

Globe Theatre's 'King Lear'

Can high tragedy be a form of entertainment?

Victor L. Schermer

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The Globe Theatre production of *King Lear* at the Zellerbach Theater frames Shakespeare's tragic drama of a demented and betrayed king within the setting of an itinerant theater troupe making music and offering commentary at intervals throughout the play.

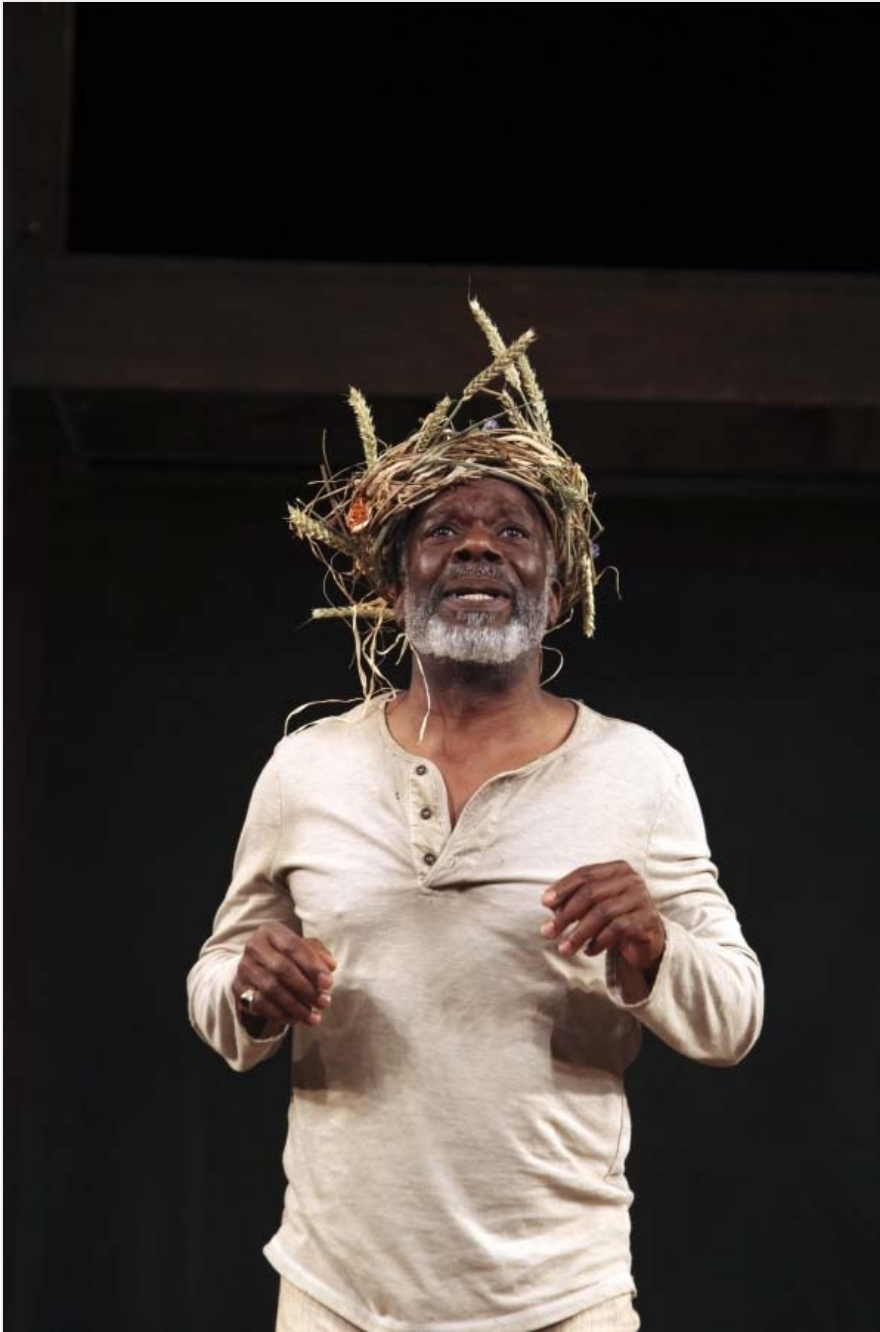
The bare wooden stage setting is set off from the proscenium like one of those small music boxes or clocks in which characters move around during the music or at the ringing of the hour. The costumes combine aspects of Renaissance garments with modern dress, creating an imaginary realm that is a postmodern amalgam of past and present.

Within this imagistic context, a powerful historical and emotional drama is enacted that is rivaled only by other Shakespearean and the best of the Greek tragedies. The question is: Does such a setting for such a play really work?

A powerful performance

We know that Shakespeare has always been realized in diverse ways, emphasizing either the historical period of the story, Shakespeare's own time and staging, or modern dress and context. (Another recent performance of *King Lear*, in Chicago, presents Lear as a troubled torch singer, namely Frank Sinatra (!) [see a *Chicago Tribune* review [here](#)].) The Bard's plays are decidedly theatrical, meant to be elaborated using varied dramaturgical devices, so it is within his *métier* to provide whatever setting works to good effect.

On the level of "the theater," this Globe production of *Lear* works well, thanks largely to the enormous talents of the actors and director, as well as a composer, movement expert, choreographer, and others who make the London Globe one of the finest companies in the world. The performance is



Joseph Marcell as King Lear (both photos by Ellie Kurttz)

energetic and at times electric, the words are well-spoken, the characters portrayed with finesse and power, the history clearly set out, and there are enough fiery moments to heat up Shakespeare's richly populated world of personalities, conflicting emotions, mythical and uncanny angelic and demonic presences, and, ultimately, deep probing into the human condition.

But what about Lear?

However, *King Lear* has a side to it that demands that we set aside all other considerations to focus on the character of Lear himself. The play is more than serious drama: it's high tragedy that portrays the most painful aspects of the human condition embodied and personified in a man who first loses his perspective, then loses control of his domain, and finally loses his mind. And

even within his dementia, he realizes his deep love of his loyal daughter, Cordelia, whom, out of his earlier vanity, he had betrayed:

*No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues*

*Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,
That ebb and flow by the moon.*

This is a man for whom reality and memory have vanished, for whom prison becomes delusional paradise, and yet who is able to repent and comprehend what is truly essential in life— the existential human condition: to live in a “prison” (of the self-centered blind uncomprehending ego) yet always seeking redemption, meaning, and love.

High tragedy versus entertainment and story

Shakespeare wrote for the Globe Theater, a place where everyman came to be entertained, entranced, and mystified. It is natural that its current incarnation would try to recapture the ambience of the original, as this performance does. It is noble too, that they should be faithful to Shakespeare’s text, which has historical and dramatic elements in which Lear is but one in a host of characters caught in a web of power, intrigue, deception, and cruelty.

However, what truly absorbs modern audiences is Lear as a representative of “tragic man,” with everything else as a backdrop. We want to know the deepest part of ourselves through him, and we want to weep for what we have lost and gained simply by virtue of being human. Such *dramatis personae* are few and far between. They constitute the basis of the highest tragedy, for which the ancient Greeks, according to Aristotle, gathered in order to undergo catharsis and personal identification and transformation.

There aren’t many figures who attain this level of tragic significance. Examples might include Oedipus (whose story has parallels to Lear in some respects), Lear, and perhaps James Tyrone, Sr., the father in Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, a character based on O’Neill himself.

Now you see him . . .

Joseph Marcell is stunning as Lear. He evokes Lear’s dementia, his fierce emotions, his changes of mood with dramatic articulation and movement. He never lets us forget for a moment the humanity that lurks under all of Lear’s masks and peregrinations. However, the way that the play is realized, we almost forget about him when he is not part of the action. That is because, in fact, Lear is only one figure in a sociopolitical drama. The Globe setting places him firmly in that context. The play is treated as an action drama, and we are watching shifting scenes that involve all the *dramatis personae*.

Thus, when Lear is not on stage, we forget about him. That does not happen with Oedipus or with Tyrone, Sr. They cannot *not* be thought about, even for a moment. And it shouldn’t happen with

Lear. His presence should be all-encompassing, but for that to happen, the theatrical presentation has to be built around Lear rather than the plot and the event structure.

It also has to sustain the aesthetic illusion of witnessing real, whole persons, rather than actors. At the end of this production, the actors reappear as themselves with musical instruments in tow and remind us

that, after all, it is only a play that we are witnessing, and none of it is real. That is very contemporary — it is like watching a tragic event on the TV news, turning off the set, and going about our business.



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