaunty straw hat and ivory-tipped cane. Ada Louise Huxtable, in her short but insightful biography of Wright,¹ points out that for all his modernism Wright never forgot his roots in Victorian aestheticism. As a young man he read Ruskin, William Morris, Pater, and Oscar Wilde, even imitating Wilde's wearing of lace-trimmed velvet suits. Sartorial displays were only a part of Wilde's insistence on the importance of beauty in all aspects of our lives; he actually toured the United States in the 1880s lecturing on "The House Beautiful," which became the catch phrase for progressive architects and decorators like Frank Lloyd Wright. That speech in the play about the moral necessity of beauty could have come from Wilde or any of those other Victorian aesthetes, even though Wright's concept of beauty expressed a radical change.

¹ Ada Louise Huxtable, *Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York, 2004).