


King Lear, directed by Adrian Hall, American Repertory Theatre, Cambridge, 1991.

When I was studying theater in grad school, a professor I knew mounted a production of King Lear with six student directors in the cast, each of whom had been assigned a directing process. "You see," he confided to me on opening night, "it took seven directors to solve this son-of-a-bitch." It may seem ungrateful to suggest of a great play by Shakespeare—perhaps for many of us, his greatest—as if it were a thick, stubborn knot that needed to be untied. Yes, we know Lear is a sublime piece of writing, that a brilliant actor in the role—Olivier on video, Redgrave on recording—can tear your heart out, that Lear's reunion with Cordelia is so emotionally overwhelming that even a dismal production can't completely wreck it. But what we look for in a new Lear is a director and a cast who arrive at interesting, workable ways to meet the play's challenges: how to stage the opening scene so that we comprehend Lear's folly without losing sympathy for him, how to find Cordelia's position without making her seem icy and uncaring, how to make emotional sense of Edgar, whose devoutness and devotion appear exquisite on the page but in production tend to come across as humorless and exasperatingly naive. King Lear used to be referred to as the great Shakespeare play that never works on stage (peculiarly, that seems more nearly true of Macbeth, whose complex and more succinct and flamboyantly theatrical), because it's loaded with problems that a production needs to solve. At least as many, I'd say, as Measure for Measure and All's Well That Ends Well, the two dark comedies that scholars long ago dubbed the "problem plays," or Shakespeare's most mysteriously beautiful work, his fairy-tale romance, The Winter's Tale.

The problem in All's Well That Ends Well is Bertram, the son of the Countess of Rossillon, whom Helen, her ward, chooses as a husband—her reward for treating the sick King of France and curing him. Helen is one of Shakespeare's quicksilver heroines, charming and astonishingly plucky: carrying her dead father's bag of medicines to court, she offers her services even though she knows she will die if she fails. It's easy to love Helena the emotional adventurer, who chances everything out of love for Bertram, too high above her in station to consider her an appropriate wife under normal circumstances. And it's easy to hate Bertram, who, when the King hands him Helen as a present (Halle, in your corner, if you run away to the wars without consulting the marriage, vowing never to share her bed until she can gain possession of his ring (a gift from the King) and get pregnant by him, a man who despises her and crosses half the world to escape her. It's a fairy-tale set-up (like the premises of both Lear—the love contest—and Winter's Tale), damnably hard to make dramatic sense of on a stage. However sympathetic you might be to a young man's rebellion against his monarch's telling him whom to love, Helena is such a treacherous one (as he ought to know, since they've lived together) that you can't help laying patience with any man who can't appreciate her value. And you might feel like murdering a man who humiliates her as Bertram does. She's far too good for him, her spirit so high when she wins him by devising a bed-trick to entice him and journeying across the continent to put it into effect, you can't help thinking he isn't worth it.

The Winter's Tale, last summer in Stratford, England, by the Royal Shakespeare Company, was staged by Sir Peter Hall, whose direction I've never much cared for. His 1969 film of Midsummer Night's Dream had almost every gifted young British performer in the cast (it was a hippie Midsummer, and pretty famous in its time), but I found it unwatchable, and the work I've seen by him since in New York left me cold—a stately, Edwardian-style Merchant of Venice rescued by Dustin Hoffman's Skylock; a grotesquely over- wrought Orphans Descending starring Vanessa Redgrave; and last season's Four Brothers Adoring the Sun, a bad John Guare play made still worse by Hall's inept handling of the actors. However, seeing his All's Well finally made sense, for me, of his August reputation. He does have a taste for old-fashioned tableau staging, but this was a remarkable All's Well that cut straight through the play's notorious "problem" and made complete sense of the text.

Hall doesn't achieve this by sacrificing Helena, by making any less of her than Shakespeare seems to indicate (a chintzy "solution," I think), Sophistic Thompson, with her muncinace face and hands, and hilly voice, is good but dry and soft at the same time, is as delightful a Helena as you could wish for. (At moments, she suggests a tiny, courtly version of Amanda Plummer.) What he makes succeed is the problem of treating the King (Richard Johnson), in an effortlessly commanding performance and some of the most splendidly costumed—designed by John Gunter—I've ever seen in a theater, she makes you aware of how much she's risking and how untiring her heroism is. Boldly proclaiming she'll answer for those skills with her life if need be, she falls to her knees; she's rushing headlong, her heart in advance of her practical side (and past her feet of faith), in pursuit of her own true Shakespearean heroine; you feel her shame acutely when Bertram (Toby Stephens), seconds after they've wed, declares he's off to war with his friend Paganel (Hall), and Helena, even the goodby kiss she summons up her courage to ask for, and you weep for when he writes that he has no intention of bedding her, ever.

What Hall does to bring off an emotionally satisfying finale is to dramatize the transformation of Bertram. Sophie Thompson's Helena is the injured good angel of this All's Well, but Bertram is its protagonist. Toby Stephens, a dramatic actor who plays him as a sodden, low of youths in the first act, so restless and self-involved (his first action on stage is to check himself out in a mirror) that of course he can't appreciate Helena, is transformed into the true puer type: eager and boyish and completely irresponsible. But when we catch up to him again at the beginning of the second act, war has aged him a year, his spirit's hardened, he feels such a short time—she's learned that his wife is dead (a false report put out by Helena herself), and he's losing his first bout with sexual passion (a lodging for Dorset), he's falling in love by the drop (as he's playing opposite Rebecca Saire)—that he looks baffled by it. He doesn't seem to know what to feel, but it's clear he's feeling something deeply, for the first time in his life. And, though you laugh when Diana mocks his extravagant lovemaking (she knows it's empty, even if he doesn't), you see that he's growing up—at least he's capable of looking the part of a young man, even if he's still too young to distinguish between lust and love.

Hall uses Parolles, the handsome braggart who turns out to be a coward of the first order, to move Bertram, to the next phase in the maturation process. Michael Siberry cuts a magnificently centered figure on the stage of the Swan, and his vocal attack, though a little like Alan Rickman's on the surface, really has the semiotic resonance of the nineteenth century. That's a fine choice, since Parolles is a grandstander, all show and no substance. Bertram, still a kid, is taken in by him the way Don Giovanni is befuddled by the tricks of Steepforth; and, like David, he has to see his hero fall before he can grope his way to manhood. That's why (though it's never been clear to me before) the whole play seems to make sense in attendance when the other members of his regiment, capturing Parolles, blindfolding him, and pretending to be enemy soldiers interrogating him, expose his willingness to betray even a friend (before he's killed) to the threat of dying.

Stephens reappears in the final reconciliation scene at the court of France with a little hair on his chin and cheeks (a nice touch). Here he must answer for his youthful follies before he (and we) can be rewarded with a happy ending—all must be truly well before the play can end well. In most productions of this play, Bertram's lies about Diana (who he thinks slept with him; we know he's lying; she's sleeping in her bed) when she confronts him, his lechery before the King, just exacerbate our dislike of him. In Hall's production, they're desperate lies, not contemptuous ones; he's working feverishly to dig a grave for the sins of his recently dead youth. When Parolles enters, Bertram realizes that what he's attempting is futile, because Parolles is the very picture of those sins, returned to him in full view. The Parolles companions downstage, in opposite corners, to underline this point.) So Bertram makes a true confession of his past, earning the right to Helena's hand, in a speech appalled weak at the end and when it reaches backwards, out of the production, to the text itself, and alters the way you read it. You don't feel he's grafted anything onto the play to make it what you want it to be. And you believe he's moving not just into the emotional perquisites of what is essentially Bertram's trial scene, and makes us believe in his remorse and in the maturity of judgment that permits him to be reunited with Helen for which he is at last.
melancholy and emotionally complex as a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, and demands delicacy as well as imagination.

Sometimes a production manages both. In 1978, Robin Phillips mounted the play at the Stratford (Ontario) Shakespeare festival with Brian Bedford as King Lear (who here, in a role which accuses his innocent wife of adultery with his best friend and condemns her innocent child as a bastard) and Martha Henry as Paulina, Queen Hermione and Perdita. Their Cordelia, who plays the lead role in this sister's tale, deranged by madness, who demands delici- as well as imagination.

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British film *Truly Madly Deeply*, and a stunningly modernist *Nora* in the line BBC production of *A Doll's House* that ran on PBS late January, must be one of the most gifted actresses working right now. She gives off a heady blend of emotional and intellectual energy in her performances that isn't remotely like anything you see from anyone else. Her Isabella is never the warm-blooded and life-affirming than either of the other two women I've loved in the role (Martha Henry, and Kate Nelligan on television) chose to play her. She's capable of both hot flashes of anger—not the indignation, the outraged purity, that Nelligan (the best of the conventional Isabellas) presented, but a much more personal and secular kind of fury—and genuine intimacy. When she first appears to Angelo (David Schoeffel), in a supremely intelligent performance, she berates him, "[G]o to your bosom, / Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know / That's like my brother's fault."

The staging emphasizes Isabella's audacity here. She and Angelo are seated opposite each other, each at a desk, in an area that looks like a courtroom: she is making a formal suit to the city's administrator of the laws. But when she speaks these lines, she crosses the area between the desks and reaches into his private space to touch his heart—and she does. Noble and Schoeffel make perfect sense of Angelo's horrifying treatment of Isabella: she gets beyond his cool ruler to the part he's costumed and became his role, and he's so ill-equipped to deal with his own buried sexuality that it comes out twisted and he becomes a sexual tyrant.

Isabella is still the Friar to help, and he responds to her passion, but emotional fullness; he falls in love with her, her love isn't tyrannical, and Stevenson suggests that Isabella feels the impulse to answer it, though she chooses differently. (Their scenes together are played with a touch of the non-feeling-now face that bubbles up Shakespeare's most well-dressed comedic lines, supplies the beating heart of this production: he's the most movingly human Duke I've seen. He's slow to act on Angelo's corruption, not because she's a sadder or because he's losing playing God, but because he's slow to believe it: Angelo is a man he's trusted, a minister he's had faith in, a friend.

The last scene takes so long to wrap up because the Duke, to be just to Angelo, has to see exactly how this deputy comports himself when Isabella and Mariana accuse him publicly, and because there's one thing about Isabella he's yet to learn before he can ask her to be his wife. He's seen her love for her brother, her sense of justice, her self-righteous anger, but he hasn't any evidence that she's capable of generosity—of moving beyond her own injuries to act on another's behalf.

That's why, having commanded Angelo to wed Mariana, he then sentences the deputy to death and ignores Mariana's plea to spare him ("O, my most gracious lord, I hope you will not mock me with a husband!"). He wants to see what Isabella will do when Mariana, inevitably, asks her friend to add her voice to the call for mercy.

Stevenson plays this moment for all it's worth. Her Isabella has to couple with her baser emotions how she could feel anything but satisfaction at the death of Duke has pronounced on her tormentor? But finally she approaches the Duke and kneels quietly to him. The mirror reflects her brooded and half-smiling, the intimacy of her petition, which recalls the yet unspoken link between Isabella and the Duke. Interviewed in the *New Yorker* and that's something she has to be renegotiated every performance.

The performance recorded by the Royal Shakespeare Company archives ends with the Duke speaking to ask for Isabella's hand, and her rising to his "dear Isabella," touching his face, tenderly, and receiving his kiss.

**THE CHALLENGES OF THESE PLAYS CAN BRING OUT THE WORST IDEAS AND IMPULSES OF DIRECTORS AND ACTORS; WE'VE ALL SEEN THESE PRODUCTIONS. THEY CAN ALSO BRING OUT THE BEST, AND ACTORS EMBRACE OR ON SOMETHING SURPRISING THEMSELVES.**