

Shakespeare's 'King Lear' is a hugely demanding play, but the Alton Fringe Theatre company, in Chris Chappell's thoughtful and measured production, (with Catherine Gerlach as Assistant Director), gave its audience a powerful experience, helped by the intimate space of the Studio Theatre, where we were disturbingly close to some horrific scenes.

The play is an exploration of old age, with all its vicissitudes, and of the varying responses to that condition, the choice of modern dress emphasising the relevance of the subject to our own times. The Fringe players found key phrases to lean on, making the narrative line plain and the meaning clear, and the original music, composed and played by Steve Gerlach, underlined the emotions at each stage, particularly in the great storm scene.

There were other powerful scenes: the division of the kingdom, the riotous knights, and the condemnation of loyal Kent (Douglas Brown) to the stocks, where the scheming sisters (Sarah Castle-Smith and Barbara Rayner), cruelly stripping Lear of his royal authority and his expectation of affection from his daughters, flanked their father, their harsh scarlet dresses contrasting with his stooped old age, and with the white dress of their gentle, bewildered younger sister (Jo Foulkes). Tim Guilding, long a lynchpin of the Company, gave a strong performance as Lear, as he moves from petulant

king to a man of dwindling power, both over his kingdom and himself, and finally to his dotage? his madness? his self-realisation? . . . Tim's subtle interpretation led us to ponder our own definition of old age.

The final scene, with Lear holding the dead Cordelia in his arms, cradled by the watchful, selfless Kent, was visually beautiful and very poignant. The difference between the two brothers, the malicious Edmund (Nigel Dams) and the blameless Edgar (Stephen Dunne) was well maintained, with Edgar maturing as the play progressed. Rod Sharp, as the Earl of Gloucester, coped bravely with the gouging out of his eyes and subsequent blindness. Unfussy stage management left us free from distraction, as the players relentlessly pursued the shocking, sobering story of King Lear.

Judith Hepper