

Belarus Free Theatre - KING LEAR directed by: Vladimir Shcherban

Review Quotes

★★★★★

One of the greatest productions of *King Lear* London has ever seen... It shook the Globe from the yard to the rafters

The Arts Desk

★★★★★

Energetic... extraordinary... charming

The Guardian

★★★★★

Thrilling

Financial Times

★★★★★

Bold, irreverent and provocative

Exeunt

★★★★★

A Lear returned vividly to its roots: as a comic folktale that shatters into tragedy...again and again BFT find images that pierce the play to the quick.

Andrew Dickson, *The Guardian* ★★★★★

★★★★★

I have never experienced a deeper silence at the Globe... London seems to stop for this experience to take place unencumbered by external factors ...It's difficult to do this production justice in one review; the sheer dearth of ideas and intensity of the final scenes is difficult to put into words.

Dan Hutton, *The Hutton Enquiry*

★★★★★

Like a post-Soviet Oedipal *X-Factor*, the Belarus Free Theatre on Friday night gave one of the greatest productions of *King Lear* London has ever seen. Forget our local *Lears*, with naked theatrical knights and casts in emotional straitjackets: this was as cruel, as beautiful, as you could want. It shook the Globe from the yard to the rafters.

Josh Spero, *The Arts Desk*

★★★★★

I've been seeing King Lear in the theatre (and in quite a few countries) for 44 years - this was the most astonishing, imaginative, hilarious and painful I have ever seen... The newspapers who didn't bother even to send reviewers should be blushing.

Audience Member

The Hutton Inquiry

“King Lear” by William Shakespeare

May18 by danhutton

at Shakespeare’s Globe, Thursday 17th May 2012

I have never experienced a deeper silence at the Globe. As Lear wheels on his executed daughter and mourns her passing, everyone stops moving, stops breathing even, and seem to synchronise their heartbeats in order that we can comprehend more fully the enormity of the situation played out in front of us. For a minute at least, London seems to stop for this experience to take place unencumbered by external factors.

What lies at the heart of the Belarus Free Theatre’s production of *King Lear* is a defiant sense of passion, and the freedom to express feelings no matter what. Naturally, this is helped by our knowledge of the company’s background, but what comes through loud and clear is the importance of speaking out; only once the characters in this production have made an attempt to put their thoughts into spoken words to they achieve some kind of happiness.

Vladimir Shcherban’s production presents us with an utterly broken state, which punishes those who fight against corruption and causes its population to turn mad. The company is careful not to show us black-and-white portraits, as our sympathy constantly shifts; no one is completely good just like no one is completely evil.

Nicolai Khalezin’s adaptation plays freely with Shakespeare’s original, intercutting additional scenes (such as Cordelia singing about her father) and changing the emphasis in the last few scenes so we watch the demise of the leads. Once again proof that Shakespeare is not sacred and his that his texts can and should be adapted in order to present specific ideas.

There is an urgency in the ensemble’s performance which heightens the sense of passion (though sometimes it’s difficult to hear them). The cast has been

pared down to its bare essentials in order to tell the story more clearly, and although some may complain of the inaudibility of the actors, I found that the juxtaposing of loud choruses with quiet speeches underlined the message of the people having power. Pavel Garadnitski's Gloucester, though young, does a fine job of portraying the anguish and loneliness of this man, aided by the fact the stories of Edgar and Edmund have taken a back-seat to make way for the three sisters. Victorya Biran's Cordelia is not the quiet, waif-like creature she is often portrayed as, instead preferring a more sinister approach in order to be on par with Goneril and Regan. They are played by Yana Rusakevich and Maryna Yurevich respectively, and preside in an utterly self-interested sphere, so much so that their relationship verges on incestuous. At the centre of it all is Aleh Sidorchik's arrogant Lear, whose descent into madness comes extremely early and who is less concerned with the love of his daughters than cold, hard power, which only serves to make his final realisation all the more painful.

This production shows a superlative understanding of the importance of imagery in theatre. Nice ideas like using real earth to demonstrate the delineation of land and playing with the concept of mental and physical ability reach their climax during the stunning storm scene, using only a large tarpaulin, some water and a couple of long coat tails. It's as good a storm scene as you'll see at our subsidised powerhouses at a fraction of the cost. In an intelligent twist, Shcherban brings back the idea during the battle scene but substitutes the blue tarp for a red one. This, coupled with the high-pitched moans of a saxophone and Belarusian poems by Andrei Khadanovich, makes for a chilling finale.

It's difficult to do this production justice in one review; the sheer dearth of ideas and intensity of the final scenes is difficult to put into words. It's a remarkably brave and determined production, and though it is deeply tragic there is also a pure optimism discovered in the reappearance of the bodies in the final image. This feeling of hope is exacerbated by the tension released by a company who has to perform in secret in their home country having free reign in the most public of theatres. We know, like Kent, that awful pasts can be confined to the shelves of history if the masses come together to share their passion.

POSTCARDS FROM THE GODS

Saturday, 19 May 2012

Belarusian King Lear – The Globe



Belarus Free Theatre have one outstanding USP – they have a good claim on the title “the most endangered theatre company in the world”. Banned in their homeland, they have been [threatened with imprisonment, rape and torture](#), by Alexander Lukashenko's dictatorship.

I have to confess, I wasn't hugely bowled over by their scratch performance of [Minsk 2011](#) at last year's Edinburgh Fringe, but it was a scratch performance, so allowances can be made – even if almost everyone else decided to review the unimpeachable integrity rather than the slightly sloppy undergraduate devised piece aesthetic.

Nevertheless, apart from Eimuntas Nekrosius's *Hamlet* from Lithuania, thanks to massive celebrity support in Britain BFT are about the most famous company performing in the Globe to Globe season. And they've been given *King Lear* in recognition of this fact, one imagines. It is possibly the most poetic of all Shakespeare's tragedies. Perhaps even the most tragic.

I was about ten minutes late to this evening's performance. As I entered an grey-haired man in shabby modern dress was sitting in a wheelchair having a conversation with a violent-looking shaven-headed youth in vest and military boots. The old man is pissing from his chair into a bowl. This is Gloucester and Edmund.

That tells you about all you need to know about the style. It's fast: they'd

already whizzed through the whole of the 332-line first scene in which Lear divides his Kingdom in the ten minutes before I arrived. It's scatological: Gloucester's first act after relieving himself was to grab Edmund's head and grind it into his crotch to indicate his anger at what Edmund had just told him. And it's urgent: this urgency is mostly drawn from the company's "poor theatre" aesthetic and their mad dash to bring *King Lear* in at about two hours plus interval.

There is a generalised contemporaneity to it – Goneril and Regan are dressed in the now-regulation high heels, fur coats and tight mini-dresses of many post-Soviet bloc theatre traditions. The boots look like those issued as standard to the Belarusian army, but Lear is wearing an enormous shiny metal gauntlet on his right hand – perhaps a symbol of his kingship, but surely also a nod to the play's original medieval setting. In the main this is a Lear of suit jackets over dirty white vests, quickly stripped away to three examples of the *de rigueur* full frontal male nudity for the madness on the heath.

To cut the play so short, there must be innovation and cuts aplenty. Until the end, I think pretty much every soliloquy has been excised (this seems to be a common way for G2G companies to bring down running times – although the results of those which have remained have been fascinating). The action is fast and frenetic, the language into which the text has been rendered is demotic, not poetic. And the characters run about cursing one another in order to get through the plot.

The ensemble's chief virtue is energy and invention and they attack the play like angry clowns jabbering, accompanied by onstage piano and saxophone played from the balcony. The storm is played with Lear atop a large blue tarpaulin as buckets of water are thrown at him as he rages. The climactic battle between England and France is played out under a red tarpaulin with punches flying out on all sides like those [cartoon fights in dust clouds](#).

This is a compelling, watchable *King Lear*. There is always something new happening. Gone are the solitary figures pacing their lonely sterile promontories doing nothing but telling us what their plans are, what they think and how they feel. Instead, no one gets a minute to themselves as the action rushes onwards. The downside of this is that we do lose here all sense of the play's tragedy. We don't really get to know the characters well enough to start to feel for them.

That said, in this production, you get the impression that they'd spurn our sympathy anyway. In a lot of ways, if this *King Lear* seems like the least tragic you've ever seen, it's because none of the characters ever even give way to self-pity. They're too wired. It is only at the (very sudden) end that Lear delivers something like his mourning speech over Cordelia's topless corpse and yet even here he is flanked by the entire company, alive or dead, standing, watching and singing that in that jagged, haunting Eastern European style also used by [Teatr ZAR](#) or [Voix Bulgares](#).

It doesn't feel as if Belarus Free Theatre have taken the play and used it to say anything about the situation in their own troubled country. Instead, the

political act here is the fact of their being here at all. They've certainly inhabited the play and made it theirs. This is King Lear as a strange, savage act. A relentless unfolding of brutality. As such, while not what I was expecting, that feels like more than enough of a statement.



While writing this piece I had a look back to see what other King Lears I'd seen. I seem to have reviewed more-or-less a Lear a year since 2006 (apart from when I was in Berlin).

Globe to Globe: King Lear, Shakespeare's Globe

Belarus Free Theatre stages Lear as post-Soviet Oedipal X-Factor extravaganza

by [Josh Spero](#) Sunday, 20 May 2012

Like a post-Soviet Oedipal *X-Factor*, the Belarus Free Theatre on Friday night gave one of the greatest productions of *King Lear* London has ever seen. Forget our local *Lears*, with naked theatrical knights and casts in emotional straitjackets: this was as cruel, as beautiful, as you could want. It shook the Globe from the yard to the rafters.

Part of [Globe to Globe](#), it is a poignant play for [a company of dissidents](#). Lear (Aleh Sidorchik) wore a radiant gauntlet, which he broke Cordelia's nose with when she refused to sing the songs her sisters had. Goneril's was an orgasmic version of "My Heart Belongs to Daddy", except she seemed to place her heart 18 inches south, while Regan gave us a preview of Belarus's Eurovision entry. Both received their share of the kingdom as their father shovelled dirt from a pram into their uplifted skirts, so that clasping it to their stomachs they looked pregnant.

Coup de théâtre followed *coup de théâtre*. The storm scene was rendered with a blue tarpaulin, lifted and dropped by the cast, which cracked and thundered as Lear blindly tripped around it, enmeshed and soaked. The battle between England and France trapped the cast under a red tarpaulin which they punched and kicked, its booms making by far the cheapest and most effective version of this scene. And when Goneril and Regan were trying to talk their father out of his pride and his retinue, which was taking over their houses, they clasped onto his neck and he spun them around, at first sweetly and childishly, then faster and faster until they were parallel to the stage and you were terrified they could fly off.

This Lear also provided rigorous yet inventive interpretations of scenes and characters

Music and songs were essential to this *Lear*. After the primal cabaret at the start, a piano remained on stage pretty much throughout, characters tapping out the initial howls of rain, smashing dissonances of fear and hatred and accompanying threats, laments and seductions. The piano functioned as instrument of control, too: when the Fool played, the characters were compelled to dance even as they spoke. As a symbol of everything the Belarus Free Theatre stands against, it was perfect.

Far from being just a Brechtian extravaganza, this *Lear* also provided rigorous yet inventive interpretations of scenes and characters. Instead of the camp howls when Lear carries Cordelia in, he silently pushed her in on the pram out of which he had been dealing dirt in the first scene. As he whispered to her and imagined her coming back to life, the Globe was silent, beyond compelled. If this ever gets put on in London again, you have no excuse not to see it.

Comments

Submitted by tonyhoward (not verified) on Sun, 20/05/2012 - 08:12.

To anyone who thinks this fine review must be overstated: it isn't. The newspapers who didn't bother even to send reviewers should be blushing.

King Lear

Shakespeare's Globe, London

Andrew Dickson ★★★★★

guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 23 May 2012 17.13 BST



Playing with our expectations ... Belarus Free Theatre's production of King Lear at Shakespeare's Globe, which was performed in Belarusian. Photograph: Simon Kane

A gaunt and arthritic king totters on stage, his head a thatch of matted white hair – then, grinning, he springs up like a jack-in-the-box and whisks off the wig. This is, we gather, one of Lear's dangerous little jokes: one of many in a production that teases constantly at our expectations. Instead of treating the play as it's so often done in Britain, as Shakespeare's attempt at a PhD in epistemology, Vladimir Shcherban and a young, energetic Belarus Free Theatre company offer instead a Lear returned vividly to its roots: as a comic folktale that shatters into tragedy.

Central in every sense is Aleh Sidorchik's wolfish King, given to wandering around grandly with one fist in a glittering iron gauntlet, but who you suspect is running a petrol scam on the side. It's an extraordinary performance, physically charged yet off-centredly charming, and a believable portrait of a man who collapses because he fails to connect with his family. The company inventively use sound and the simplest of props to underscore the point: what begins as a mocking on-stage susurrations, Lear's daughters whispering in his ears, ends in a storm scene powered by the roaring of a cheap plastic blue tarpaulin, shaken into an improvised sea by the cast – at first an obstacle that the King must overcome, then his bivouac on the heath. Equally well-judged are Yana Rusakevich's Goneril and Maryna Yurevich's Regan: harridans neither, but long-suffering children pushed to the limit. Hanna Slatvinskaya's worldly-wise Cordelia is driven even further, to the bottle – a plausible hint that her shotgun

marriage to the opportunistic King of France (Aliaksei Naranovich) was never likely to bring much happiness.

Sometimes the jokey, improvisational tone goes awry: presenting the daughters' battle for affection as a rival striptease like something from a Belarusian lapdancing club was one idea that could safely have stayed in rehearsals, and I tired of the on-stage, off-tune piano, which ends up being tinkled by nearly everyone, apparently on the basis that it's there to be used. But again and again BFT find images that pierce the play to the quick, and which draw out an often-buried theme, its battle between the generations: Siarhei Kvachonak's posh-student Edgar, puffing distractedly on a spliff, can no more understand Pavel Garadnitski's testy, incontinent Gloucester than Lear can communicate with his daughters. And as Edmund, Aliaksei Naranovich is for once not a snarling villain, but a practical man making the best from unfair circumstances.

Only the conclusion, oddly, wobbled: staging Cordelia's hanging upfront, downstage and surrounded by audience members, reduces the impact of this most brutal and shocking of acts, and makes a nonsense of Lear's entrance with her body, where Shakespeare carefully strains the suspense about whether she's really dead past breaking point. And Sidorchik's decision to whisper the final scene meant that its impact disappears beneath the noise of nighttime Southwark (even for those, like me, who don't understand Belarusian). I felt the loss – particularly when the play's ideas had been articulated with such blade-like sharpness.

COMMENT

[tonyhoward](#)

24 May 2012 1:36PM

Andrew, can I make a guess that you were seated rather than standing for the final scene?

Close to, the reduction of the acting level to the spoken/whispered was astonishing and deeply moving. It's interesting that most of the visiting Globe to Globe companies have mastered the open air acoustics better than a great many UK actors have - and the Belarus company also benefitted from their freedom to cut King Lear down to under two hours without offending UK academics.

Just to get it onto google - I've been seeing King Lear in the theatre (and in quite a few countries) for 44 years - this was the most astonishing, imaginative, hilarious and painful I have ever seen.

I wish you'd had space, though, to relate this great production to the extraordinary commitment and courage of the company themselves, whose political persecution are well known. For them it wasn't simply a question of making the play "work" - it was about making the play speak - speak for them, and speak to us. From the opening, where Lear scooped earth into his daughters' skirts - literally giving them the country and making them metaphorically pregnant with its future - to the ghastly new murder scene where the prison guards filed away Lear's steel gauntlet and warped the records to suppress what was happening to Cordelia, this was six-star theatre. Six at least, because we don't often have the opportunity to see a company break the rules and rethink what theatre's for.