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"Which is the Justice, Which is the Thief?" The Politics of Power in Trevor Nunn's Royal Shakespeare Company Production of "King Lear".

Crowning the monumental *Complete Works Festival* of the RSC for the 2007/2008 season, Trevor Nunn's long-awaited production finally opened on the 31st of June at the Courtyard Theatre (Stratford-Upon-Avon). Nunn's well-ordered production was applauded by the majority of critics along with its enthusiastic audience who, ever since, have been vividly responding with sold out houses and will more than likely continue to do so during its world tour which will reach London in November at the New London Theatre and will last until the second week of January.

More than 30 years after his first two productions of the play - 1968 and 1976 - Nunn's new *King Lear* compellingly engages the audience's sympathies as they are taken into a world ravaged by division, domination and exploitation which resonates even more vigorously when seen against the inhumane violence of our contemporary world scenario. The play's intrinsic ambiguity, ambivalence and existential atheism finds adequate expression in the 19th century Russian-style setting cleverly designed by Christopher Oram in which a curving, red-plush, heavy-curtained theatrical balcony is seen to gradually decay as the tragedy unfolds, thus achieving a contemporary effect, as of a "great confusion" (3.2.92) brought about by ruthless bourgeois politics. The devastation and war-like atmosphere, which progressively turns the graced palace into a bare stage piled up with barricades and sandbags, is further enriched by the costumes reminiscent of late regency military regimes and aristocratic courts, both visually displaying their iniquitous distinctions of rank, as patriarchal history dictates. In this provocatively transitional setting, capable of accommodating the continuous shifting of oppressive structures of power, it is really hard to imagine the king's human odyssey as a moral journey of sin and redemption. For, an intricate drama of opposing forces is incessantly at work as masterly conveyed by McKellen's multi-faceted Lear who swings from a fatherly caring king to a whimsical, at times violent, senile madman overburdened at the end by his own human mortality.

Far from A. C. Bradley (1992, 1st ed. 1904) and G. Wilson Knight's moralistic thrust (1989, 1st ed. 1930), Lear's potential chalice of equality and co-operation, using Riane Eisler's emblematic metaphor (1987), is seen inexorably demolished by the blade of division and domination imposed by the long history of hierarchic and authoritarian social structures designed to destroy and dominate, thus leading the "realm of Albion" to its tragic consequences. The bleak tragedy depicted by Shakespeare - well-framed in Nunn's conflated text which includes

passages from both the 1608 Quarto and the 1623 Folio - is in this drama perhaps the most radical in its condemnation of the exploitative status of political and social relations of the time to the extent that even the deeply human feelings matured by both William Gaunt's moving Gloucester and McKellen's sophisticated Lear at the end of the play appear disturbingly ephemeral and ineffective. Similarly, divine justice does not intervene on either side of Romola Garai's virtuous Cordelia - "so young [...] so true" (1.1.108) - and the dashing individualist Phillip Winchester's Edmund - "now gods, stand up for bastards" (1.2.22) who are both left to tragically perish as a further discrepancy of rightful order. Within the godless secularity of the play, not even the "all licensed Fool" (1.4.191), brilliantly played by Sylvester McCoy, is spared: he could have preserved a glimpse of hope beyond the numbing silence of tragic conflicts and destruction, but Shakespeare is having none of it. Very aptly, Trevor Nunn deploys full awareness of the play's potential bleakness and has the Fool unexpectedly hanged at the end of the first half of the show where his corpse is chillingly left swinging for a few minutes during the interval leaving the audience appalled by such utter human alienation. This is only the prelude to further brutal devastation which occurs with the king's madness in the storm, the vividly theatrical scene of Gloucester's blinding and ending with the death of most of the principal characters. Nunn's dense, elliptical reading of the play surfaces again in the skilful direction of the potential cruelty which resides in Gloucester's bloody punishment: here, the abominable violent bestiality of human beings is remarkably highlighted by Monica Dolan's sadistic Regan who is seen gleefully thrilled with dysfunctional ecstasy at the sight of the Earl's blinding inflicted on him for 'his goatish disposition' which disrupted and polluted the aristocratic authoritarian boundaries of both Edmund and Edgar's social rankings. Frances Barber's stealthy and lustful Goneril is far more monstrous than Dolan's ruthless Regan and they both make a magnificent pair of "monster ingratitude" as the evil sisters.

Yet catastrophe and madness on matters of government and law - probably experienced by Shakespeare at the time of the Gunpowder plot and devastating plague - conveniently serve as instrumental covers for expressing both a sharp critique on the violent impositions of hierarchical institutions and a much needed shift towards a more rightful and supportive social system as bravely hinted at by the Fool in his prophecy significantly addressed to the audience:

> When priests are more in word than matter,
> When brewers mar their malt with water,
> When nobles are their tailors' tutors,
> No heretics burned but wenches's suitors;
> When every case in law is right
> No squire in debt, nor no poor knight;
> When slanders do not live in tongues,

> Nor cut purses come not to throngs,
> When usurers tell their gold i'the field,
> And bawds and whores do churches build,
> Then shall the realm of Albion
> Come to great confusion:
> Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
> That going shall be used with feet.
> This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time.
> (3.2.81-95)

The Fool's pointed and insolent words are even more revealing and less ambiguous when they hint at the true nature of both Goneril and Regan who tragically incarnate the insane violence bred by their class-divided society. Again "madness" reverberates through the wildflower-crowned Lear through which "a man may see how this world goes with no eyes" (4.6.146), thus reiterating the vicious normative power of a dominator social organization which relentlessly distorts the profound human yearning for connection. The utopian scenario of a more equalitarian world is emblematically envisioned by the Fool, Lear's humanizing wit, and only when he dies is Lear capable of recognizing the same injustices and, "as matter and impertinency mixed, Reason in madness" (4.6.170), expressing his real feelings about authority, politics, court intrigue and economic inequality within the dimension of his new-found humility:

> LEAR What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears. See how yon justice rails upon yon simple thief. Hark in thine ear: change places and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?
> GLOUCESTER Ay, sir.
> LEAR And the creature run from the cur – there thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office.
> Thou, rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand;
> Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back, thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind
> For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.
> Through tattered clothes great vices do appear;
> Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold, and the strong lance of justice hurtles breaks;
> Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.
> None does offend, none, I say none. I'll able 'em.
> (4.6.146-164)

The true powerlessness and the pervasive helplessness experienced by both Lear and Gloucester as impoverished outcasts stands in contrast to the fake and

instrumental one externalised by Ben Meyjes's moving Edgar whose mock-madness and vagabondage allow him to overcome Edmund's machinations, nurse his father and prevent his suicide - an indeed human rather than divine intervention - despite Gloucester perishing at the end, his heart bursting smilingly (5.3.197). However, Edgar's feigned madness, as the disguised Poor Tom, simultaneously stands as a significant identification with the rapidly growing poverty of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: his cry "Tom's a-cold" (3.4.57) painfully echoes the historical background of poverty experienced by many during the Elizabethan Poor Laws which brutally contained the poor and the homeless by being "whipped from tithing to tithing and stocked, punished and imprisoned" (3.4.130-131). Punishment is also traceable in Jonathan Hyde's loyal Kent who is banished by Lear and put in the stocks by Guy Williams' boisterous Cornwall for his disobedience and "rough plainness": his irreverent rejoinder to "see better" along with his furious quarrel with John Heffernan's mannered Oswald does unsettle both unconditional obedience and subservient loyalty and therefore, as it poses a threat to legitimate authority, must be condemned.

McKellen's magnificent portrayal of Lear's journey into anger, madness, humility and love is subversively expressed beneath the surface of dominator repressive history, in the hope that, as Gloucester realizes, "distribution should undo excess and each man have enough" (4.1.73-74) and in favour of a world that sustains and enhances life. But at the end of the play, with Cordelia's corpse in Lear's arms, we are left in a world where "all's cheerless, dark and deadly" (5.3.288) in which the king's afflictions vanish in the suffering cry for a social system beyond rigid top-down hierarchies, economic "superflux" and centralized power.

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