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Review of *King Lear* (Cork Shakespearean Company) Directed by Sinéad Dunphy and Declan Wolfe at the Unitarian Church, Cork. 30th October 2015
Reviewed by Edel Semple (e.semple@ucc.ie) University College Cork

The advertising poster for the Cork Shakespearean Company's production of *King Lear* promised a Lear "as you have never seen him before". Our initial sight of Lear presented us with a scenery-chewing, leather-clad, aggressively jovial über-male; followed by his cronies, Lear swaggered on stage fresh from a raucous party and, in a fit of menacing merriment, proceeded to put his daughters on trial. The world of the play was masculine, brash, and violent, and from the beginning Lear's relationship with his children was unsettling. Pleased with Goneril and Regan's performance of love, Lear rewarded each with a lengthy kiss on the lips and a slap on the backside. The two sisters only smirked and Lear's sycophants guffawed in support of their master, but Cordelia's silent disapproval was evident.

Performed in the round – often a difficult task for actors and something of a new departure for this amateur theatre company – the position of the characters on the stage enabled the alliances and tensions to be immediately apparent. In one corner, Lear lounged in a red-leather chair/throne, opposite Cordelia, while Goneril and Regan faced one another from the other corners. When Cordelia defiantly refused to follow in her sisters' footsteps, Lear threw her to the ground and viciously kicked the floor-mat map of the nation. For all his drunken joviality, Lear ruled his country and his family with an iron fist and it seemed his eldest daughters had learned their lessons well.

Throughout the play, Goneril and Regan were twin-like. Physically similar and dressed alike, the pair were eerily drawn to one another; as they plotted together early in the play, holding hands and moving in a circle, they were reminiscent of *Macbeth*'s witches. As soon as Goneril and Regan held the reins of power, they moved swiftly and acted as a unified force. Lear had little understanding of their bond and attempted to play them against one another; however, hugging Regan to annoy Goneril, he was instantly rejected. Having long been the

objects of Lear's power, these weird sisters asserted their dominance with a vengeance. Regan in particular seemed to relish her new power. Unmoved by Gloucester's bloodcurdling and alarmingly realistic screams – the audience collectively shuddered – Regan rubbed his blood between her fingers, with an air of scientific curiosity, and she later smugly stomped on Oswald's crotch to add weight to her verbal threats.

Notably, the production presented us with a spirited Cordelia. Capable and commanding, Cordelia was more than equal to her sisters; with her fair hair in a no-nonsense plait and clad in a simple black dress, she seemed like a young warrior queen in the making. In contrast to Cordelia and the gormless Edgar, Edmund was at home in Lear's court and seemed to be the perfect product of this corrupt society. With his tattoos, black t-shirt and ripped jeans, Edmund resembled one of The Clash, as he sardonically swaggered about the stage, part rock-star, part rebel without a moral compass. Like Shakespeare's Richard III, Edmund created a rapport with the audience by treating us as his confidantes; he frequently lounged in Lear's throne as if he was one of the audience, flirted with women in the front rows, and threw sardonic glances and theatrical winks at every opportunity. Edmund also provided much comedy; boasting of the sisters' desire for him, he temporarily forgot Goneril's name and looked to the audience for help in jogging his memory.
The audience only received such attention again from Lear in his madness. With a crown of leaves, grey tights, and a smock top, Lear interacted with audience with childlike innocence. In one of the few quiet moments in this production, Lear took a reed from his crown and tucked it behind Gloucester's blindfold; the small gift showed a brief moment of communion between the two aggrieved patriarchs.

For all harshness of the aesthetics of this production – the gaudy red lighting, the black costuming, the scant furniture in black or red – one of its strengths lay in its delicate handling of the characters' complexities. There were no clear lines, no easy judgements, to be had here; Lear was a brutish and abusive bully, but he was also a victim and a father filled with regret, and Goneril and Regan were both casualties of paternal power and merciless agents of destruction. Ultimately, this staging of *Lear* presented us with a vision of a flawed and human royal family struggling with the decisions they had made and the consequences of their actions, and no one emerged unscathed from the physical and moral battles in this hard world.

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