

# Out of Hours Theatre

## THE MADNESS OF THE KING

### King Lear

National Theatre, London  
Until 28 May 2014

*King Lear* is not for the fainthearted, either in duration or in content. Most productions, including this impressively-staged show at the National Theatre, London, run for about three and half hours. The play contains treason and murder, adultery, serious sibling rivalry, civil war, extreme weather and, of course, madness.

The director, Sam Mendes, has set the action in a totalitarian state, with a lot of black uniforms and black leather, and added in a particularly grisly use of the corkscrew in ophthalmic surgery.

The play has quite a soundtrack too — a menacing rumbling from the wings accompanies a solar eclipse before it gets under way, there is spectacular thunder and lightning in the storm scene, and plenty of overhead helicopters and fighter planes during the battles.

In a much-anticipated casting, Lear is played

*Simon Russell Beale. Photo by Mark Douet*



*Kate Fleetwood, Anna Maxwell Martin, Simon Russell Beale. Photo by Mark Douet*

by Simon Russell Beale, generally reckoned to be our greatest living Shakespearian actor and who, at 54, comes well-prepared for this demanding role. Although Russell

Beale is the star of the show, there is fine acting from the other principals, although I couldn't help seeing some of the characters in a slightly non-Shakespearean light. The Fool, for example, has something of the Van Morrison about him, while the transparently duplicit and ambitious Edmund kept reminding me of Ed Balls. Gloucester, who unfortunately lived — and died — before the era of screw-capped wine bottles, was, to my mind, John Hurt playing Lord Browne with facial hair. Kate Fleetwood's Goneril was a particularly nasty piece of work and Anna Maxwell Martin's Regan was quickly transformed from a bimbo into an absolute monster. Tom Brooke made Edgar his own in a very fine performance.

After making some ill-judged decisions about the division of his kingdom among his daughters, Lear is conventionally described as 'descending into madness', leading to internecine rivalry, the

drinking of a number of lethal gin and tonics, and ultimately to Civil War and the collapse of the state, as well as generating a very considerable body count. Lear's madness, however, is problematic, not least because when he comes on to the stage in the final scene carrying his dead daughter's body, he seems less mad than when he denied her a share of his lands in Act 1. Indeed, his madness has attracted almost every psychiatric diagnosis; bipolar disorder, organic brain syndrome, acute psychosis, involuntional melancholia and, of course, Alzheimer's disease, and there are certainly symptoms of all these at various stages of the tragedy.

Speaking at a National Theatre Platform, Russell Beale said that he had researched dementia fairly extensively in preparation for the role, and concluded that Lewy body dementia, in which hallucinations and motor disorders also occur, seemed to offer the best 'fit' with Lear's madness.

The National run is, predictably, sold out but will be beamed out live to cinemas across the country on Thursday 1 May, so book your tickets now and let us have your diagnosis — we'll publish the best justifications in the journal.

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