

King Lear (Joe Cronin, l) looks on as Cordelia (Barbie Wu) refuses to plead



MICHAEL BRINKERHOFF

A for Ambition

The daunting challenge of *Lear*

King Lear is a Shakespearean masterpiece. His longest play, running up to five hours, it is so full of beautiful language and meaty philosophy that it has long been the private domain of English teachers, Great Actors and the most serious of Shakespeare fans. But recent productions in London and New York have attempted to bring the play to the people, and LCC's production follows suit.

Taking her inspiration from Ian Pollock's wonderful *Illustrated King Lear*, a graphic novel, director Judith "Sparky" Roberts tries for an edgy, comic book feel. It's the same concept behind the mega-hit *300*: Take a moment out of Western culture, turn it into a thrilling graphic novel and then act it out on stage or screen. If LCC's Student Production

Association had a multi-million dollar budget (and unlimited sets of six-pack abs) as did the makers of *300*, the idea could have come to fruition most successfully.

Lear is taken from an ancient legend; it's the story of an elderly king who divides up his domain among his daughters with the plan of living out his last years free of worry, in their care. His growing dementia exhibits itself early on when he disinherits his one honest daughter in favor of his two flattering, avaricious offspring. Here the baser elements of human nature take over, and events spiral out of control until Lear is homeless, naked and raving on the heath while his elder daughters are consumed by lust, greed and violence.

There are moment when Roberts' vision

The graphic novel concept wears particularly hard on Lear's three daughters. Shakespeare didn't give the actresses much to work with.

is breathtaking. High drama scenes, such as Lear's confrontation with a storm, are bolstered by interesting, if not perfect, set and lighting techniques and original blocking. At other times, the vision stretches farther than budget or skill will allow. Much of that inspired blocking looked as though it could use another few rehearsals. The elegant sword-play and fight scenes, choreographed by John Elliot III, seemed awkward in the hands of some actors, and I question the decision to put pot helmets on Regan (Michelle Nordella) and Goneril (Julie Fether) and send them into the front lines of battle. But more frequently the fighting and movement helped the play clip along. Kory Weimar (who played Edgar/Tom) was as physically perfect as Poor Tom as he was with a sword and an enemy to kill.

The graphic novel concept wears particularly hard on Lear's three daughters. Shakespeare didn't give the actresses much to work with, and any production runs the risk of these characters turning out two-dimensional, the two eldest just plain evil and the youngest just plain silly. While all three actresses — Fether, Nordella and Barbie Wu as Cordelia — are strong, talented and com-

mitted to the vision, the audience is left wondering why they hate their father so much and make such bad choices.

But you will get your Shakespeare's worth with guest Equity actor Joe Cronin as Lear. For all the lighting and sound tricks, *Lear* always comes down to an actor's ability to make us care about a foolish old man on the brink of death, and Cronin makes us care deeply. Kyle Cooper is wonderful as Kent, delivering some of Shakespeare's best insults and noble intentions with charm and reverence. Matt Keating's physical comedy and tragedy make what can be one of Shakespeare's less-comprehensible fools interesting. I have never seen anything like Dylan Skye Kennedy's Edmund, who is usually a Shakespearean villain on the scale of Iago. Kennedy played him with so many smiles and silly looks that rather than taking a grim pleasure in his vengeance upon the order of the world, he digs into evil like a 6-year-old an ice cream sundae. It fits the theme perfectly but left me feeling deprived of someone to hate. How could anyone want to kill someone who smiles so much — even if he was responsible for half the misery in the play?

Roberts and the Student Production Association are to be commended for such a complex and worthy undertaking. They do everything in their power to make the play accessible, including keeping it to just under three hours. I applaud their bold choices and would recommend this as a production for *Lear* novices to break their teeth on. **EW**

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