

THINGS TO DO

Mother-daughter 'Lear' captures heartbreak of dementia





"Mother Lear" tells the story of an aging mother and her caretaker daughter. (Photo by Lauren Matley)



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There's a lot that's heartbreaking in William Shakespeare's tragedy "King Lear," but one thing in it that all too many people can relate to is the terror of losing one's mind, or the dreadful misery of having to watch parents or other revered elders lose theirs. It's that all too common tragedy that lies at the heart of "Mother Lear," a new drama inspired by Shakespeare's play that We Players is performing in various spots in private residences, parks and community centers in San Anselmo, Tiburon, San Francisco, Berkeley and Saratoga.

Created by its performers, the play features Courtney Walsh (who recently played Mercutio in the company's "Romeo and Juliet") as a crazed and panicked former professor and author who's now forgotten how to do tasks as basic as pulling an item out of a bag and has to dump everything out on the ground instead. Playing Judy Collins' "Both Sides Now" incessantly on a small karaoke machine hung around her neck, she speaks only in lines from "King Lear" as if that's the only language that she's retained.

Her harried daughter, played by We Players founding artistic director Ava Roy, is at the end of her rope trying to keep her mom out of trouble. Even attempting to cajole her into going back inside is a Herculean labor that keeps getting her nowhere for the length of the play. A dutiful, loving Cordelia to her mother's Lear, she speaks in down-to-earth modern sentences, just trying to reason with a parent whose reason has fled her. The only way she can engage her mother in any kind of conversation is to recite lines and scenes from "Lear," usually as Cordelia or the king's faithful Fool, but also has the loyal Kent and Lear's spiteful other two daughters.

The play itself lasts about 50 minutes, but it takes a while to hike to the performance site, depending on where it is, and it's followed by an intermission and a facilitated discussion with the audience about their reactions to the piece and the feelings and personal issues it brings up for them.



We Players did a different two-person remix of “King Lear” in 2014 called “King Fool,” again with Roy as Cordelia taking on other roles — especially the Fool — to humor a parent whose mind is slipping away, in that case played by (and adapted by) John Hadden. That one too was about an hour long, followed by a conversation with the audience. I even saw it performed in exactly the same spot, atop a grassy hill behind a private home in San Anselmo. But whereas “King Fool” relied on Shakespeare’s reshuffled text, “Mother Lear” deftly weaves lines from the elder “Lear” with plain-spoken contemporary expressions of exasperation and gentle coaxing from our modern Cordelia.

Both performances in the new version are heartrending. Walsh as the mother has moments of pleasure in losing herself in Shakespeare’s scenes, but the experience of losing herself in general clearly terrifies her and makes her lash out. As the daughter, Roy exudes love and tenderness but also bitter frustration and deep sorrow, and it’s all too easy to put oneself in either of their shoes. For all its Shakespearean flourishes and ruefully funny moments, all of it feels terribly real. It happens every day.

Sam Hurwitt’s theater blog, The Idiolect, is at theidiolect.com. Contact him at shurwitt@gmail.com or on Twitter at twitter.com/shurwitt.

Review

What: “Mother Lear” by We Players

Where: Various locations in Marin, San Francisco and the East Bay

When: Through Nov. 4; various days and times

Admission: \$25 to \$60

Information: weplayers.org

Rating (out of five stars): ★★★★★

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