

It's not often that the Alton Fringe Theatre tackles a Shakespeare Play. When it chooses to it does not allow any half measures. What a way to follow the Master - taking on the greatest. "King Lear" is now generally recognised as Shakespeare's greatest Play. The Alton Fringe has taken it on and has come up with a winner again.

I attended the performance on the Final Night. The whole experience was very special. Perhaps the key to the success of the Fringe is that it places the text of a Play as its priority. There is no special concern about costume or scenery or setting. It's the words that matter. And when you get the words proclaimed so clearly in the intimacy of a studio theatre you are very privileged indeed.

Of course, as this implies, the setting helps. The Wessex Arts Centre at Alton College allows for a very intimate experience. But there were few props, no spectacular background, in fact nothing that might distract.

"King Lear" is a very powerful Play, majestic in language, overpowering in its message. However, the Alton Fringe managed to make it perfectly accessible. This is one of the benefits of this particular location. No matter where you sit you are very close to the

action and can feel caught up in the life - or death - being depicted on stage. This was my experience here.

When the Alton Fringe Theatre began some twenty eight years ago it took on a very democratic style of management. There was no constitution or subscription or rules of membership. If you loved theatre you joined in. Tim Guilding has been the 'leader' and inspiration of the Alton Fringe since it began. He would, of course, discount any such claim. However, his great experience in drama and theatre has been of priceless benefit to the Fringe.

It was great to see Tim Guilding in the title role of this mighty Play. But central to the action of "King Lear" are the daughters the King would like to manage. In this Fringe production these daughters are brilliantly played by Sarah Castle-Smith, Barbara Rayner, and Jo Foulkes. Each of these has made an impact on the Alton stage before and bringing them together in "Lear" made for a very powerful experience. They were, of course, ably supported by a large cast of some very experienced performers.

Chris Chappell, the Director, allowed the text of the Play to speak for itself. This was a thoroughly unfussy production and the talent of the cast - with clarity of voice and respect for the rich text - made it very memorable indeed.

Michael McGreevy