

THEATRE
KING LEAR

★★★★☆

Bovingdon Memorial Hall

One might think that the complex and entirely challenging nature of Shakespeare's darkest tragedy, *King Lear* is probably not best suited to the limitations of a village hall. Yet last week the Bovingdon Players cast aside these preconceptions, staging a most memorable performance of this epic drama.

The set, designed and constructed by Mike Aylward, was simple, primarily bare and stark. Along with a proscenium stage an additional rectangular thrust was incorporated in the centre of the hall, with a bridge linking both acting areas. This drew the audience into greater intimacy with the action, of which there was plenty during the three hours of performance. The effective costumes, designed by Jan Burrows, set the time; based around the build up to the First World War. From start to finish the security of the Players' combined abilities was evident. The pace was well modulated, its variety underscoring both the furious and often bloody action with moments of touching gentleness.

The terrible journey made by Lear, from being king and father in the heart of his family to destitute and lonely pauper, was travelled by Stewart Woodward. In what proved a remarkable performance he presented a king tainted with the fallibility and vulnerability of age, and then expertly conveyed Lear's decent from brittle, wrathful autocrat into ever-darkening senility and madness. In the early scenes, and later, he was very well supported by strong players; Robert Peacock's deferential and utterly faithful Kent, two feisty and arrogant daughters in Liz Lewis's Gonerill and Sally Bull's Regan, who nicely balanced periods of apparent normality with open callousness and malevolence, and by the convincing integrity of Patricia Choffel's calmly affectionate and striking Cordelia. John Downs strident, powerful, unforgiving Duke of Cornwall proved a worthy counterpart to his wife, Regan, as did Carl Barker as the perplexed foil of Gonerill, the essentially good, resilient Duke of Albany.

In the sub-plot that complements the early action Jeff Prestedge was ideally cast as the loyal and stoical Gloucester, who, like Lear, allows foolish mistrust to destroy his family, and it was a disappointing when his sons, the illegitimate and scheming Edmund, played by a lively, fluid Adam Briffett, and the naïve but legitimate Edgar, later disguised as the madman, Poor Tom, played most sensitively by John Mower are forced to disappear

At the heart of the play, once Lear is thrust out by his two ambitious and greedy daughters, is the king's relationship with his Fool, played engagingly by an agile and energetic Jeremy Warbrick. Delivering the repartee with quick clarity, he matched humour and lightness of touch with lithe, well-timed movement, and deftly reflected Lear's confusion with moments of his own frightened vulnerability.

While the first half of the play is long and occasionally quite hard to follow, the second half is a different matter. Scene follows scene of tragedy and disaster, and it is now that Lear truly touches us with the awfulness of his predicament. Stewart Woodward drew the audience with him in a fearsome depiction of the experience of pain; able to create flashes of awareness amidst his increasing dementia, of the loss of dignity and long ago autonomy. He conveyed acutely the torments and bewilderment of a life destroyed by irredeemable confusion.

And yet despite the violence and arguments, the betrayals, the alarming excess of corpses, and the thoroughly grim denouement, what this production managed to convey more than anything was the enduring quality of love. Lear is followed, albeit unknowingly on his part, by loyal supporters like the banished Kent who follow him manifestly out of love; the blinded Gloucester is never abandoned by his son Edgar, and the poignancy of the final scenes between Lear and his beloved Cordelia, and then the effects on him of her death, made them almost unbearable to watch.

Other players who ably supported the action were Penny Coombs as a sinister and androgynous Oswald, John Oglesby in an impressive number of roles including the 'waterish' Duke of Burgundy, Kevin West as a poetic King of France, and Nikki Clough and Andrew Jamieson as redoubtable knights, messengers and attendants.

Assisted by the intelligent eye of Pam Dawson, Producer and Director Lionel Elton nursed and nurtured this excellent production through months of rehearsal, and his secure and loving hand was evident throughout. The atmospheric lighting and diverse yet highly appropriate sound were by Tony Sidell and William Jamieson.

Carolyn Keer

(This Review appeared in a slightly abridged form in the *Watford Observer* on Friday December 14th 2007.)