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King Lear review, Duke of York's: a devastating lead performance from Ian McKellen



King Lear at the Duke of York Theatre CREDIT: JOHAN PERSSON

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By **Ben Lawrence**

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King Lear, a play about a divided kingdom in crisis, is a gift to theatre directors anxious to speak to the here and now.

So it's surprising that the one disappointment in Jonathan Munby's otherwise splendid production (which has transferred from Chichester) is the half-hearted attempt to show how external forces, and the precarious position of the state, plague the beleaguered king. Blaring sirens and marching soldiers aim to give a sense of martial law, but it all seems a little perfunctory.

What we have instead is a close up on the personal, and here the production takes flight. McKellen is spellbinding from the very start: we first see him as a much-decorated monarch aware of his own consequence, before the machinations of his inner circle begin to work in tandem with his own unravelling.

Then he is capricious, avoiding all eye contact and looking perpetually into the middle distance as if searching for something lost in the mists of time, grabbing at thoughts like dandelion seeds.

McKellen is known to sometimes drown out nuance with too much command coming from the diaphragm, but here the voice is rich and supple, which highlights the old man's vulnerability.



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"I will have such revenges on you both," he cries in response to the treachery of his two elder daughters, showing an impotent rage both startling and unspeakably sad.

There have been several cast changes since the transfer, but Sinéad Cusack as the quietly galvanising Kent and Danny Webb's Gloucester, capturing the terrible trajectory from all-knowing cynic to mutilated victim, continue to be terrific.

I was particularly impressed with Kirsty Bushell's Regan, a sort of sexually knowing Violet Elizabeth Bott who gets an erotic thrill from the (rather too horrific) blinding of Gloucester and works in brilliant contrast to Claire Price's Goneril (the best of the new players) who begins as a buttoned-up scold and then can barely contain her excitement at the carnal awakening she receives from James Corrigan's anarchic Edmund.

Not all the performances work, but I think this is more to do with artistic decision rather than actorly skill.



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Lloyd Hutchinson's Fool, part George Formby, part Frank Carson, seems too gimmicky and loses impetus once Lear embarks on his bewildering odyssey. I also question some of the contemporary settings, which occasionally jar with the intimacy of the verse-speaking.

Seeing Lear on a hospital drip is one modish venture too far, for example. The intimate setting of Chichester's Minerva was appropriate for this imagining of the play as a chamber piece. By and large it is maintained in the loftier Duke of York's, though the gangway leading from the stalls onto the stage, used to suggest both dynastic pomp and urgent action, can sometimes seem like a distraction.

Still, this is a production that subtly but devastatingly shows the effects of dementia and of ageing, and that is down to McKellen who, throughout, has carefully shown its gradations as well as its non-linear effects.

In that final scene, when the body count is rising, he does something extraordinary. Looking despairingly at the prone body of Anita-Joy Uwajeh's Cordelia, he suddenly seems to confront his own mortality while witnessing the soul of his daughter transcend.



Ian McKellen in King Lear at the Duke of York Theatre CREDIT: JOHAN PERSSON

Then, as Lear utters his dying breath, McKellen somehow captures the gamut of a long life in his crumpled face; he is a small child, a decisive ruler and an old man aware of life's melancholy. It's a poignant end to this most human of tragedies.

Until November 3. Tickets available at tickets.telegraph.co.uk (https://tickets.telegraph.co.uk/london-theatre/plays/king-lear?icid=com_tmgtickets_inarticlelink_generic_footer)

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