

Duke theater performs absurdist Lear

By Kathy Zhou (<http://www.dukechronicle.com/staff/kathy-zhou>) | Thursday, April 4 2013



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A checkered floor with raised steps to an ornate throne, two curious mushroom poofs, a toy castle made of building blocks, an enormous gold-framed mirror and a chandelier—the Bryan Center’s Sheaffer Lab Theater has become a surreal, Cocteau-inspired, pseudo-Renaissance wonderland. Throw in exceptional light and sound work, resplendent costumes designed from scratch and the ghost of Shakespeare, and you’ve got the backdrop to the upcoming production by Duke Theater Studies.

The first thing to know about Lear by emerging Brooklyn-based playwright Young Jean Lee is that the play is but an echo of Shakespeare’s King Lear. The only necessary prior knowledge is that the two sons of the Earl of Gloucester and the three daughters of King Lear are coping with their fathers’ deaths. “It takes characters from Shakespeare’s King Lear but sets them in a contemporary theatrical world,” explains Jody McAuliffe, director of Lear and Chair of Theater

Studies. “It combines elements of absurdist theater and also of popular culture. Lee mixes the classical and renaissance with the contemporary to bring us closer to how Shakespeare is a way to understand her own life and the world in which she lives.”

Though the piece runs parallel to King Lear, it is not an adaptation. Rather it exists on a separate register to serve a specific purpose. A contemporary absurdist, Lee drives her characters through existential crises fueled largely by the interpersonal, executed in a way that can be disorienting or bewildering. Through its modern—and often shocking—language, the play provides a relatable reflection on the deaths of Gloucester and Lear with a new perspective: the various and unexpected methods of coping with a parent’s death.

“King Lear is known historically as one of the grandest attempts to explain death,” says stage manager and sophomore Mike Myers. “There’s a juxtaposition between what Shakespeare’s given us and how Young Jean Lee has adapted that so we can visit other explanations.” In a way, Lear is a very personally driven work. Lee had done extensive research on Shakespeare and King Lear during her Ph.D. studies, yielding subtle details and connections between the two plays. More exceptionally, Lee wrote Lear in the midst of her own father’s battle with cancer. Lee furthers her exploration of coping with death by weaving through a blaring and frantic dialogue that is furrowed down into a singular crisis: what do you do when your father is dying?

“This is a group of children,” says Jules Odendahl-James, resident dramaturg and visiting lecturer in Theater Studies, and the production dramaturg for Lear. “It gets down to the purity and essence of self, going from a highly stylized borrowing of Shakespeare, interspersed with contemporary references, to the moment when these children are about to lose their father. It’s a disconcerting type of doubleness...we’re always meant to see the fissure between those two worlds.” The duality recurs stylistically and thematically: the complex and the simple; the parent-and-child relationship; narcissism and selflessness; fealty and disloyalty; childhood and adulthood.

The play resonates powerfully, traversing time frames in a short space. It engages but also differentiates from the world Shakespeare has crafted. Rather than focusing on the play’s relationship to King Lear, the audience is instead drawn into the distinctive foundation for Lear. The characters’ developing struggles, and their confrontation with the moment of mortality, haunt the space.

“Lear is exaggerated and bizarre, but it’s so accurate to life,” says freshman Faye Goodwin, who will play Cordelia, one of Lear’s daughters. She explains that she learned more about her own relationship to her parents—that the process of Lear is not only about art or acting—but about things that can be especially relatable to Duke students. “You want a resolution. Each character presents their own methods—shutting things out, falling apart, stepping into their father’s place, making a mockery of it all—and it can destroy them if they don’t find a way to acceptance.”

Lear evokes a funnel, stripping away the madness and fear that surrounds death. Interspersed with compelling twists and pop culture references, the play throws the audience into a whirlwind of confrontation, struggle and deliberation. As these sons and daughters become no more than children losing a loved one, so is death chiseled down into its barest and perhaps truest understanding.

Lear opens tonight, Apr. 4, at 8 p.m. in Sheaffer Lab Theater and will run until Sunday, Apr.14. Tickets are available online or at the box office. More information can be found at <http://theaterstudies.duke.edu>

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