

# Fit for a King

**T**ell me, my daughters..." and it all begins again. King Lear wants to retire and bequeath his kingdom — land and power — to his three daughters, but men like Lear do not relinquish power easily. One more exercise in who's the boss: tell me how much you love me, and thereby prove you deserve my generosity. Goneril and Regan make flowery declarations and are amply rewarded; the youngest, Cordelia, refuses to play this game and assumes that her devoted love for her father has been apparent to him all along. Her withholding angers him — he is a man who "has ever but slenderly known himself," and, catastrophically, he disowns her.

Well, a family drama that begins like this is bound to get worse, and, sure enough, it does: betrayals, power grabs, maneuverings both political and romantic, stabbings, poisonings, mutilations (wait until you see the eye-gouging scene!) and all manner of mayhem involving not only Lear and his daughters and their husbands, but another family, the Duke of Gloucester and his two sons, Edgar and Edmond, who scheme and lie and destroy.

And because this is a tragedy, the truth of

love emerges too late; regrets pile up along with the corpses.

*King Lear* is considered the greatest play by the greatest English playwright. So it is inevitably a risk to attempt it, just as it is a fine achievement to produce a *Lear* that works both theatrically and emotionally, as this one does. Especially distinguished performances are turned in by Buck Shinner in the tremendous lead; Bev Appleton as the king's loyal friend the Earl of Kent; John Peakes, who is deeply moving as Gloucester; and Michael Whistler as Edgar, Gloucester's loving son. The women are all interesting and significantly different from one another: Sara Valentine's old-fashioned looks bespeak Cordelia's nobility; J.J. Van Name is lascivious as Goneril; Ashley Izard is terrifically fierce as Regan.

Carmen Khan's direction is smart, speedy (taking into account that the show runs just under three hours) and is wonderfully unencumbered by sets and fancy costumes. Watching men in business suits speak these immense passions makes it more moving and shocking rather than less. I half-expected to see a ball-point pen in the pocket of Gloucester's bloody shirt — and the long velvet gowns, along with the occasional cloak and uniform speaks Khan's intelligent refusal to pin down this timeless play to a historical period.

—Toby Zinman

([t\\_zinman@citypaper.net](mailto:t_zinman@citypaper.net))

## KING LEAR

Through March 24,  
Philadelphia  
Shakespeare Festival,  
2111 Sansom St.,  
215-496-8001,  
[www.phillyshakespeare.org](http://www.phillyshakespeare.org)