

We Players uses 'Lear' to talk about aging in the 21st century

Anne Gelhaus

While the titular Shakespeare scholar in We Players' "Mother Lear" suffers from dementia, the play's two writer/actors found an eloquent voice for her to express her suffering.

"All of her text is from 'King Lear' because that's all she remembers," says We Players founder Ava Roy. "Sometimes people with dementia lose the power of speech but can still think."

Roy and actress Courtney Walsh, who plays the title role and collaborated on the script, are staging "Mother Lear" at eight Bay Area venues over the next month, including three private residences. They'll perform on the front lawn of Saratoga's Montalvo Arts Center Oct. 12-15.

The show is a lot less lavish than the production of "Romeo and Juliet" that We Players performed at Montalvo last October. That production was "site-integrated," meaning the audience literally followed the action from one area of the arts center to another.

"In many ways this project is radically different from We Players' hallmark," Roy says. "Our larger productions are restricted to their locations. 'Mother Lear' is just two of us with a bag of props, so we can do it essentially anywhere."

While production values are simple, "Mother Lear" addresses the complex issues of aging, dementia and death. Walsh in particular has researched these issues in depth while developing the play, even taking part in a simulation that uses sound and visual distortion to imitate the symptoms of dementia.

At Montalvo, each performance of the hour-long play will be followed by a discussion with health care professionals who work with dementia patients, the dying and their caregivers.

"I think of the conversation as Act 2," says Roy, whose role as daughter Cordelia in "Mother Lear" has given her insight into the stressors caregivers face.

"This work has increased our deep admiration for caregivers everywhere," she says. "The techniques my character comes up with to deal with her mom are so similar to dealing with little kids to try to engage them."

Ideally, Roy says, the post-show discussions will add to the connections the audience has formed with the play's characters.

"Aging is something we all go through. We lose our memories, we lose our faculties, yet it's something we don't talk a lot about," she adds. "Hopefully, the emotional journey we go through (in the play) gives people access to their own thoughts and feelings on the topic."

Shakespeare addressed these issues in "King Lear," and although he didn't have the medical language we have now, Roy says, his tragedy still resonates.

"Lear is not only aging, but he has the whole madness scene," she adds. "So much of that is tied to his grief and loss."

The mother and daughter in "Mother Lear" use Shakespeare's text to convey their own grief and loss.

"Basically, we can find anything that we want to say to each other in 'King Lear,'" Roy says, adding that Cordelia does stray from Shakespearean dialogue at times, particularly when she's trying to get her mother to do a certain task. "Sometimes she just makes stuff up."

Even though Mother Lear has early onset dementia, Roy says, it's understood that she still has enough self-awareness to want to deal with her illness on her own terms. That's an important lesson for any caregiver to learn, she adds.

"You have to meet them in their own reality," Roy says.

"Mother Lear" runs Oct. 12-15 at 5:30 p.m. at the Montalvo Arts Center, 15400 Montalvo Road, Saratoga. Tickets are \$25-\$45 at montalvoarts.org/weplayers or 408-961-5858.