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Glenda Jackson Stars in a Confusing Lear

David Sheward · Thursday, April 11th, 2019

Some actors are larger than life, but not life-like. We admire their craft rather than identify with the characters they are portraying and the emotions they are conveying. These actors usually win major awards, but they rarely truly move audiences other than causing them to stand for ovations. Glenda Jackson can be one of these stars at times. Perhaps that is why she left acting for politics, where there is less risk of really showing your inner self. Her brilliance has always been cold and her technique so practiced and steely, she holds us at an arm's length. That can work when the character is a armor-plated matriarch like Elizabeth I or the lionness-mother A in Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*, in which she returned to the New York stage to triumph and accolades last season. But Shakespeare's *King Lear* requires an unflinching, messy exposure of guts, and pain, and Jackson isn't willing to do that.



Glenda Jackson in *King Lear*.
Credit: Brigitte Lacombe

Yes, the star is to be commended for tackling this Mount Everest of male roles. In Sam Gold's production for Broadway—a different staging than the one she headlined in London—Jackson is commanding, rageful, and fearsome but not vulnerable. This is a glittery star turn, admirable for its diction and technique, but we don't feel Lear's pain as his world is destroyed when he gives his lands away to his two deceptive daughters and rejects the honest third. Instead we have a snob-appeal event with its main motive praising Jackson and filling the box office rather than revealing the Bard's harsh truths about power, vanity, corruption, and family dysfunction.



John Douglas Thompson and Glenda Jackson in *King Lear*.
Credit: Brigitte Lacombe

Set in modern dress (Ann Roth created the tastefully elegant costumes) at what appears to be a glittery hotel lobby not unlike Trump Tower (appropriately ornate setting by Miriam Buether), Gold's rendition is a mixed bag with as many moving moments as confusing ones. The director does not trust the Bard's direct appeal to our emotions, but piles on as much business as possible to keep our supposedly wandering minds occupied.

His distracting staging choices take away from key moments. As Jackson is powerfully delivering Lear's climactic speech when he finally cracks under the pressure of his daughters' betrayal, this piercing, vital turning point of the play is muddled by Philip Glass's quirky score played by an onstage string quartet, sign language translation made for a character played by a deaf actor, and the Fool's fiddling around with duck tape. After Lear storms off, the action is further muddled as the evil daughters and their entourages are served coffee and dessert by multiple servants.

Fortunately, there are enough clear and cogent sequences and performances to maintain engagement over the course of three and a half hours. Gold cleverly double-casts loyal daughter Cordelia with the truth-telling Fool, since both are Lear's voices of reason. Ruth Wilson is engaging endearing and funny in both roles. The idea of having a deaf actor (an overly-fierce Russell Harvard) play the Duke of Cornwall seems an odd choice at first, but it pays off because the trusty servant (solid Michael Arden) who slays him has been translating and signing for him, thereby establishing a deep connection and making the act of murder more startling.



Ruth Wilson, Glenda Jackson and John Douglas Thompson in *King Lear*.
Credit: Brigitte Lacombe

Pedro Pascal is a sexy and seductive main villain Edmund, but Sean Carvajal is a bland Edgar, his virtuous brother. Jayne Houdyshell and John Douglas Thompson impart the dignity of the Earls of Gloucester and Kent. Elizabeth Marvel is a deliciously vile Goneril, Lear's eldest and most treacherous offspring. Her colleague Aisling O'Sullivan goes too far into melodramatic territory and comes across as an Irish Cruella Deville as middle daughter Regan. Her pronounced Gaelic accent weirdly stands out like everything else in this confused, muddled production of one of Shakespeare's greatest works.

April 4—July 7. Cort Theatre, 138 W. 48th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 1pm & 7pm, Thu—Fri 7pm, Sat 1pm & 7pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: three hours and 30 mins. including one intermission. \$35—\$159. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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