

Lear: Walking Backwards isn't Easy

THE DIALOGUE THEATRE BLOG

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Melbourne University Shakespeare Company's *Lear* set out to re-conceptualise both conventional theatre and the traditions of Shakespearean representation. Presenting an ambitious and transformative portrayal of the Shakespearean tragedy, *Lear* explored the consequences of hitting rewind, delivering a thought provoking and admirable performance.

Adelaide Greig's direction of *Lear* created opportunity for a wild shift in the presentation of the perennial tragedy: *King Lear*. Beginning from the original play's finale, the production was performed entirely in reverse, generating some interesting quirks, devices, and problems in the script, performance, and development of the play. Perhaps most pressing of all the rewind production's implications was the relative inaccessibility of the plot to members of the audience without prior exposure to *King Lear*'s plot. Such members, including myself, were forced to wonder exactly what was going on and how the transpiring events served to develop characters and plot.

Thrust into the play as fully fledged agents, and embodying all accrued traits from the first moment, characters were presented with a shocking, and at times alienating, immediacy. To some extent this placed unique constraints on the performative abilities of the cast, who, upon the rewind button's depress were forced to crank emotive and expressive capacities to the max from square one. Despite this, on the whole the cast delivered a complete and convincing performance, punctuated with humorous, frightening and engaging moments. Len Duniec as Lear, and Rupert Bevan as Oswald provided the production with some key moments of clarity and strong voicing, re-energising the at times turgid and confusing scene sequences. However, Alexander Scott's portrayal of Edmund was somewhat two-dimensional and flat, producing an altogether obviously 'evil' caricature of a challenging and complex character. However, it must be said that these shortcomings stemmed largely from a lack of opportunity for character development rather than explicit deficits in

ability. After all, it is extremely difficult to develop character complexities when the play begins at the end of the character's arc.

Casting was diverse and exhibited a wide range of disparate talents and tendencies, with the majority of actors fleshing out and developing characters well suited to ability and style. However, whilst undoubtedly unintentional, it was perhaps misguided for the majority of servants to be represented by people of colour, while the main cast was predominantly white. The re-gendered roles of Lear, Gloucester and Edgar were progressive but only added to the play's incomprehensibility, rendering it difficult to discern the characters. The already complex reversed production was not the most suitable context for the deployment of such reconstructions.

Set design, by Satyaprem Saraswati, and lighting, by Holi Walsh, were impressive and used to good effect. Scenes were empowered by complex light sequences paired with strong audio elements and characters were able to exhibit a diverse range of movement and action due to the set's tiered walkway. These factors lent tangible presence to dialogue, supporting difficult developmental sequences. The production's costuming, hair, and makeup, by Maddy Nibali, were admirable. Characters presented in bright and visible colours delineating their affiliation, and were styled with impressive plaits in keeping with traditional aesthetic traits for *King Lear*.

Lear, whilst conceptually ambitious and courageous came short of delivering in practice what it promised in theory. The complex narrative re-structure meant that ability, progressive casting, and plot were lost in overly esoteric direction and scene progression. Although a novel idea, production reversal fails to serve as an effective and powerful theatrical technique without considerable technical support.

Flynn Pervan

MUSC's Lear runs from the 17th – 24th of May at the Guild Theatre.