

THE PRESS

Review: King Lear, York Shakespeare Project, John Cooper Studio Theatre, 41 Monkgate, York



Paul French as Lear and Charlotte Wood as Cordelia in York Shakespeare Project's King Lear. Picture: John R Saunders

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YORK Shakespeare Project, founded 15 years ago, is now an established element of the cultural calendar in York, here presenting its 30th play.

Taking on one of Shakespeare's most well-known tragedies, American director Ben Prusiner brings the storm with a deliciously dark production.

Building on the fragmented country we see split into portions in the opening scene, the production shows a war brewing and breaking out overtly throughout.



David Phillipps as Edmund. Picture: John R Saunders

Even our first glimpse of Lear in his military finery signals a belligerence backed in his banishment of Cordelia (Charlotte Wood), a fighting instinct which is kept until the last.

Paul French's Lear may seem a little reserved for the first few acts but his descent into madness is all the more distressing when compared to how composed he first presents the king.

Wood also brings a new confidence to such an oft-overlooked character, her Cordelia striding confidently. Alexandra Darlington accompanies her return, this time playing a nurse instead of the French monarch from the first scene- it's interesting to see Cordelia given the same power and authority which is normally reserved for her scheming sisters.



Helen Wilson as Gloucester and Elizabeth Elsworth as Kent. Picture: John R Saunders

Performed in the round, there are a few vantage points lost and some empty space as several markers are placed nearer to the audience. That said, the space is used fully for fight sequences choreographed by Neil Tattersall that burst with activity.

A decidedly more serious production, Carrie Morrison's Fool seems somewhat out of place when decked out in bright gilets and a multicoloured "coxcomb". Morrison's singing voice, however, pierces the horror of the storm, a sequence created with great simple effectiveness by lighting designer Izzy Marsh and sound designer Alexander Sovronsky. Using the stark set to their advantage, the two use cracks of thunder to create a desolate wasteland for Lear to lose himself in.

Siblings really excel in Prusiner's production. Cindy Campbell and Jennie Wogan's Goneril and Regan ooze poison (and an excellent eye for colour co-ordination) at every turn.



King Lear: York Shakespeare Project's 30th production. Picture: John R Saunders

Comparing Campbell's coldness with Wogan's faux-friendliness mean the two make the roles their own while retaining their sense of conspiratory chemistry.

Likewise, the roles of Edmund and Emma (formerly Edgar) are superbly played by David Phillipps and Emily Thane. Phillipps fully indulges in Edmund's duplicitous deeds, his villain a strong presence at every moment on stage. Thane's Emma, driven to desperation, remains nuanced and never feels forced.



Sally Mitcham and Emily Thane in King Lear. Picture: John R Saunders

Her scenes with Gloucester (Helen Wilson) are utterly heartbreaking, and do well to inject the (originally father-son) relationship with an enhanced sense of sympathy.

Elizabeth Elsworth's Kent is well worth a mention, not least for displaying one of the most transformed Kents I've seen in adaptation. Another example of how the characters come undone in Lear, it's clear her part has been given careful consideration which pays off well.

There are still some instances of stumbling over lines or across stage, but this is a strong cast who are well worth braving the elements for.

York Shakespeare Project presents King Lear, John Cooper Studio Theatre, 41 Monkgate, York, until December 10. Box office: 01904 623568 or at yorktheatreroyal.co.uk